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Motives

Job 22-27

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Some people don't know when to shut up. Right? And we've all been on both the receiving end and the giving end of that problem. A friend keeps talking when they should have stopped and hurts us deeply. And on another day I'm the guilty one who should have stopped a long time ago, but just so intent on making my case that I kept going even though I'd lost the argument or missed the point long before. We're at that point in the book of Job. Really, I think we reached that point some chapters back, but it's just now that it's starting to dawn on some of the characters in the story. Today we'll be looking at Chapters 22-27. This is the third cycle of speeches between Job and his friends, but it's a little different than the first two. The pattern has been for Eliphaz, the mystic, to speak and for Job to rebut him, then for Bildad, the traditionalist, followed by another rebuttal from Job. Finally, Zophar, the rationalist, speaks and Job responds.

In the first cycle, Job's friends tried to induce him to confess his sins with the promise that if he did so, God would restore all of his material blessings. Their accusations were vague and non-specific. And Job stuck to his guns and insisted that it was his integrity that was important, not the "stuff". In the second cycle, Job's friends appealed to what we're calling the "Retribution Principle": God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. They were more pointed in accusing Job of some non-specific sin and, again, he stood firm on his integrity. Along with Job's wife, who spoke at the beginning, Job's friends are playing the part of devil's advocates. In the prologue the Adversary challenged God's wisdom, arguing that if God rewards people for righteousness, people will be righteous for selfish reasons, which isn't

righteousness at all. And so Job has become a witness in God's defence. He has refused to compromise his integrity just to get his blessings back. But Job's friends aren't done yet. The trial isn't quite over. And they keep pushing. At this point there's nothing left for them to do than to up their game through outright accusations. The Retribution Principle is how God works, they insist, thus Job is guilty and their job is to persuade him to confess his guilt. If Job does that, the Adversary wins his case in the divine court.

Eliphaz doesn't know when to stop. As we'll see, this cycle is shorter than the others. Eliphaz goes on at length, but Bildad has only six short verses to say before he sputters out. Zophar knows when to be silent—finally—and says nothing. Many Old Testament scholars think that Zophar's speech has either been lost or that it was transposed and merged into Job's response to Bildad. Either is possible, but I think that what we have actually makes rhetorical sense. Eliphaz, the mystic who thinks that God has given him a vision about Job, just doesn't know when to quit. I've noticed that that's often the case with people who are convinced that God has spoken to them. Bildad, the traditionalist, tries one last time, but really has nothing left to say. Zophar, the rationalist, hears Bildad sputter out and realises that he's got nothing more to add and should probably just keep his mouth shut.

So look at Chapter 22, beginning with verse 5. Eliphaz isn't going to beat around the bush anymore about Job's supposed sins. He says:

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 favored man lived in it.
You have sent widows away empty,
and the arms of the fatherless were
crushed.**

**Therefore snares are all around you,
and sudden terror overwhelms you,
or darkness, so that you cannot see,
and a flood of water covers you. (Job
22:5-11)**

These were serious charges in Job's world, just as they were serious charges in Israel. They should be serious charges to us, but in our world we've largely given up personal responsibility for these sorts of things to the government. In the ancient world it was expected that people would take care of each other. Those who had, were generally expected to help the have-nots. But these charges are pretty silly when laid against Job. He wasn't just a wealthy man. He was a prominent man of his city—an elder who sat at the gate. Everyone would have known his charity and he would not have had the reputation he had if he'd been truly guilty of these charges. Whatever the case, Eliphaz accuses Job and urges him to confess in verse 21 and following:

**“Agree with God, and be at peace;
thereby good will come to you.**

Again, the message is: confess and God will restore his blessings to you. Confess, and you'll get your stuff back. The Hebrew of verse 30 is difficult. The ESV speaks of God delivering the one who is not innocent, but the Hebrew really seems to indicate that Eliphaz is talking about Job delivering the innocent: “who will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands.” In other words, if Job would only listen to his friends, humble himself, confess and repent, not only will God restore his blessings, but Job could then be an encouragement to others in similar situations to do the same.

Job will have none of it. He doesn't respond to Eliphaz with anger or sarcasm this time. I think that at this point Job has given up on his friends. Instead, he laments his state and expresses his longing for a hearing before God. Look at 23:3-7.

**Oh, that I knew where I might find
him,
that I might come even to his seat!
I would lay my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.**

**I would know what he would answer me
and understand what he would say to me.
Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; he would pay attention to me.
There an upright man could argue with him,
and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.**

Job still has hope in God, if only he can get a hearing. Surely God would hear him and set things right. But, alas, Job goes on, God is nowhere to be found, and as much as God seems to be paying too much attention to him, he doesn't seem to hear Job's cries. But, most important, Job continues to stand firm on his claim to righteousness. Verse 12:

**I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.**

Job continues his lament in Chapter 24. It's interesting, because Eliphaz is encouraging Job to think of himself, but Job's outlook continues to be bigger than himself. Again, it's not about "stuff"; it's about righteousness and as part of that, Job's asking questions about righteousness and justice that affect the whole world. In verse 1 he asks "Why are not times of judgement kept by the Almighty?" People do the sorts of things that Eliphaz has accused him of. They "drive away the donkey of the fatherless", "they thrust the poor off the road". And, Job says, the poor end up seeking food in the wasteland and lie all night without clothing. They bring in the harvests of the wicked, but are given nothing to eat in return. "The murderer rises before it is light," says Job in verse 14, "that he may kill the poor and needy." "The eye of the adulterer also waits for the twilight, saying, 'No eye will see me'.

And yet, says Job—and the ESV doesn't communicate this very well—this is all for at time. Look at verse 24:

They are exalted a little while, and then are gone;

**they are brought low and gathered up like all others;
they are cut off like the heads of grain.**

It looks like Job is starting to find a chink in the Retribution Principle. If the wicked can prosper for a time, but still face justice eventually, then maybe—just maybe—the righteous can face suffering for a time and live with a hope of restoration.

Now, Bildad responds in the six verses of Chapter 25:

**“Dominion and fear are with God;
he makes peace in his high heaven.
Is there any number to his armies?
Upon whom does his light not arise?
How then can man be in the right before God?
How can he who is born of woman be pure?
Behold, even the moon is not bright,
and the stars are not pure in his eyes;
how much less man, who is a maggot,
and the son of man, who is a worm!”**

God is big and we are small. Oddly enough, Bildad argues that Job's claims of innocence are bunk because no one is innocent. While he is correct, perfection was never Job's claim. But in the end Bildad just sputters out: We're all maggots and worms. God will never grant you an audience, Job.

In his final speech, Job uses Bildad's talk of God's ordering of the cosmos as a springboard. In 26:7-14 he sings a great hymn of creation, speaking of God's power and authority as he brings order.

**He stretches out the north over the void
and hangs the earth on nothing.
He binds up the waters in his thick clouds,
and the cloud is not split open under them.
He covers the face of the full moon
and spreads over it his cloud.
He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters**

**at the boundary between light and darkness.
The pillars of heaven tremble
and are astounded at his rebuke.
By his power he stilled the sea;
by his understanding he shattered Rahab.
By his wind the heavens were made fair;
his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.
Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways,
and how small a whisper do we hear of him!
But the thunder of his power who can understand?”**

God has tamed the primordial chaos—that which was formless and void—and has given it purpose and function. And yet for all the power and authority God has exerted to bring order to Creation, we can hear but a whisper of him. We have a glimpse of him, but his ways remain a mystery. This may be the wisest thing Job has said so far, although I don't think he realises it at this point. Our knowledge of God is limited and his ways in this world will always be, in large part, mysteries to us. God will come back to this point when he finally speaks at the end of the book.

But regardless of the mystery, Job refuses his friends' advice. He will hold fast to his integrity. The heart of his last speech is in 27:2-6.

**“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.**

When he talks about not speaking falsehoods or uttering deceit, what he's

saying is that he will not make a false confession of sins that he hasn't committed. "Till I die," he says, "I will not put away my integrity...I will hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go."

This is the climax of the dialogue section of the book. The key point here is that Job values righteousness for righteousness' sake. He's not in it for the blessings. He's not in it for the "stuff" and he never was. This was the whole point of the Adversary's challenge to God and Job says here that he will cling to his integrity whether he receives benefits or not. Job, the star witness to the wisdom of God's policies in the world, proves the Adversary wrong. God wins the case. Now, there's more left to the book of Job. God has won his case against the Adversary, but Job knows nothing of that. He's still got serious questions that need answering.

Again, the key point here is that Job affirms that there is really something calling righteousness and that it can be objectively defined. You see, most religion in the ancient world was defined by what we call the Great Symbiosis. The gods had needs and people tried to meet them. In return, the gods would give the people what they needed. But to know what the gods needed was trial and error. To a large degree, whatever resulted in prosperity was assumed to be what the gods wanted and was therefore "righteous". To them Job's idea of a disinterested righteousness, the idea of righteousness for righteousness' sake didn't make any sense. Their whole religious lives revolved around serving the gods in order to receive blessings—to have their needs met—in return. But Job has found something greater. Job has found a righteousness defined by a God who, as Creator, is worthy of service, of worship, of faith regardless of the blessings he may give. Even when the world governed by this God doesn't make sense, Job knows that this is the God who made fair the heavens by his wind and who shattered the forces of chaos. We hear but a small whisper of him, but knowing who he is, Job is

willing to give him the benefit of the doubt when life doesn't make sense.

I think this is a good place for us to pause today. Some flavours of "Great Symbiosis" religion still exist. A lot of people believe in the idea of karma. It's hard to think of a better example of righteousness motivated by selfish reasons. Closer to home, there are wide swathes of Christianity that have been influenced and even taken over by the Prosperity Gospel. It's a false gospel that turns Christianity into little more than a means to health and wealth. But even Prosperity Gospel aside, we Western Christians have increasingly over the last couple of hundred years turned the gospel into a primarily therapeutic message. The gospel is, first and foremost, the royal summons to the King who has given his own life for his people. If Job, who knew nothing even of the Lord's covenant with Israel, could see in God someone worthy of service and worship for his own sake, how much more ought we be able to see that in the God who became incarnate in Jesus and died on the cross for our sake? But all too often we pitch the gospel almost entirely as a therapeutic message: Jesus will make all your problems better. He may. But following Jesus also means taking up our crosses daily to follow him. Jesus may solve some of our problems, but following him is to take the narrow and difficult path. Brothers and Sisters, if we need to think about our motives and Job gives us a good opportunity to do that. Even if we haven't bought into something as off the mark as the Prosperity Gospel, we should still be asking ourselves what motivates our pursuit of righteousness.

I remember this discussion hitting me about the time I got into high school. That's where it started becoming one of the more common topics of teaching in our youth group. Up until then we Christian kids just followed the rules. As kids that's where the focus usually is. Things are simple: don't lie, don't hurt other people, don't steal their stuff, and so on. We learned the Ten Commandments. But as you get older you start to realise that the Bible doesn't have a commandment for everything

and even when you can find a commandment about something, the application isn't always clear. We tell our kids: Holiness means not having sex until you're married. Seems simple. But then what do our kids do? They start asking what constitutes "sex". How far can I go before I cross the line and break the rule? You see, this is what happens when we try to teach holiness and godliness as keeping the rules without doing the much harder work of teaching our kids the motivations for holiness and godliness, without digging into the gospel of God's loving grace with them and teaching them that Jesus is the King to be served because he is both our great and loving Creator and our merciful and gracious Redeemer. Asking how far is too far, pushing the limits of the rules is not holiness. It reflects a false and self-centred righteousness. But this sort of minimalistic faith is common today. It asks, "What's the least I have to do?"

But it's not just high school kids. We often continue to carry this minimalist approach to faith with us as we get older. We see it in our attitude towards giving. We ask things like, "Am I obligated to tithe off my gross or my net?" and then we calculate that tithe to the penny. Never mind that the tithe was an Old Testament concept. Never mind that even when the tithe was obligatory, it was given to support the temple and its priests. The law *also* required the people to be generous to the poor and needy on top of the tithe. But we often fall back on the tithe, because it makes for an easy rule by which to judge. There's no easy rule in the New Testament, but if we're willing to pay attention and if we're willing to think beyond a minimalist faith we see that the New Testament (and the Old for that matter, too) calls God's people to a proportional generosity. No, there's no number on it, but that's how holiness is.

Another good example is one I never thought I'd see, but that is regularly coming up in some of the clergy discussion forums I frequent. Pastors want to know how to address cannabis use in the Church. It used to be easy—falling back on the rules—because it

was illegal. Christians shouldn't break the law. But falling back on rules doesn't teach holiness. And now, as many jurisdictions lift their prohibitions, how do we address the problem? I know there's some debate over this, but this is one of those issues the Bible doesn't address directly. There's no "rule" for it. I think the prohibition against drunkenness gives us some guidelines that apply particularly to drug use for purely recreational purposes. I've read a number of articles talking about a dramatic upswing in cannabis use during the pandemic. People are stressed, they're worried, they want escape. But does this kind of escape draw us closer to God? Think of David, the man after God's heart. There's a guy who faced some difficult and stressful situations—some of his own making. When David was faced with hardship, he went straight to God. Many of the psalms are the result. If, instead, David had looked for relief or escape in a pipe full of dope, we'd have no Psalter—and I don't think he'd gone down in history as a man who pursued God. And, of course, this goes for anything we might use to escape our problems rather than bringing them to God, but I think the current cannabis problem illustrates this sort of minimalism well.

Another example. A Christian guy I used to work with came to me for advice one day. His wife was angry at him. He'd struggled with a porn addiction ever since he was a teen. He knew it was wrong, but he only decided to do something about it when his wife got fed-up with it and threatened to leave him. This was the first problem: He wasn't motivated with the idea of honour God; he was motivated by the potential loss of his wife. He went to his pastor for counselling. I don't know if the fault lay with poor counselling on the pastor's part or if my friend misunderstood, but whatever the case, he fell back on "rules" and convinced himself he was doing the right thing. He dug up the legal definition of "pornography" and stopped looking at that kind of thing. He stopped looking at websites with pictures of full nudity and switched to websites that featured

swimsuit and lingerie models and convinced himself he wasn't looking at porn. And he couldn't understand why his wife was still upset with him.

Jesus gets at this sort of legalistic minimalism in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5. People thought they were fulfilling the law against murder so long as they didn't stick a knife into their neighbour, but Jesus reminded them that the requirement to love one's neighbour is bigger than that. If you hate your neighbour, even if you don't actually kill him, you've failed to fulfil the law of love. Similarly, he says, lusting after a woman—whether she's clothed or not—is to commit adultery in your heart, even if you don't actually engage in the act. Jesus concludes with the words, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect".

Brothers and Sisters, that's what it means to be godly. That's what holiness looks like. Yes, there are times when the Bible gives us clear rules, but our goal isn't to be slavishly obedient to the rule, while pushing its limit. It's to look at the principles of godliness that lie behind it and to recognise that the rule isn't there to keep us from having fun, but as a guide to holiness. If we approached the clear rules with that in mind, I think we'd do a lot better in addressing those areas in life where the Bible doesn't offer clear rules. Rather than asking what the minimum is to be a follower of Jesus, rather than asking how much we can indulge ourselves before falling into sin, we'd be making our way through life and evaluating everything we encounter, every choice we have to make and asking things like, "Does this bring me closer to God or will it drive me from him or cause me to miss an opportunity to draw closer?" and "Does this look like loving my neighbour or does it look like loving myself?" and "Is this self-centred or is it God-centred?" Ultimately: "Does this entail sacrifice, giving of myself in a way that honours God and makes him known?"

Brothers and Sisters, Job teaches us the importance of following after God for God's sake and of pursuing

righteousness for righteousness' sake—because both are worthy, not for what we gain, but because God is God and righteousness honour him. Because God has proved himself worthy of our devotion by his goodness and his faithfulness, seen supremely in the cross, and because pursuing holiness and righteousness in our lives pleases him while exposing the unbelieving world around us to the hope he has given us of a world and a humanity one day set to rights.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, as the Creator who tamed the primordial chaos you are worthy of our service and worship, but you have proven yourself even more in giving your Son to die on our behalf, to die for your enemies, that we might be restored to your fellowship. You have proved your goodness, your faithfulness, and your worthiness. Even as we struggle with disordered, sinful, and selfish desires, you have poured your own Spirit into our hearts to turn them to you. Teach us, we pray, to avail ourselves of the means of grace that you have given—that we would immerse ourselves in your word, live in loving fellowship with our brothers and sisters, be reminded of the grace of the sacraments, that we would pursue godliness in our lives, setting aside every selfish motive and pursuing righteousness solely for the purpose of honour you and of making you known. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.