

Job 31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 31. I have made a covenant with my eyes. How then could I gaze at a virgin? What would be my portion from God above, and my heritage from the Almighty on high?

Is not calamity for the unrighteous, and disaster for the workers of iniquity? Does not he see my ways, and number all my steps? If I have walked with falsehood, and my foot has hastened to deceit, let me be weighed in a just balance, and let God know my integrity. If my step has turned aside from the way, and my heart has gone after my eyes, and if any spot has stuck to my hands, then let me sow, and another eat, and let what grows for me be rooted out. If my heart has been enticed toward a woman, and I have lain in wait at my neighbour's door, then let my wife grind for another, and let others bow down on her. For that would be a heinous crime, that would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges, for that would be a fire that consumes as far as Abaddon.

And it would burn to the root all my increase. If I have rejected the cause of my manservant, or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me, what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? Did not he who made me in the womb make him?

And did not one fashion us in the womb? If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it? For from my youth the fatherless grew up with me as with a father, and from my mother's womb I guided the widow. If I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or the needy without covering, if his body has not blessed me, and if he was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep, if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, because I saw my help in the gate, then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket. For I was in terror of calamity from God, and I could not have faced his majesty. If I have made gold my trust, or called fine gold my confidence, if I have rejoiced because my wealth was abundant, or because my hand had found much, if I have looked at the sun when it shone, or the moon moving in splendor, and my heart has been secretly enticed, and my mouth has kissed my hand, this also would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges, for I would have been false to God above. If I have rejoiced at the ruin of him who hated me, or exalted when evil overtook him, I have not let my mouth sin by asking for his life with a curse.

If the men of my tent have not said, Who is there that has not been filled with his meat? The sojourner has not lodged in the street, I have opened my doors to the traveller. If I have concealed my transgressions as others do, by hiding my iniquity in my heart, because I stood in great fear of the multitude, and the contempt of families terrified me, so that I kept silence, and did not go out of doors. Oh, that I had one to hear me! Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me! Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary! Surely I would carry it on my shoulder! I would bind it on me as a crown! I would give him an account of all my steps! Like a prince I would approach him!

[3 : 1 5] If my land has cried out against me, and its furrows have wept together, if I have eaten its yield without payment, and made its owners breed their last, let thorns grow instead of wheat, and fowl weeds instead of barley. The words of Job are ended.

Job chapter 31 concludes Job's speeches in this book. This is the last chapter of Job's lengthy concluding speech, in which he sums up his case, and once again asserts his innocence. This is Job's second oath, after that of chapter 27 verses 1 to 6. And Job again took up his discourse, and said, As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty who has made my soul bitter, as long as my breath is in me, and the Spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit. Far be it from me to say that you are right. Till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go. My heart does not reproach me for any of my days. The oath of this chapter comes after Job's recollection of his former estate in chapter 29, against which the misery of his current condition was seen in chapter 30. The chapter has an implicit courtroom setting. Job has suffered tremendous misfortunes, which seem to single him out as a guilty man, judged by God. Again, Job, once a ruler and leader of his people, now appears to be divinely condemned, leaving him stripped of authority and standing in his society. Job has been calling for a divine hearing of his case, looking for vindication, which will absolve him of the guilt that now wrongly seems to cling to him. This chapter is a formal declaration, a self-malediction, or self-imprecation, cursing himself if he is not telling the truth about his innocence in the matters of which he has been accused. This is more than just a denial of guilt. It's a formal proclamation calling for God to act if he is guilty in any of these matters. We should recall the way that Eliphaz the Temanite had made serious yet false allegations concerning Job in chapter 22 verses 5 to 9.

Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities, for you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The man with power possessed the land, and the favoured man lived in it. You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed. Gerald Janssen mentions Robert Gordas' observation that there are fourteen sins that Job claims to be innocent of. The two times seven list might be an indication of comprehensiveness.

He also notes that, as the Hebrew verb for swearing or taking an oath is related to the number seven, there might be a significance in the number here. Against this point, we should probably note that there isn't agreement in the numbering of the sins. Once again, as in the vision of Job as the righteous leader in chapter 29, there is a clear accent upon justice as a social matter in Job's list.

This is what righteousness looks like, not just a personal righteousness, but public responsibility and duty. Job throughout is calling for God to bring judgment upon him if he is guilty of any of the sins that he lists. As he is currently suffering at God's hands, he is effectively declaring that his suffering has been justly inflicted upon him if he is guilty in any of the matters he mentions. Once again, many scholars and translations, dissatisfied with the ordering of this chapter, have reordered elements of it. However, as is generally the case elsewhere in Job, the justification for such ordering is relatively weak textually. The chapter begins with the sin of lust. Job not only declares that he hasn't looked upon a virgin to lust after her, but that he had positively made a covenant with his eyes not to do so. We might here think of Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter 5 verses 27 to 29.

[7:14] You have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you, that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away, for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. In both of these cases we see that beyond the commandment not to commit adultery, there is a duty to starve lust in our hearts, not to feed it by granting our eyes free reign to roam around, or lustfully gazing upon another, committing adultery with them in our hearts. Had Job acted in such a manner, he leaves his heroes in no doubt that judgment would have been deserving, and disaster might even have been appointed to him. Verses 5 to 8 move to falsehood, deceit and dishonesty. Job insists that he is a man of truth, and requests that God weigh him in a just balance, so that the matter of his integrity would be left in no doubt. Adultery in verses 9 to 12 is the next sin. Had Job been guilty of this, he says that he himself should be cuckolded as a just judgment. He euphemistically speaks of men bowing down over his wife, like a prostitute. Several commentators also see a euphemistic reference to sexual intercourse in the grinding mentioned in the first half of verse 10. The male upper millstone grinds upon the lower female millstone as an image of sexual relations. Clines argues against this.

He claims that it is more likely that it refers to the wife being reduced to a slave, and the most menial of tasks, although this might well have implied or connoted that she would have been sexually abused. Injustice and oppression are the subject of verses 13 to 15. God is the patron of the weak and the oppressed, and those who abuse them are subject to God's curse and judgment. Deuteronomy chapter 27 verse 19. Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, and all the people shall say, Amen. The righteous man is supposed to be characterized by generosity, charity, and magnanimity. In verses 16 to 23, Job exculpates himself of miserliness and indifference towards the poor, from the sins not of commission so much as in verses 13 to 15, but sins of omission. The righteous man needs to act when he sees that justice is not being performed.

Greed, avarice, arrogance, and the pride of life are the subject of verses 24 to 26. Job enjoyed immense wealth, but his confidence was not in his wealth. He looked to the Lord for his security.

Idolatry is next in verse 26 and following. Job has not worshipped the heavenly bodies or other idols. He has been faithful to God throughout. He has not rejoiced in other people's ruin or downfall.

[10:00] He is not afflicted by schadenfreude. He does not rejoice in the destruction of others, but wishes people to be built up. The ancient Near Eastern man was expected to be a good host, characterized by liberality and hospitality, and Job, again, has been faithful in this matter. No one can justly accuse him of not having performed his duties in this respect. Hypocrisy is the subject of verses 33 to 34.

Job's righteousness has always been the real thing. It's not just a facade he puts on for social face. David Clines argues that verses 35 to 37 are out of order and should be placed at the end of the chapter. Janssen, as we shall see, argues against this transposition. To render all of this even more formal, Job proclaims his desire for a witness, likely at this point God himself, and places, as it were, his signature or sign beneath his verbal statement. He fervently wishes that he had the indictment of God, the judgment and sentence against him that account for all of the disaster that has befallen him. So confident is he that no such document exists that he declares that if he were given it, far from hiding it away, he would wear it openly and proudly.

In chapter 19 verse 9 he had declared, He has stripped from me my glory and taken the crown from my head. Now in a surprising return of that image, he wants to wear the Lord's indictment against him around his head as a new crown. He has lost his honour, but he would wear the document of indictment as a badge of honour. He would give a thorough accounting of all of his deeds and approach God with confidence, like a prince. In the concluding verses of Job's speech, Yonson hears an allusion to the story of Eden in Genesis chapter 2 to 3, to Adam's relationship to the land, presenting the intriguing possibility that Job is gathering together all of his former self-implications and denials and exculpations in terms of the paradigmatic curse of Genesis chapter 3 verses 17 to 19. And to Adam he said, This, Yonson suggests, would help to explain why the chapter fittingly ends with these words, rather than with verses 35 to 37, as Gordis

Cline's and others suggests that it should. Furthermore, in the statement that ends the chapter, the words of Job are ended or completed, Yonson also notes a possible allusion back to the description of Job's character as that of a complete or blameless man, as he was first introduced to us in chapter 1 verse 1, the words are related.

A question to consider. On a number of occasions in the Psalms and here in the book of Job, individuals appeal to the Lord insisting upon their righteousness and claiming that they are not guilty of sin. How are such declarations possible for fallen human beings to make?

[13 : 09] Can we make such declarations?