

Job 30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 30. But now they laugh at me, men who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock. What could I gain from the strength of their hands, men whose vigour is gone? Through want and hard hunger they gnaw the dry ground by night in waste and desolation. They pick saltwort in the leaves of bushes, and the roots of the broom tree for their food. They are driven out from human company. They shout after them as after a thief. In the gullies of the torrents they must dwell, in holes of the earth and of the rocks.

Among the bushes they bray, under the nettles they huddle together. A senseless, a nameless brood. They have been whipped out of the land. And now I have become their song. I am a byword to them.

They abhor me, they keep aloof from me. They do not hesitate to spit at the sight of me, because God has loosed my cord and humbled me. They have cast off restraint in my presence.

On my right hand the rabble rise. They push away my feet. They cast up against me their ways of destruction. They break up my path. They promote my calamity. They need no one to help them, as through a wide breach they come. Amid the crash they roll on. Terrors are turned upon me.

My honour is pursued as by the wind, and my prosperity has passed away like a cloud. And now my soul is poured out within me. Days of affliction have taken hold of me. The night racks my bones, and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest. With great force my garment is disfigured.

[1 : 3 6] It binds me about like the collar of my tunic. God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you for help, and you do not answer me. I stand, and you only look at me.

You have turned cruel to me. With the might of your hand you persecute me. You lift me up on the wind. You make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm. For I know that you will bring me to death, and to the house appointed for all living. Yet does not one in a heap of ruins stretch out his hand, and in his disaster cry for help? Did not I weep for him whose day was hard?

Was not my soul grieved for the needy? But when I hoped for good, evil came. And when I waited for light, darkness came. My inward parts are in turmoil, and never still. Days of affliction come to meet me. I go about darkened, but not by the sun. I stand up in the assembly and cry for help.

I am a brother of jackals, and a companion of ostriches. My skin turns black and falls from me, and my bones burn with heat. My lyre is turned to mourning, and my pipe to the voice of those who weep. After having described his former estate in Job chapter 29, in Job chapter 30 Job discusses the profound contrast between that and his current condition. The contrast is accented through the repetition of the word now in verses 1, 9, and 16. Job wants his hearers to recognize the difference between what he once was, and what he now is. In the preceding chapter he described the way that he was honoured by all members of society, the way that he acted on behalf of those who were weak and poor and needed aid. He begins this chapter with a portrait of a group of people who weren't even members of society. The people in question are foolish and disreputable. They are unreliable, unable to hold down gainful employment, and are scavengers at the edge of society. They are accounted as thieves and ne'er-do-wells, and so society rejects them. The last chapter ended with Job's honour among the greatest of society, and this chapter begins with Job's dishonour and his shame among the least of the society, among those who aren't even fit to be members of society. He's become a byword to them.

They make up songs to ridicule him. They, people that society has rejected, give him a wide berth. They spit to dishonour him when they see him. They regard Job as having been judged by God, so they feel no compunctions about scorning him. Verse 12 might refer to the rabble. Alternatively, it might refer to lepers. The very ones who are removed from society for being unclean on account of their disease regard him as even more unclean. As God has broken Job down, it is as if a great company of scoundrels and outcasts come in his wake to join the spoiling of this once great man.

[4 : 26] All the honour, reputation and standing that Job once enjoyed in his society is taken away as if by a storm, and coupled with this utter change in fortunes in his outer estate, Job's own bodily condition is most painful and lamentable. He experiences no rest or relief. His agonies are unrelenting. Verse 18 is a difficult one to translate. It likely refers to an action of God that is violent towards Job.

Norman Harbell reads it. With great strength he ties me up with my garment and strangles me with the neck of my tunic. Robert Alden reads it. In his great power God becomes like clothing to me. He binds me like the neck of my garment.

David Klein suggests that we render it. With great force he grips my garment. He clasps me tight like the neck of my tunic. Marvin Pope's reading is fairly similar. With violence he grafts my garment, seizes me by the coat collar. God has cast Job into the mire and reduced him to dust and ashes.

The expression dust and ashes is surprisingly rare on the pages of scripture. It only occurs on three occasions. Here, in Genesis chapter 18 verse 27, Abraham answered and said, Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. And then finally, in Job chapter 42 verse 6, Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes. It's noteworthy that these are the last words of Job in the whole book. Job looks to the Lord, but the Lord does not seem to respond. He does not seem to show any concern or care for him, but only cruelty. Not only does he ignore Job's pleas for help in his sorry estate, he compounds his afflictions. He torments Job. It's as if the Lord wants to inflict upon Job the very cruelest death. Verse 24 is another very difficult one to understand, and the great range of translations of this verse should give us some indication why.

David Clines translates it, Surely I never stretched out my hand against any needy person, if they cried out in their calamity. Harbell's reading is similar, I did not strike the poor when they cried out to me in their disaster.

[6 : 30] John Hartley, however, reads it, Yet God does not stretch out his hand in destruction, if one cries to him for help in his disaster. Pope reads it, One does not turn his hand against the needy, when in his distress he cries for help.

However, the ESV reads it, Yet does not one in a heap of ruins stretch out his hand, and in his disaster cry for help. A number of commentators have termed this the most difficult verse in the whole book, which, considering we're talking about the book of Job, is really saying something.

In the preceding chapter Job had spoken of the way that he had taken concern for the poor, the needy, the oppressed, and the disregarded. He had been the eyes for the blind, he had been the feet for the lame. And now, in his moment of distress, who was standing up for him? Who was taking up his cause? He wept with those who wept. He showed a great regard for the needy.

There are various passages in scripture that seem to suggest that the person who is faithful in these situations, who takes concern for the poor, will be blessed with God's concern for him. But in Job's situation, that does not seem to happen. The Lord disregards him. And what's worse, when he's hoping for relief and goodness, God sends him darkness and evil. Job speaks of going about darkened, and in verse 28, that his skin turns black and falls from him. He's suffering from a terrible skin condition. Elsewhere, we learn that he had foul breath. His body is repulsive. He's barely recognizable to the people who know him. He's become disfigured. He experiences continual pain.

He's malnourished and wasting away, covered with sores that seem to heal up, but then open up again and ooze out their purse. He's abhorrent and physically disgusting to all who once knew him.

[8 : 10] He is related to ostriches and jackals, creatures that haunted the desolate and deserted ruins. Neither God nor man listens to his cry, and the tone or music of his life, that was once so filled with joy, as we see in the preceding chapter, is now turned to mourning and a dirge.

A question to consider. Not all forms of suffering are at all alike. Can you think about the different species of suffering that Job is experiencing? What are some of the distinct sorrows that accompany each one?