

Job Chapter 31

In our last class Sunday, we studied Job chapters 29-30: the first two chapters of Job's closing argument. In chapter 29, we see Job recounting the blessings he had enjoyed before this evil had fallen upon him. One such blessing that Job seems to spend the most time on was the respect he used to get from others. People viewed Job as wise and listened to what he said due primarily to his actions – Job took upon himself the burden of seeking out ways to help others in need. Job contrasts these pleasant memories in chapter 30 to his present state. Not only had he been suffering immensely, but the reaction he was getting from people had swung completely in the opposite direction. Those who used to respect Job now abhorred him and mocked him. Even those enduring the worst of living conditions – as Job saw it – exalted themselves over Job.

In chapter 30, verses 20-26, Job explains how God is refraining from helping or showing any evidence of comfort or support. The picture painted here is of a man crying out for help and the one to whom he is crying just stands there, staring blankly at him. It is an image of cruelty and indifference. The reaction Job believes he is getting from God leads him to question: was it wrong to ask for help? The question is rhetorical and indicting of God, as Job reasons that when others asked him for help, he not only helped, but he felt compassion. How Job had responded to those in need was the opposite of a man standing motionless with a blank stare on his face. The chapter ends with Job summarizing how horrific his suffering was.

Moving now into Chapter 31, one theme that is quickly noticed is how Job brings curses upon himself if he is guilty of any sin. A variety of sins are discussed in detail, and Job maintains that he is guilty of none of them. It is easy to read this chapter and view Job as prideful. That is in fact how Job's friends perceive it, and how Elihu will interpret it in the chapters that follow. However, I do not believe it was Job's intention to simply draw attention to how great of a person he was. Rather, I believe Job views himself to be embattled in a bitter debate centered on his integrity. Job is merely bringing evidence to support his case and aggressively challenging his friends to bring evidence to the contrary. Remember that God viewed Job as unequaled in righteousness – Job had God's approval. The sins that Job avoided should be ones that we also avoid; yet given the context of a bitter debate, I would hesitate to use these verses out of context as a pattern for us to follow, just the same as I would caution going to Job chapter 25 to use Bildad's arguments for God's authority. We don't want to lose sight of the motivation behind such words, even if the words themselves proclaim truths.

In verses 1-8, the imagery of a person's innocence is represented as it is commonly found in other scriptures: walking in a straight line and having clean hands. These images are contrasted with a person who walks in lustfulness and deceit. In verse 8, Job curses himself that if he is guilty of any of these things, then let another person rob him of all that he had worked for. Bear in mind: Job was basically already living this curse. Therefore, I think we can infer that Job wanted to call out how unjust it was that these things were happening to him.

Verses 9-12 make reference to one desiring an opportunity to commit adultery, and the curse he puts upon himself is an awful one; that his wife should then prostitute herself out to many other men.

In verses 13-15, the idea is that if Job had closed his ears to the complaints of his own servants, then he should expect to receive the same treatment from God. This is similar in nature to the curse from verses 1-8: it has basically already happened. We can then infer that Job is implying an indictment against God:

that if Job had enough humility and reasonableness to listen to the complaint of his servants, then why does God not hear the complaint of his servant, Job? Verse 15 argues: why should Job's servant be shown preference in this manner to Job himself – did not God fashion them both in the womb?

In verses 16-23, Job curses himself if he had ever neglected the needs to the poor. Job uses hyperbole in verse 18 when discussing the lengths to which he helped others “guiding the widow while he was yet in his mother’s womb.” In verse 20: the words “if his body has not blessed me” is talking about the thanks he would have received by helping cover the needy with clothes. That Job had helped so many people gave him confidence (at least intellectually) to stand before God and make his case. I believe that is what verse 23 is talking about. Job had no reason to fear seeing God face to face – uncontrollable emotions notwithstanding – because he had done no wrong that should lead him to being afraid.

Verses 24-28 discuss how Job had not put confidence in any material thing, nor worshipped it. When Job speaks in verse 26 about looking at the sun and moon, it refers to well-known forms of pagan worship during that time; those of which God’s people were warned against on multiple occasions. One such example is found in Deuteronomy 4:19-20: “And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.” Though Job is most commonly believed to be an Edomite, it is clear that regardless of his heritage, he understood the sin of pagan worship and its incompatibility with serving Jehovah. Similarly, in verse 27 when Job refers to kissing his own hand, this has to do with paying homage. This ritual of kissing the hand, or some physical emblem of authority, is practiced commonly even in religions today. Had Job kissed his own hand, it would have indicated that he had made himself his own god, entrusting only in himself and taking the credit for his success.

Verses 29-40 discuss matters of retribution, hospitality, and concealing error. Job took no joy from the ruin of his enemies, nor did he ask God’s curse upon them. Job was hospitable to the traveler, and Job did not hide his sin because he was afraid of what others would think of him. In verses 35-37, Job boldly demands of his accusers: give me a list of what I have done wrong, and I will wear it like a robe or a crown, for everyone to see until I make it right! In verses 38-40, the land and field represent the task given to Job of helping others; if he had neglected his task, then the curse would be for him to simply reap what he had sown.

In summary, Job was a good man. Though he has not handled himself perfectly in this exchange with his friends, what happened to him was not fair. We must not lose sight of this, nor of God’s endorsement of Job at the beginning of the book, as we interpret Elihu’s and God’s responses in the coming chapters.

On Sunday, we will plan to study Elihu’s interjection and what we are to make of it. I look forward to that time with you!