

**Job, II**

What does it mean that Job was blameless and upright? That he was a sinful man, but he shunned evil and feared God (Job 1:1)? On several occasions he admits to being a sinner. In 7:21 he says, “Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins?” He is not denying he has them, but he is just asking why he is not pardoned for them. Thus, being blameless and upright is not to be equated with being sinless. Fearing God more than most men do characterizes Job’s blamelessness and uprightness. Job cultivated his relationship with God by sacrifices of repentance and delighting in the law of the Lord. Job was blameless and upright because he knew his position before God, that God was sovereign. Despite his suffering he never turned from God. Though he questioned the Lord, he always trusted Him. “Though he slay me yet will I trust him.” Like Noah, he was “righteous in his generation.” It was also said of Noah that he walked with God (Genesis 6:9). He was blameless in his generation. What is the central message of the book of Job? That we can suffer or not see God and be assured that there is some divine plan or reason for our suffering or injustice, even though we may not ever see it. God is still God and we are not.

This man was perfect and upright, or blameless and upright. The word blameless can also mean perfect in the sense of being complete. He was complete, he was perfect, he was genuine, and he was upright—upstanding. He feared God and turned from evil. God is the one who says this of Job. The narrator says it first, but then God confirms it in verse eight: “Then the Lord said to Satan, have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. He is perfect and upright.” “Perfect” in the sense of integrity, of genuineness, not of being sinless. Job was wholehearted in his commitment to the person and requirements of God. He was a committed follower of God. He was not a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. He was not trying to serve God and man. He was single-minded in his desire to serve God. He was the genuine article; he had integrity in his relationship to God. That is something we can all aspire to, by God’s grace and through His Spirit. We will never be sinless until we are glorified, but we can be blameless in this sense. We can be single-minded in our desire to serve God, and that should be our prayer.

After the narrator’s description of Job and God’s description of Job, the accuser came into that heavenly assembly. Notice that it is the Lord Himself who begins to address the accuser in 1:7 when He says, “‘Where have you come from?’ Satan answered, ‘From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it.’ Then the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.’” Then the accuser begins to accuse and question. Verse nine says, “‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’ Satan replied. ‘Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.’” What exactly is the accuser’s charge? What is he saying? He is, first of all, attacking Job’s integrity, saying, “Is it for naught that Job fears God?” Job’s wife even will come to him later and say, “Are you still fearing God? Are you still holding onto your integrity? Curse God and die.” The Hebrew uses a euphemism of “bless strongly,” rather than saying “curse” when it is in the context of the Lord. There are some Renaissance paintings that depict Job’s wife where it is implying that she is saying, “Job, make your peace with God, bless God, and die.” This is a misunderstanding of the euphemism that the accuser used. Thus even Job’s wife at this point becomes more of a problem than a helper and says, “Why do you not just curse God and die? Are you still holding on to your integrity?” Let me say one more thing on the nature of Job’s integrity before we move onto what the accuser is really after. The accuser is, first of all, attacking Job’s integrity, but that integrity of which we speak is the opposite of duplicity. Proverbs 11:3 says, “The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.” The opposite of integrity is duplicity.

Job was not a double-minded man, rather he was a man of integrity. He was blameless, perfect in that sense. That is precisely what Satan attacks. He is not attacking the fact that Job appears to be blameless, but he is saying, “Why is Job doing that? Is it out of pure devotion for you or is it not simply because you have blessed him so incredibly?”

Thus the more fundamental charge, the more serious charge that the accuser is issuing here, is that he is attacking God. It is God’s word against his. God has just said that Job is “blameless and upright.” Then Satan basically says, “You are a buffoon. Do you think Job is blameless? Take away his blessings and see what he really is like.” Satan’s real attack is not simply on Job’s integrity but on God’s integrity. Satan is implying that either God is gullible and Job is fooling Him, or God is assuming that His audience is gullible and He knows better and lacks integrity and thus is trying to fool them. Satan’s more serious attack is on the very integrity of God. It is as if Satan is saying, “You call him blameless, but in fact he is only in it for himself. God, You are wrong. You are mistaken. You have put a hedge around him and all that he has. Take that away and he will surely curse You to Your face. Job’s righteousness is really nothing more than self-interest.” A challenge is issued here. Although God can do all things, I can see why God would not choose, in the presence of the assembly, to sweep this accusation aside. It is a serious charge, relating not only to Job’s integrity, but far more importantly, to God’s own integrity. And so the Lord allows Satan to test Job. This is not dualism; it is not the forces of good against the forces of evil. God is sovereign. The Lord is in complete control and only allows the accuser to act. And when the accuser begins stripping Job of all that he has, which was his initial request, he fails to bring the desired result in chapter one. Then the accuser asks to be allowed to touch Job’s body: “You can take away his things. But take away his health, make him miserable, and see what he will do.” In all this, Job remains steadfast. He perseveres, as the writer James said. Job maintains the integrity of his faith in the Lord. He says, “Shall we accept good from God and not trouble also?” “In all this,” we read in 2:10, “Job did not sin with his lips.”

At this point in the book the contest with Satan, the accuser, is finished. The accuser is not mentioned again in the rest of the book. That is over. However, Job’s trial is only beginning because as a human being he wants to know why he is being tested; he wants to know what is going on. Unlike we who have opportunity to read what went on in the heavenly assembly, Job has no clue. That is one reason that this is called a book of speculative wisdom. Speculative wisdom means making judgments where insufficient information is available. Job did not have information about the heavenly assembly, and so he is left to speculate about the cause of his suffering. He is striving to find meaning in his suffering. And the arrival of his friends, Job’s comforters, will only be an addition to his torture, as it turns out.

Job and his friends—this is a long section, 2:11 to almost the end of chapter 27. It may extend into chapter 28, depending on whether we view the poem in 28 as an interlude or as words of Job. The visitation of the three friends begins with a narrative description of their arrival and a seven-day vigil as they sit together in silence. Job, in chapter three, breaks the silence and curses the day of his birth. Notice what he says in 3:23: “Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?” Notice the ironic echo of the words of the accuser: “Have you not put a hedge around him.” Now in a quite different sense Job is saying, “You have hedged me in.” This is not a protective hedge but a restrictive hedge, a hedge that locks him into this suffering that he is experiencing. After Job breaks the silence, the dialogues between Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Job begin. Job speaks first, then Eliphaz speaks and Job responds. Then Bildad speaks and Job responds. Then Zophar speaks and again, Job responds. And then it starts over again with Eliphaz. There is progress and movement in this book.

I would like to talk about some major themes that come out of these three cycles of dialogue in chapters 4 to 28. The first major theme is the theology of what is sometimes called retributive justice. Retributive

justice means that good behavior is rewarded and bad behavior is punished. This is the theology that is espoused by Job's friends. Eliphaz is generally regarded as being a little more gracious than the others, but all three are espousing this theology of retributive justice. In this theology they are both right and wrong. Their theology is essentially correct, but their application is dead wrong. What they are saying in itself is basically sound—we could find it elsewhere. The New Testament sometimes quotes Job's friends. They are not cultists or bringing a new theology; they are talking about a God of justice. But they are wrong in their rigorous application of this particular notion of retributive justice to every single case, particularly Job's case. Job himself does not accuse them of being wrong in their theology. In fact, in chapter 12 he says, "Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you!" That was the Hebrew equivalent of saying, "You are undoubtedly wise." But then he goes on to say, "But I have a mind as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know all these things?" Notice he does not say, "You are wrong." Rather he says, "I know that. Who does not know that? Everyone knows that, every child knows that." In 13:1-2 he says, "My eyes have seen all this, my ears have heard and understood it. What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you." He is not contradicting their theology. But he is disagreeing with their application. In 16:4-5 he says, "I also could speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you. But my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief." He is at least hopeful that though he knows the same theology and could talk like them and make as fine speeches as they, he would be a true comforter. He is at least hopeful that he would not simply spout off theological truth that is irrelevant to the present circumstance, but rather be more sensitive to them as individuals.

Thus Job admits that the theology his friends espouse is right, but he cannot admit that it has any validity in his own case. He knows that something more must be at work in his own case other than purely retributive justice. He is eventually driven to the point of saying, in chapter 27, "If this is all that is involved, then God has denied me justice." Job 27:1-6 says:

And Job continued his discourse:  
 "As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice,  
 the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul,  
 as long as I have life within me,  
 the breath of God in my nostrils,  
 my lips will not speak wickedness,  
 and my tongue will utter no deceit.  
 I will never admit that you are in the right;  
 till I die, I will not deny my integrity.  
 I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it;  
 my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.

When he says, "My conscience will not reproach me," he is not saying he will never be conscience-stricken because of sin. Again, he is not at all claiming to be sinless. He is simply saying, in terms of the charge they are bringing against him—that his suffering is explained by his wickedness, by some secret horrendous sin—he will never admit that they are right. His conscience, in regard to that charge, will not reproach him as long as he lives. Job does not disagree with his friends' theology of retributive justice, rather he simply disagrees with their application of it to him and his situation.

This brings us to another major point that we see in the friends' dialogues, the dispute between Job and his friends, and that is the narrow view of causation. That is to say, what is it that may bring about suffering? The friends' arguments, the words they speak to Job, in a sense force Job to appeal to God for vindication. Remember what their charge is: sin brings punishment and suffering. "You are suffering,

therefore you must be being punished for sin.” Therefore he has to appeal to God for vindication. In 17:3 he says, “Give me, O God, the pledge you demand. Who else will put up security for me? You have closed their minds to understanding,” but God remains silent. By verse 6 of chapter 17, Job is saying, “God has made me a byword to everyone.” That is, he has become a household name. For what? I suppose for one whom God does not vindicate, for one who is suffering because of some secret hidden sin. People are talking about Job. And he is driven more and more to the position of questioning God’s justice. Moreover, he asks, if retributive justice is as certain and immediate as his friends claim it to be, “How is it that you are not now suffering yourselves?” If your formula is correct, why are you sitting there cozy and comfortable? In 19:28-29 he says, “If you say, ‘How we will hound him, since the root of the trouble lies in him,’ you should fear the sword yourselves; for wrath will bring punishment by the sword, and then you will know that there is judgment.” Job 20:1-3, the following verses, say, “Then Zophar the Naamathite replied: ‘My troubled thoughts prompt me to answer because I am greatly disturbed. I hear a rebuke that dishonors me, and my understanding inspires me to reply.’” He got the point. Job said, “Well, if all you are saying is true, how come I am the only one suffering here?” And Zophar took that up and began to reply.

We come to Job’s final response to his friends in chapters 26 and 27. These are not his final words because he will later have more to say, but to his friends these are his final words. In chapter 27 he begins by protesting his innocence one more time. In verse six he concludes his defense: “I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.” And at the end of verse five he says, “I will never admit that you are in the right; till I die I will not deny my integrity.” He protests his innocence of the charge. Then, interestingly, beginning in verse 13 he articulates the principle of retributive justice, very much in the same terms that his friends have been speaking. “Here is the fate God allots to the wicked, the heritage a ruthless man receives from the Almighty: However many his children, their fate is the sword; his offspring will never have enough to eat. The plague will bury those who survive him, and their widows will not weep for them...” He is saying the very same thing that his friends have been saying, but notice that he is not applying it to himself. He is just articulating that principle.

Then we come to chapter 28, which is a disputed chapter. Is this from the lips of Job, or is this an interlude by the narrator to calm things down and impart wisdom that anticipates the wisdom that will come at the end? Chapter 28 describes in poetical terms man’s inability to discover wisdom, which ultimately is the province of God. It begins, “There is a mine for silver and a place where gold is refined. Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from ore. Man puts an end to the darkness; he searches the farthest recesses for ore in the blackest darkness. Far from where people dwell he cuts a shaft, in places forgotten by the foot of man; far from men he dangles and sways.” It continues on, talking about the depths to which man can dig. Then in verse 12 it says:

But where can wisdom be found?  
Where does understanding dwell?  
Man does not comprehend its worth;  
it cannot be found in the land of the living.  
The deep says, “It is not in me”;  
the sea says, “It is not with me.”  
It cannot be bought with the finest gold,  
nor can its price be weighed in silver.  
It cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir,  
with precious onyx or sapphires.

Ultimately he comes to verses 23-28:

God understands the way to it  
and he alone knows where it dwells,  
for he views the ends of the earth  
and sees everything under the heavens.  
When he established the force of the wind  
and measured out the waters,  
when he made a decree for the rain  
and a path for the thunderstorm,  
then he looked at wisdom and appraised it;  
he confirmed it and tested it.  
And he said to man,  
“The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom,  
and to shun evil is understanding.”

Now Job is searching to understand what is going on, and this is God’s response at this moment of clarity, lucidity, and calmness, whether from the mouth of the poet, distinct from Job, or from Job himself. I am attracted to seeing this as coming from Job himself. When we are in dire distresses we experience these extremes—one moment doubting God and the next knowing for certain that He is there and He is good. This seems to be a moment of clarity in Job’s mind. And he realizes that God understands the way to wisdom. He is searching for understanding and God’s response is this: “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.” Fear God, shun evil. Trust and obey. That is the extent to which human wisdom should aspire, not necessarily beyond.