

Job 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 12. Then Job answered and said, No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. But I have understanding as well as you. I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these? I am a laughingstock to my friends. I who called to God, and he answered me, a just and blameless man, am a laughingstock. In the thought of one who is at ease, there is contempt for misfortune. It is ready for those whose feet slip. The tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure, who bring their God in their hand. But ask the beasts, and they will teach you, the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you, or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind. Does not the ear test words, as the palate tastes food? Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days. With God are wisdom and might. He has counsel and understanding. If he tears down, none can rebuild. If he shuts a man in, none can open. If he withholds the waters, they dry up. If he sends them out, they overwhelm the land. With him are strength and sound wisdom. The deceived and deceiver are his. He leads counsellors away stripped, and judges he makes fools. He looses the bonds of kings, and binds a waistcloth on their hips. He leads priests away stripped, and overthrows the mighty. He deprives of speech those who are trusted, and takes away the discernment of the elders. He pours contempt on princes, and loosens the belt of the strong. He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light. He makes nations great, and he destroys them. He enlarges nations, and leads them away. He takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth, and makes them wander in a trackless waste. They grope in the dark without light, and he makes them stagger like a drunken man. Job chapter 12 is the start of the conclusion of the first cycle of discourse, Job's speech following Zophar the Nehemiahite's address.

Within it, Job is speaking not merely to Zophar, but to all of his friends. It's one of the longest of Job's speeches, second only to his final speech. Much as the general tone adopted by his friends at the start of their speeches to him, Job begins his speech here in a somewhat contemptuous and dismissive tone. No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. The friends of Job have put themselves forward as authorities on wisdom, indeed almost as if they had a corner on it, leaving the spectator wondering whether if they die, wisdom will die out with them. Job insists that they do not have a monopoly on wisdom. He has wisdom too. He is not inferior to them. He implies that he knows a few things that they might not. The opening section of Job's speech in verses 2-4 forms a bookend or inclusio with chapter 13 verses 1-5. David Clines observes the repetition of the words, I am not inferior to you, from verse 3 in chapter 13 verse 2. What you know, I also know.

I am not inferior to you. Norman Harbel observes the way that the theme of wisdom recurs at the end. Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom. Job expresses his situation in verse 4.

He's a laughing stock to his friends. They may not literally be ridiculing him, but in their speeches to him they are clearly dismissive of his plight. Here Job expresses something of what his friends do not fully realise. He knows for himself that he is one who has called upon the Lord. He's a just and a blameless man, and yet nonetheless he finds himself in this position. They may have tidy systems of guilt and retribution, but Job, from his own experience, knows that something has to give. Verses 5 and 6 are difficult to understand, and a number of commentators puzzle about how they are to be fitted within their context. Verse 5 might refer to the posture adopted by the friends of Job. They do not look with pity, but with contempt upon someone who has experienced misfortune, in this case Job. They of course see it as a sign that Job has done something wrong. In their position they are proud and self-righteous, ready to dispense advice, but unable to enter into true compassion with someone in Job's position.

Just as Job is someone who is righteous, yet has suffered severe misfortune, Job expresses the other side of the situation in verse 6. Bandits and marauders, whose actions call out for God's judgment, enjoy peace, no matter how much they provoke God. One might imagine Job thinking back to the events of chapter 1, and the Sabaeans and Chaldean raiders who had killed so many of his servants, and also taken his oxen, donkeys and camels. Is Job really the sinner to be judged in this situation, and not them? Yet they seem to have gotten away with their crimes, and indeed profited by their injustice. While Job, for his part, a blameless and righteous man, languishes in ignominy. Where is the justice in that? The meaning of the end of verse 6 is difficult to understand. What does it mean that the robbers bring their God in their hand? John Hartley mentions a number of different possibilities.

[5 : 18] It might be a reference, for instance, to their idolatry. They have idols that can be held in their hands. Alternatively, it might be a reference to their swords being their gods. Or finally, it might be a claim that they are as powerful as God. Job's friends had appealed to a number of different authorities, and Job draws their attention to nature itself. He brings forward the beasts, the birds of the heaven, the bushes of the earth, the fish of the sea, all as witnesses for his cause.

They know about the sovereign hand of the Lord in all the affairs of creation, and Job's friends might learn a thing or two from them. The life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind is in the hand of God. As Proverbs chapter 29 verse 13 puts it, the poor man and the oppressor meet together. The Lord gives light to the eyes of both.

Perhaps Job's intent is to suggest that by the sovereign preservation of all creatures in life, any simplistic scheme of retribution is unsettled. Even while they're performing their acts of robbery, the Lord is sustaining the robber in his existence. And years after he has committed his crime, he may continue to do so. Verse 9 is noteworthy in that it contains the only reference to the name of the Lord in the whole of the speeches of the book of Job. Virtually all other references are to God.

The friends had brought forward different authorities. The authority of visions like Eliphaz, the authority of the ancients' wisdom, as in the case of Bildad, and then the authority of deep wisdom, in the case of Zophar. Job raises a challenge to these. The understanding person can discern and test wisdom. He does not merely have to accept it on the basis of some authority. Like the palate tastes food, he can taste what is true wisdom and what is false. Verse 12 might be a question.

Is wisdom indeed with the ages? Is understanding really something that comes with longevity? In verse 13, Job appeals to a deeper source of wisdom. God himself is the one who possesses wisdom and might. Verses 13 to 25 are a sort of doxological hymn. However, Norman Harbell suggests it involves an inversion of the themes of Proverbs chapter 8 verses 14 to 16, picking up words like counsel, efficiency, understanding, power, kings, the great, and judges. Those verses read, I have counsel and sound wisdom. I have insight. I have strength. By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just. By me princes rule, and nobles all who govern justly. Job here describes God in similar terms. But the actions of God's wisdom described here are not so much those actions of upholding and creating the order as that of throwing the order into disarray and disorder.

[7 : 59] Harbell notes the presence of three sections here that can be distinguished by their literary features. First, the way that God destroys the established order in verses 13 to 16, the way that he deprives leaders of their efficiency in verses 17 to 21, and the way that he disorients nations and leaders in verses 22 to 25. God has wisdom and might, but what does he do? He shuts a man in. He tears down.

He withholds the waters in drought or sends them out in deluge. Yes, he has strength and sound wisdom, but he is the one who upholds both the deceiver and the deceived. He is the God of all wisdom, but he frustrates counsel. He leads counselors away naked. He makes fools of judges. He frustrates the rule of kings, divests priests, and overthrows those who have strength. He brings princes to shame and weakens the strong. He is the God who said, let there be light, but he is the master of the darkness, the one that can throw people into blindness and leave them in disarray and disorientation.

In his reference to the deep and the darkness, Job might be picking up on some of the themes of Zophar's speech. In chapter 11 verses 7 to 8, for instance, can you find out the deep things of God?

Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven. What can you do? Deeper than Sheol. What can you know? A question to consider, where else in scripture do we have portraits of God as the unsearchable and inscrutable Almighty who brings disaster mysteriously?

