



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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**Let the Almighty answer me!**

**Job 29-31**

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It would be an understatement to say that things have gone from bad to worse for Job. Job's troubles *started* at a far worse point than most of us have probably ever known and then went quickly downhill from there. He's lost everything: his prosperity, his children, and finally his health. And yet for Job that wasn't all. Job was a righteous man. Because of that he was esteemed by his friends and his community. And now that's gone too. He once sat in a place of honour at the city gate, a respected elder of the community, but now he sits on an ash heap in the garbage dump. Job has lost his reputation.

We may miss this because we no longer live in an honour-based culture. In an honour culture—which is what virtually every culture was before the Twentieth Century—certain choices in life are esteemed over others and the people who choose those things are shown honour by the society, while people who make poor choices are shamed. This has mostly been lost in our culture in recent decades. We often hear people talk about it in terms of our having created a “participation trophy” culture. We still do have some sense of honour, but you can't have honour without also having shame and we've largely done away with the shame. What little concept we have left of honour won't last much longer. But in Job's world honour was important and Job has lost his. And this is largely because he and the people around him looked at the world and had a sense of divine justice rooted in what I've called the Retribution Principle—this idea that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. Seeing Job's loss of everything and sitting in the town dump scraping his sores with a potsherd meant that he was being punished. He'd

seemed like a righteous man, but clearly he'd been hiding some secret sin and was now being punished. And this has left Job utterly crushed. As much as he laments the loss of his material blessings, the biggest blow to him is the loss of reputation. He knows he's a righteous man, but everyone now thinks otherwise.

So far we've listened in as Job and his three friends have debated. Job has maintained his righteousness. He's refused to compromise his principles and in doing that, he's proved the Adversary wrong. Job has pursued righteousness, not for selfish reasons, but because he values righteousness itself. But Job is still left, as we saw last week, with the big question: Why? How can God let this happen to him? And so the second half of the book was introduced by a hymn, sung by the narrator, about wisdom. Wisdom is more precious than gold, but human beings will never find it. It's not buried in the earth the depths of the sea. Rather wisdom lies with God and thus, to fear the Lord—to trust in him—is the wisest thing a human being can do. This gives us something to think about as we dive into the second half of the book. Today we'll look at Chapters 29 to 31. Job now launches into a series of three discourses and here we get a sense of his frustration, not only with his situation, but also with God. Job continues to pursue righteousness, but in terms of wisdom he goes further and further off the rails. He's supposed to be one of the wisest of the wise—and so were his three friends—but none of them truly grasps wisdom.

In Chapter 29 Job recalls his former days of blessings from God and honour amongst his people. Look at verses 2-7:

**“Oh, that I were as in the months of old,  
as in the days when God watched over me,  
when his lamp shone upon my head,  
and by his light I walked through darkness,  
as I was in my prime,  
when the friendship of God was upon my tent,  
when the Almighty was yet with me,**

**when my children were all around me,  
when my steps were washed with butter,  
and the rock poured out for me streams of oil!  
When I went out to the gate of the city,  
when I prepared my seat in the square...**

Right at the outset Job assumes that because his life is no longer full of blessings that God must be absent—he's no longer watching over Job. God once shone his light upon Job and guided his path, but now Job is in darkness. Once the friendship of God was on Job's tent, but now, Job senses, God has abandoned him—or worse, has become his enemy.

We get a sense here of just how close Job is—or was—to God. It's telling that in the divine counsel, when the Adversary challenges God, God immediately thinks of his servant Job. Now here Job speaks of God's friendship being upon his tent—his dwelling place. Now, Job wasn't a Jew, but the way he phrases this would have, to the Jewish readers of this book, taken on the sense of sacred space. Because of Job's friendship, his closeness with God, his very house took on the sense of temple or tabernacle and that casts Job in the role of prophet and priest. And so the rest of this makes sense when he speaks of the young men deferring to him and the old rising in his presence. Job held a place of great honour in his community because of his nearness to God. Even princes and nobles ceased to speak in his presence, he says in verse 9.

But Job's righteousness wasn't just pious talk; he also walked the walk. In verse 12 he says:

**I delivered the poor who cried for help,  
and the fatherless who had none to help him.**

and continuing at verse 14:

**I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;  
my justice was like a robe and a turban.  
I was eyes to the blind**

**and feet to the lame.  
I was a father to the needy,  
and I searched out the cause of him  
whom I did not know.  
I broke the fangs of the unrighteous  
and made him drop his prey from his  
teeth. (Job 29:14-17)**

Job deserved his reputation. This is the first time we've heard the details and it contrasts very sharply with where he is now. In Chapter 30 his speech turns into another lament. In the first verse he says, "But now they laugh at me." But who is it that's laughing? It's not just the people who were once his peers. No, it's worse than that. In verses 1-8 he describes men who have no honour: "men whose fathers I would have disdained (v. 1)...A senseless, a nameless brood (v. 8). The men who lack wisdom and honour and righteousness—who live like animals—disdain Job. "They abhor me," he says in verse 10.

**Because God has loosed my cord and  
humbled me,  
they have cast off restraint in my  
presence. (Job 30:11)**

Job then moves on from his loss of honour to his physical afflictions before crying out again. His cry is, on the one hand, a cry to God to hear him, while at the same time a cry of hopeless lament. Job no longer expects God to hear his cry. Look at verses 19-21:

**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.**

This is the setup for Job's final appeal in Chapter 31. Job is convinced that God either isn't listening or refuses to respond, so he leverages that. Now, Chapter 31 has some textual difficulties. Verses 2-4 are the clear introduction to Job's appeal and the words of verse 1 fit better in the middle of the chapter as he makes his case. The same goes for

verses 38-40, which fit better before what are clearly Job's closing remarks before that. These things aren't that uncommon. Scribes would sometimes miss a line or two and, rather than recopy the whole thing, they'd make a note of it in the margin. A later scribe might not be sure where to insert that marginal text and would just put it at the beginning or end of the chapter. So in verses 2-4 Job begins:

**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?**

This is the Retribution Principle. "The unrighteous are punished. That is justice," says Job, "So why is God punishing me? Has he not seen my ways?" Of course, the question is rhetorical. God knows Job's righteousness. So Job's now calling God's justice into question as he goes on to make the case for his own righteousness. Specifically, here's what Job's doing now. He's speaking as much to God as to his friends at this point and so he makes two things clear: First, God punishes the wicked and, second, God is watching all of this. That means that as Job goes on to make his detailed claims to righteousness, if he's being dishonest, then God is obligated to punish him in some way. It's Job's last-ditch effort to reclaim his honour. He will insist on his righteousness. He lists a hosts of sins and calls down curses on himself if he is guilty of any of them. If God does not act or if God refuses to speak in response—and it's clear that Job is counting on divine silence—then he will be vindicated. He may not have his material blessings back, but at least he will have his reputation.

Job begins in verse 5 with his honesty:  
**"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. (Job 31:5-8)**

Notice how Job calls down a curse on himself if he has been dishonest in his business: may someone else eat what I have sewn. Now look at verses 9-12:

**"If my heart has been enticed toward  
a woman,  
and I have lain in wait at my  
neighbor'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.**

Again, he calls down another curse: If I have pursued my neighbour's wife, may my wife "grind grain for another"—a euphemism for his wife bearing another man's children. This is a crime that the judges would be sure to punish and that would condemn Job to destruction, surely then, God will not overlook it if Job is guilty.

Job continues with this pattern. In verses 13-15 he calls down a curse on himself if he has "rejected the cause of my manservant or maidservant". In verses 16-23 Job asserts his care for the poor:

**"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...  
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...**  
(Job 31:16-17, 19-21)

So far Job has asserted his faithfulness in marriage, his care for his servants, and his generosity with the poor. Again, Job wasn't an Israelite, but the things he's addressing were all core to the ethical system that the Lord had given to Israel. These are key things that define righteousness, especially as it pertains to externals. But Job goes on in verse 24:

**“If I have made gold my trust  
or called fine gold my confidence...**

Job has been richly blessed with material wealth, but he has not made an idol of it. Similarly, in verse 26:

**if I have looked at the sun when it  
shone,  
or the moon moving in splendor...**

Job has not turned to other gods either. He says in verse 28:

**this also would be an iniquity to be  
punished by the judges,  
for I would have been false to God  
above.**

He has been as faithful in his religious duties to God as he has been faithful in his familial duties to his wife. He has not trusted in his wealth or worshipped other gods. Verse 1 seems to fit best with these verses as well. Job says there:

**“I have made a covenant with my  
eyes;  
how then could I gaze at a virgin?”**

The sense isn't so much about sexual ethics, but in the context, about Job using his wealth and position to build a harem. Other men would have done that and it would have been culturally acceptable, but Job has lived humbly, not exploiting his position. He has followed the way of righteousness.

Finally, Job wraps up his appeal with a miscellaneous ethical list: “If I have rejoiced at the ruin of him who hated me” (v. 29), “[If] I have not opened my door to the traveller” (v. 32), “If I have concealed my transgressions as others do” (v. 33), and “If my land has cried out against me...if I have eaten its yield without payment” (vv. 38-39). Job covers the gamut of sins. “If I have done any of this,” he cries out, “may God bring these sins back on me in punishment.”

He concludes in verses 35-37:

**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.**

This is Job's formal claim to innocence. He has called down curses on himself if he has lied. He makes his mark. The “signature” in Hebrew is the letter *taw*, which in the script used in the days of the Old Testament was actually an “X”. Job uses legal language here. He has stated his case and has signed his mark to it. If this were an earthly court and no one rose to challenge his statement, Job would leave vindicated. Now, on the one hand, Job is ready should God finally speak. He will defend his case with confidence. But, the fact is, since God has refused to answer Job thus far, Job's expectation is that God will not answer. And there's the problem in Job's thinking. He's trying to win back his honour through manipulation. And that, I think, is the point on which we can transition to our application.

Again, we see that Job's righteousness is a disinterested righteousness. He's not in it for the blessings; he values righteousness because it's right. And this is good. Job continues to prove that God was not wrong to hold him up as a paragon of righteousness in the beginning. Job was introduced as

upright and blameless and nothing he's done has shown otherwise. But. But, Job has a seriously flawed view of God. We've seen hints of it here and there. Earlier in the book we got a hint that Job, for all his righteousness, also thought that he could manage God or placate his anger through the observation of petty rituals. This is how people in the ancient Near East thought. We call it the Great Symbiosis. Ancient religion was about figuring out what the gods wanted or needed and then providing it, which then obligated them to provide what the worshippers wanted or needed. But Israel was to be different. When the Lord made himself known to Israel, he wasn't like the pagan gods. He has no needs. He cannot be manipulated. He is worthy of worship because he is God. But there's a splinter of that old paganism firmly wedged in Job's conception of God.

Consider, too, that as Job tries to win back his reputation, he does so at God's expense. Job assumes the Retribution Principle defines justice and he asserts his own righteousness and, in the process, Job sacrifices God's righteousness. Job, in his frustration, has reached the point of accusing God. He's trying to make sense of his situation. He's looking for an answer to that big question of “Why?”. But Job's looking in the wrong place. He's trying to answer the question by looking at himself and asserting his own righteousness over everything else, rather than looking to God and giving God the benefit of the doubt. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but Job has forgotten this in his despair.

In his final claim, Job has called on God to act. Either I'm guilty or I'm not, Job claims. And he calls down curses on himself if he is guilty. To his way of thinking, he wins his case if God remains silent or refuses to act. But, of course, that's just what Job expects. God hasn't spoken so far, so why would he speak now. I bet most of us have done something similar in an attempt to manipulate God or to force his hand. We're faced with a difficult decision. Often, I think, it's a decision to do something we know is sinful. And so

we pray and we ask God to speak. We ask God to give us a sign. Maybe we ask the Holy Spirit to convict us if what we're planning to do is truly sinful. Once when I was in college I prayed that if I was supposed to ask out a certain girl I like, that God would give me a sign by having her walk past me on my way to class. Of course, I prayed that just before I left for class, planning to take a route where I had a near 100% chance of passing her. A friend of mine in those days would put his Bible on his desk and pray that if God didn't want him to do such-and-such, he would guild him as he blindly opened the Bible at random to a passage that would make it clear what he was supposed to do. Not only is that second example treating the Bible like a Magic Eight Ball, both of those scenarios reflect a flawed view of God—that we can manipulate him or force him into a corner and demand he act. But this is not the God who reveals himself in Scripture.

Brothers and Sisters, God cannot be manipulated like the pagan gods. He needs nothing. But, more importantly here, he cannot be outmanoeuvred. Job knows that God is not needy, but he still treats God as if he is apathetic or inept. Job tries to justify himself, but at God's expense. Consider that if Job wins his appeal, it means that God is both unjust and unwise.

In contrast, we have the closing words of the hymn in Chapter 28. Wisdom is to fear the Lord—to trust him. That means, on the one hand, recognising that he needs nothing and that nothing we can offer him can put him in our debt. And, on the other hand, it means that he cannot be manipulated or outmanoeuvred. Our attempts to either of those things only serve to demonstrate the splinters of paganism that remain wedged in our faith.

The other major flaw revealed in Job's theology is his perceived need to bring God to account for what has happened. Again, this is a splinter of paganism wedged into his thinking about God. The pagan gods were often wicked and capricious. They had to be held accountable for their actions. But not so

the God of the Bible. We've seen this problem festering in the discourses of Job from the get-go. Job and his friends have adopted an objective standard of righteousness based on their limited observation of the world and they demand that God must be held to it. If he does not, as Job implies here, then God himself is unjust. In the chapters that follow, a fourth friend, Elihu, will step in and challenge this thinking. But it serves as a reminder that God is not contingent. He is not just because he conforms to an objective standard of justice. No, justice flows from God, just as wisdom flowed from him in his creative acts. He defines justice, not the other way around. Again, as we saw last week, to fear the Lord is wisdom. Why? Because it means submitting to him as the one from whom wisdom—not to mention justice and goodness—flows. He is the source. Our duty is not to question, but to trust. Even if God were to respond to our demands for answers, we could never possibly grasp those answers.

Brothers and Sisters, the point made here is to beware. It's very easy for us to develop a skewed perspective about God when we're in the midst of a crisis or a tragedy. It's also very easy for us to piece together flawed theology based on our circumstances. We're limited creatures. We were created to trust in God. He's the one with infinite wisdom and knowledge. Couple that with our fallen nature and it doesn't make for a good combination. We forget our own short-sightedness. We're also selfish. Put those two things together with difficult situations and our natural inclination is often to blame God and to impugn his character rather than to look for the fault in ourselves or to recognise that it is we rebellious human beings who have made a mess of the world he created good. Job, here, serves as a warning.

But there's hope here, too. For all his flawed thinking and bad theology, Job is held up by God himself as righteous. As Job says here in Chapter 29, he was the friend of God. Brothers and Sisters, righteousness and friendship with God does not depend on our perfect theology.

Some of the finest and most godly Christians I have ever known have rarely cracked open a theology book. I know plenty of truly faithful saints who have fallen victim to awful pop-theologies like the Prosperity Gospel. It's a false, pagan religion that has stolen much of the language of Christianity, but remains apart from the faith. It has a heretical view of God and of faith. I know many saints who have bought into secular philosophies and pagan New Age ideas and the like to one degree or another. And yet somehow the Spirit seems to keep the worst of these heresies and false theologies at bay. Like Job, there is a splinter of paganism wedged firmly in their faith, but they remain friends of God and their righteousness is known to everyone around them. Praise God that he is a God of grace. We're reminded here in Job of the dangers of bad theology. Friends, we have an obligation to root these errors out—to immerse ourselves in the Word and to be diligent to know the truth of God, not from our experiences, but from his Word. Theology is important. But we're also reminded by Job of God's grace. This is the God who gave his life at the cross for the sake of sinners. This is the God who places his own Spirit within us, because our hearts are broken and our desires disordered. This is the God who knows our fallenness. This is the God who has given us a redeemer. This is the God who moment by moment extends to us his grace. This is the God who draws us out of the darkness and into his light. This is the God who has bought us from death that we might know his life.