



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### But Now My Eyes See You Job 42

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This morning we come to the final chapter of Job. We can break it down into three short parts: Job's response to the Lord, the Lord's rebuke of Job's friends, and the epilogue, where we read how the Lord restored what Job had lost (and then some). While it might seem like we should have looked at Job's response to the Lord as part of last week's text, I left things with the Lord's speech for a reason. The Lord's speech really marks the conclusion or the high point of the book of Job. Job's response is important, but for the most part, Chapter 42 just ties up the loose ends. Assuming that these last short verses are the climax of the book, especially focusing on the Job's restoration, is one of the ways of misreading the book that gets people into trouble.

As I've been studying Job—there are plenty of Christian and Jewish commentaries, but it's also a book that catches a lot of secular attention—I've noticed three main ways that people misread or misunderstand the book. The most common, and one that seems to pop up a lot amongst secular readers, is summed up in George Bernard Shaw's critique. He's reported to have written, "If I complain that I am suffering unjustly, it is no answer to say, 'Can you make a hippopotamus?'" Like everyone, Shaw was sympathetic with the plight of Job. Like a lot of people—especially secularists and critics of religion who mock the idea of God or, if they may grant his existence, like to think he's doing a very bad job of it—Shaw was sympathetic with Job as he shook his fist at God and demanded an answer. And Shaw didn't really grasp

what the Lord was getting at when he put Job in his place. Yes, the Lord's point was to make it abundantly clear to Job that "I am God and you are not", but *not* in the sense of "I'm God; you're not. Now mind your own business" or "I'm God; you're not. I can do whatever I want". The Lord's point was to impress upon Job that divine wisdom is beyond human ken and that for us, wisdom means to faithfully trust in the Lord, precisely because he is wise—and to trust that in his wisdom, he is also perfectly just, perfectly good, perfectly loving, perfectly faithful.

The other misreading, one that is common in Evangelical—especially Reformed Evangelical—circles, sees the Lord finally putting Job in his place as a sinner. Job's great folly, in this view, is his claim of righteousness. And so the Lord puts him in place and reminds him that he has sinned, that he never really deserved his material blessings, that they were all of grace, and then restores those blessings once Job has repented in dust and ashes. Now, while there may be a lot of theological truth here. The sort of righteousness that, say, St. Paul writes about and that none of us can ever achieve isn't the same sort of righteousness that Job is claiming. It's a category mistake. It ignores the Lord's own defence of Job's righteousness and it mostly misses the point of the book. We ask why bad things happen to good people and St. Paul might say—and he'd be right in saying it—that sin is the problem and that we're all guilty. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. True. But that's not the point of the book of Job. Job is talking about a different kind of good—people who are indeed sinners, but who still pursue God and righteousness with all their being. Why do bad things happen to them?

And, third, I've run across not a few people who fall into the Prosperity Gospel camp who seem to ignore most of the book. God rewarded Job for his righteousness, but the devil took it all

away. But, in the end, God gave it all back because Job deserved it. In other words, faith commands blessing, just don't let the devil take it from you. It's a modern spin on the Retribution Principle, which is one of the main things the book is meant to shoot down in the first place.

So this morning as we look at this final short chapter we need to ask two questions of it. First, how is Job's final speech a response to the Lord? And, second, how does the epilogue serve as a fitting conclusion to the whole book? So, first, Job's response. You'll find it in 42:2-6:

**"I know that you can do all things,  
and that no purpose of yours can  
be thwarted.  
'Who is this that hides counsel  
without knowledge?'  
Therefore I have uttered what I did  
not understand,  
things too wonderful for me, which  
I did not know.  
'Hear, and I will speak;  
I will question you, and you make  
it known to me.'  
I had heard of you by the hearing of  
the ear,  
but now my eye sees you;  
therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes."**

In Job's response to the Lord's first speech, Job acknowledged his smallness in comparison to God and put his hand over his mouth. Now, responding to the Lord's second speech—you'll remember from last week, this was the one about Behemoth and Leviathan—Job acknowledges the bigness of God: he can do all things and no one can thwart his purposes. Job owns the Lord's accusation: "Yes, I am the one who tried to counsel God, but that was a dumb thing to do. I was speaking without knowledge." In verses 4 and 5 he does the same thing again, owning the Lord's accusation and acknowledging his ignorance and foolishness. But verse 6 is the key here. The Hebrew is difficult and the ESV translates it as "I despise myself

and repent in dust and ashes.” He despises himself, says the ESV. He accounts himself as nothing, because he’s realised how foolish it was to challenge God. Job is ashamed of what he’s done. The second verb that the ESV translates “repent” has the sense both of changing one’s mind and of regret. It may be that Job is saying he regrets his charges against God, but the way it’s connected grammatically with “dust and ashes” should lead us to understand Job to be turning aside from his ash heap. His time of mourning, his time of self-pity and anger with God is over. Job’s ready to move on even though the path before him is uncertain.

After the Lord’s first speech, Job acknowledge his place. You are God; I am not. But there’s more that has to be acknowledged. This is the point where George Bernard Shaw stopped. When we think God’s managing the universe poorly, simply reminding us that he is God and that we aren’t isn’t an answer. And this was the point of the second speech about Behemoth and Leviathan. On the one hand Leviathan is not one to be challenged and if God is so much greater than Leviathan, neither is he. On the other hand, the Lord holds out Behemoth as an example of the human response to himself. God cares for Behemoth just as he cares for Job. When the river rages, Behemoth is a symbol of stability, because he doesn’t question the Lord’s wisdom. Job needs to learn to be more like Behemoth. Job’s faith *was* in the retribution principle, in the idea that God governs the universe according to an external (not to mention, mechanistic) standard of justice. God, however, has shown him that, first, his justice cannot be so naïve reduced to a simple formula and, second, that his basis for creating and ruling the cosmos is not justice, but wisdom. Job has taken the Lord’s lesson to heart. He retracts his arrogant accusations and demands for answers that he would never be able to

understand, and he’s now ready to trust.

Now, apparently the Lord was expecting a similar response from Job’s friends. They aren’t the ones who have experienced great loss like Job has, but they’ve been spouting nonsense all through the dialogue. They’ve falsely accused Job and, as much as they’ve defended God’s justice, they’ve forced him into the Retribution Principle box to explain his actions. Seeing that Job has heard the Lord and humbly retracted his accusations and demands, you’d think his friend would, too. But they didn’t and so the Lord speaks next to them in verses 7-9:

**After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them, and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer.**

Again, Job has taken back what he said in response to the Lord. Elihu isn’t mentioned. Some see that as evidence that his speech is a later addition to the book, but I think it’s just as likely that the Lord doesn’t include Elihu, because, for the most part, he spoke truthfully about the Lord. He didn’t put the pieces together quite right, but Elihu wasn’t as off-base as the other three. That said, receiving this third rebuke, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar repent as well and offer sacrifices while Job

prayers for them. I don’t think it’s necessary to dwell on these verses other than to note one more thing that shows a change in Job.

Early in the book we saw Job acting as priest on behalf of his family. We’re told that he offered sacrifices for his children in case they had committed some offense against God. This revealed a chink in Job’s faith, a flaw in his theology. Job, at least in part, conceived of God in pagan terms — as a God who could be placated should he or his children commit some petty offense against him. Job didn’t even know if they had committed an offense, let alone know specifically what it might be, but he sacrificed to God anyway. This is pagan thinking. Now, Job serves as a true intercessor for his friends. He knows what they’ve done wrong, he’s heard with his own ears the Lord’s compassionate words, and so he steps in on behalf of his friends, not in superstition and not worried that God is petty and arbitrary with his judgement and punishments, but knowing that he desires restoration and fellowship. This may not be the trigger for what happens next, but I think it serves an important rhetorical bridge between his confession of humility before the Lord and the Lord’s restoration of Job’s material blessings. Job is thinking correctly about God. Let’s look now at that starting with verse 10:

**And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him. And each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold.**

**And the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning. And he had 14,000 sheep,**

**6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys. He had also seven sons and three daughters. And he called the name of the first daughter Jemimah, and the name of the second Keziah, and the name of the third Keren-happuch. And in all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters. And their father gave them an inheritance among their brothers. And after this Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, four generations. And Job died, an old man, and full of days.**

If we're not careful, this can be a pretty confusing ending to the book. On the one hand, we might ask how Job's restored prosperity makes up for all of his suffering. Sure, the Lord gives him more sons and daughters, but does that make up for the sons and daughters he's lost? And, of course, after all this discussion showing that the Retribution Principle—a sort of wooden formula by which the wicked are punished and the righteous rewarded—after all the discussion that the Retribution Principle (or any other simplistic idea of justice) is *not* how God governs the cosmos, it can seem more than a little odd that Job does the right thing and gets all of his stuff back. I've heard more than one Prosperity Gospel huckster use the epilogue to affirm that heresy. So how does this fit in with the rest of the book?

Well, the first thing we need to remember is that the main focus of the book is not Job, but God's governance of his creation. The Adversary challenged God: It's bad policy to reward people for their righteousness. They'll just be good for the stuff you give them. And then Job challenged God: It's bad policy to allow the righteous to suffer.

The first half of the book addresses the Adversary's challenge. Job, although he didn't know it, served as the Lord's star witness. Does rewarding

righteousness just lead to people who are good for their own benefit? The evidence of Job's life vindicated the Lord's policy. Job has pursued righteousness for the sake of righteousness.

The second half of the book dealt with Job's challenge. He and his friends have assumed all along that God runs the cosmos on the principle of justice and they believed that justice was defined by the Retribution Principle. So the Lord has now made it clear to them that as much as he delights in blessing the faithful, it is not his *policy* to do so. Justice is not his means of governing the world, which means the Retribution Principle falls flat. Now, that said, it doesn't mean that the Retribution Principle is all wrong, it just means that it can't be used to control God, to call him to account, or to predict what he's going to do. The idea that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous is true in a proverbial sense. Here's what I mean by that. Think of the book of Proverbs and the wisdom there. Proverbs aren't guarantees or rules. They're *generally* true, but they make no guarantees. Take Proverbs 21:5 for example:

**The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.**

Hard work leads to abundance and shortcuts to poverty *much* of the time, but there's no guarantee. Some people work hard and never have abundance. Other people find a shortcut and make millions out of it. Proverbs are all about context, which is why the book of Proverbs can tell us with one breath *not* to answer a fool according to his folly and with the next that you *should* answer a fool according to his folly. It depends on the fool and the nature of his folly. Wisdom is knowing the difference. And just so with righteousness and blessing. The Lord delights to reward righteousness, but righteousness is no guarantee of

reward. The world isn't perfect and there are times when, in his wisdom, the Lord has priorities that outweigh some of the blessing we might think we deserve. This is why we need to trust him. Now, Job did trust the Lord. His problem was that he wrongly assumed that the Lord operated on a very narrow and simplistic principle of justice. His trust faltered when God seemed to fail. But now Job understands that God's governance of the world is rooted in wisdom—and a wisdom that we can never begin to fathom—and Job has learned to trust again. And this time his trust will ground him more firmly than he ever could have imagined before.

So the Lord restores Job and in doing that he sends an important signal. Nothing's changed on his end. He had blessed Job before and he will continue to bless him. His policies have not changed and they will not change. What's changed is Job—and, I suppose, the Adversary. The Adversary now knows that the Lord's policy is wise and Job now knows that the Lord is not bound to an external or simplistic standard of justice. Job will now think of his prosperity very differently. Even though he was righteous purely for the sake of righteousness, when all this began, he believed he had a right to his blessings. Now he knows that his blessings are a gracious gift of God—even when he is righteous.

I think this is the lens through which the epilogue finally makes sense. People ask how a restoration of his prosperity and new sons and daughters make up for Job's losses and dead children, but that's to miss the point. Job's restoration isn't actually about Job. It's not about healing his pain or making him whole. It's about sending the message that the Lord's governance of the cosmos has been vindicated and that, despite this brief interruption made to prove the wisdom of his governance, he will continue to

govern the cosmos as he always has. This is important. A lot of people read the end of Job and think that the take-away is that when we are suffering, we can hope in our happiness or our prosperity someday being restored. That's not the point at all.

You see, the point of the book of Job, I've become convinced, is not to put ourselves in Job's shoes and to imagine how we might feel or respond. I'll be honest, I was leaning in that direction when we started. I thought this would be a good book to study in the midst of a pandemic and the social and economic wreck that has come along with it, but that's to miss the point. That said, I still think the book is immensely relevant to us. Actually, I think it's even more relevant the more I've studied and my own thinking on the book has been turned away from thinking about myself in the midst of difficult times, and instead, thinking afresh about the wisdom, the goodness, and the faithfulness of God. That's what the book of Job is ultimately about—about getting us to think correctly about God, because there is perhaps no time when we're more prone to thinking wrongly about God than when we're in the midst of suffering and tragedy. Here God reminds us that, yes, he does delight to bless his friends, but he is under no obligation to do so and, sometimes in his great wisdom, our good or the good of others or the good of the cosmos take precedence over the blessings we think we deserve. Job teaches us to the Lord no matter our circumstances, because we can be sure that regardless of what's happening, he is in control and acting wisely. Job doesn't offer the explanation we might want, but it does give us this consolation and it's the most we can handle as his finite creatures. It's a call to be who and what he made us to be in the first place—creatures invited to live in his light, to share his life, and to trust wholly in his wisdom and goodness. If there's blame to be had, it's ours.

We're the ones who rebelled and we follow in the footsteps of Adam every time we try to take God's role on ourselves, every time we get angry with him, every time we think that we can out-god God or think we could do things better.

So Job should leave us wiser. We cannot grasp the depths of divine wisdom, but we can pursue the path of human wisdom that begins with fear of the Lord. This was the vocation that Adam rejected, but it's the vocation that Jesus, the new Adam, has given back to us. That first Easter morning as he conquered death, he began the work of rolling back, of undoing the wreck that our rebellion has made of Creation. That shockwave of new creation has gone out into all the world. It has touched each of us. It has made us new, it has turned out hearts back towards God, and it has restored to us Adam's calling: to trust in the wisdom of God as we live before his face and carry his kingdom and its new life to a world still struggling through the results of human unfaithfulness.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, thank you for the book of Job. Here you hold up a mirror and show us our own unfaithfulness. Here you expose our wrong thinking about you. And yet you do not leave us lost and condemned. You not only show us our smallness, but also your greatness. You remind us of your wisdom, you give us reason to trust you even in the midst of suffering, you call us to think rightly of you and, in that, you deepen our faith in you, you deepen our fellowship with you. May we trust you more fully, Father, and may we walk more closely at your side. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.