

**Job IV, Ecclesiastes I**

Let us pray together.

*Father, we are humbled indeed by the tasks that You call us to perform. We recognize very clearly that apart from Your Spirit we are completely inadequate to perform them and we would be frightened indeed if we thought we could do them in our own strength. Lord, we thank You that You give us the privilege of being involved with You in the work that You choose to do. I want to praise You for the joy of being able to see these responsive individuals respond to the Gospel message as they hear it, for it truly is good news. Lord, I pray that we would be about our Father's business and sharing the good news of the Gospel because it speaks to us even as it speaks to others. Lord, I pray that You would ground these new believers in their faith, and that You would ground us evermore in our faith as we seek to study Your Word and get to know You better. Lord, help us to understand why it is we study books like Job and Ecclesiastes. Help us to learn their messages and to allow those messages to sink into our hearts that we may be changed by them. As we are changed, may we also become instruments of change by Your Spirit in other people's lives. Father, we also lift up to You all those requests that are on the hearts of people in this room and around the world who may someday be hearing or reading this. Father, I pray that You would assure each one that You are a sovereign and loving God and that You will prove Your sufficiency in every area of concern. May You buoy us up in Your strength and by Your wisdom. We ask, Father, that You would be with us in our studies, that You would help us to do our work well and that the things that are most important would remain with us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Proverbs 31:30 says, "Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." What does that mean? I doubt that these are necessarily words that the man is using in praise of his wife as he speaks to his son—remember that Proverbs is addressed first and foremost to sons: "My son, heed your father's instructions, do not neglect your mother's teaching." We need to recognize as we read this book that sons were the original audience. As this is now become Scripture and is addressing sons and daughters, we need to make some transfers and some converse situations would arise. But in addressing sons the father is saying, "Look for what is most important." Over and over again in Proverbs what is most important is the fear of the Lord. That is the beginning of wisdom. That is what young men are to seek in a wife, in a noble woman, someone they want to join their lives with. By implication, of course, that is what young women or women of any age should most seek to cultivate in their lives because that is what gives a woman real inner beauty. And inner beauty is the only real beauty that counts. There is a sense in which what we are on the inside begins to reflect itself even in our faces. And so that inner beauty will shine through in many, many ways.

Let me share something from Dwayne Garrett and his commentary that I think is interesting. He says, "The young man should be careful of the choice he makes. The young man has no choice but to follow one woman or another." He points out that this passage, which comes right at the end of Proverbs, is a fitting counterpart to what came at the beginning of Proverbs with the personification of wisdom and folly as women. The woman folly and the woman wisdom both make their appeal to the young men. And the young men will follow one or the other. "It is exceedingly important whom the young man chooses. If he chooses an evil woman he has little hope of transcending the context she will make for him. Wisdom is not simply a matter of learning rules and precepts, but is a matter of socialization, and man is socialized first by his parents and then by his wife."—Those of us men who have good wives know that they have had a salutary socializing effect on us, and we are thankful for that. A wife does have a great impact on who her husband turns out to be, and of course vice versa.—"Here, too, wisdom is founded in creation theology. The woman is the fitting helper. She will either exalt or destroy her

husband, and for better or for worse he will turn from his parents and cling to her. That is, he will go from the world created by his parents to the world made by his wife.”—Again, the converse is also true. She leaves her parents and enters his world, the world that he creates. But it is important to see how formative a wife can be in the life, not only of a man, but of their family together.—“In Proverbs wisdom is not merely, or even primarily, intellectual. It is first of all relational. The young person finds wisdom through three specific relationships; a man must fear YHWH [the LORD], heed parents, and find the good wife.” I am not saying that every man has to be married or that every man should be married. The apostle Paul and others have instructed us otherwise. Paul says, “I wish that you were as I am, able to devote yourself fully to the Lord, for the man who is married is concerned for the needs of his wife.” But in a general sense, and for the most part, it is a good thing for a man to find a wife. The fear of YHWH and the good wife are both gifts from God. As we think about our lives and as we think about what we want to become and how we want to have an impact on other people, let us remember that motto of the wisdom literature: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” and not only of wisdom, but also of real beauty. “Charm is deceptive and beauty is vain.” There is that other wonderful proverb that says, “Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.” It is such a waste when that happens.

The Elihu speeches—or the Elihu interruption, as it is sometimes called—is in Job 32-37. This is a part of the monologues section. After the dialogues Job presents to God his final plea in chapters 29-31. He calls upon God to answer him, but Elihu interrupts. There are many who think that these Elihu speeches are secondary. They think this for various reasons such as that God does not respond to Elihu when He responds to Job and what Job had been saying. He only responds to Job’s friends and what Job’s friends have been saying, but He does not mention Elihu. On the other hand, He has not a word for the accuser, either. He does not need to respond to him, and the same could be true of Elihu. Elihu’s speeches do seem to interrupt Job’s petition to God to answer him, and that is another reason some people think that they may have been inserted later. Also, Elihu’s exact knowledge of what has gone on before makes some people think that he must have been working from written transcripts. We dealt with that last time. It is possible that he was, but he may also have been the one who had been listening and compiling the written transcripts. I do not think it is necessary to assume that these speeches are inserted, but you need to be aware that some people do. And even if these speeches are inserted, we need to deal with them in the book as they now stand. Brevard Childs says this: “The Elihu speeches provide a transition to the divine response. Unlike Job’s three friends, Elihu, while defending the principle of retributive justice, does recognize the limitations set by God on human understanding. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Elihu uses the theme of discipline in an attempt to force Job out of the theological dilemma of assuming that if God does not recognize his innocence, God is either lacking in justice or in power. That is to say, Elihu at least brings up the possibility of a third alternative.”

Let us think about the major dynamic of the book of Job. What has been going on in the dialogues between Job and his friends? The friends are saying, “According to our understanding of the world and of God, you are suffering because you have sinned grievously.” And Job is responding by saying, “I will never admit that you are right. I will never deny my integrity. That is not the answer.” And yet they keep hammering him with a simplistic formula: sin brings suffering and suffering therefore results from sin. If you are suffering, you must have sinned. God is just. Job recognizes that God is just, and he says, “Who does not know all these things? I could say the same if I were in your position. But that is not the answer in my case. You have missed it here; there is something more going on than that.” But his friends keep hammering him with that consistent formula, and so ultimately he begins to say, “I will never deny my integrity, so maybe God is not just.” When you get into a limited debate where not all the options are presented, when you are wrestling with an oversimplified and incorrect formula, you are driven to begin to say things that are wrong, to begin to speak words without knowledge. So Job and his friends had

been arguing about this. And the function of the Elihu speeches, according to Brevard Childs, and I think it makes some sense, is to at least introduce the idea that something may be going on here that does not have to do with Job's sin. In other words, Job may be suffering because God is training him or disciplining him. This is reminiscent of James 1: "Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." Perhaps the reason God is doing this to Job is for the sake of building him up and training him for something. That is not exactly the answer, but it does at least serve to blow apart the false dichotomy Job and his friends had been arguing. Elihu says, "Maybe it is that Job has sinned, or that God is not just, but maybe it is for this other reason." The very idea that there may be another possibility is very important. To that extent, then, the Elihu speeches serve a necessary function. Elihu introduces the notion of a third alternative. Job has been driven by the persistence of his friends almost to the point of denying God's integrity in order to maintain his own.

Elihu falls silent at the end of 37 as he closes with this in verses 19-24:

Tell us what we should say to him:  
     we cannot draw up our case because of our darkness.  
 Should he be told what I want to speak?  
     Would any man ask to be swallowed up?  
 Now no one can look at the sun,  
     bright as it is in the skies  
     after the wind has swept them clean.  
 Out of the north he comes in golden splendor;  
     God comes in awesome majesty.  
 The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power;  
     in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress.  
 Therefore, men revere him:  
     He does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.

Elihu, it seems to me, is coming very close to saying the right thing when he says, "The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power [...] he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit." I do not think he is saying that God does not value the truly wise. I think he is saying He does not regard those who are wise in their own eyes. God is not impressed with those who are impressed with their own wisdom. True wisdom is another thing: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." Thus Elihu is saying, "We need to recognize our limitations." That is an important message for Job and his friends to hear. "Recognize that you are limited human beings with a limited viewpoint, and your debates are lacking vital pieces of the puzzle." We as readers already know that because we know what went on in the heavenly assembly before any of this began.

Then in the beginning of chapter 38 the Lord appears to Job:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm.  
 He said:  
  
 Who is this who darkens my counsel  
     with words without knowledge?  
 Brace yourself like a man;  
     I will question you,  
     and you shall answer me.

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.  
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?  
On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone—  
while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy?

Who shut up the sea behind doors  
when it burst forth from the womb,  
when I made the clouds its garment  
and wrapped it in thick darkness.”

You see how God is beginning to answer Job. In His first of two speeches God is asking Job, “What do you know? Answer me. You have called on me to answer you, and I have come now. Why do you not answer me? Surely you know.” God is trying to get Job to understand who He is and to pose the question, “What do you know, Job, as a human being? As a creature, what do you know about all of creation?” Job’s response after this first speech is appropriate. In chapter 40, at the end of that first speech, it says, “The LORD said to Job: ‘Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!’ Then Job answered the LORD: ‘I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more.’” Job falls silent. But it is not enough for God to silence Job with an overwhelming display of His superior knowledge.

And so God begins a second time. The second speech He begins in verse seven: “Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” What was Job’s first reaction when calamity befell him? He was defending God’s justice. He said, “The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. [...] Shall we accept good from the Lord and not calamity also?” His initial response was humble submission to the will of God—trusting in the providence of God. What brought him to the point of condemning the Lord to justify himself? His friends, his good friends and their theological discussion, brought him there. Their discussion was lacking in some elements that would have been important to resolving the dilemma. And so God now must charge him because Job has been driven to this point: “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” Some people would argue that the reason for Job’s suffering was his self-righteousness, of which he needed to be purged. But Scripture does not say that. God Himself pronounced Job blameless and upright. He is a man who is genuinely committed to the Lord. He is upright, turning from evil. He is not sinless, but he is a genuine follower of God. He is not false, but he is not a hypocrite. He is not just in it for himself. God had made that pronouncement. How could it be, then, that the suffering brought on Job was punishment for self-righteousness? I think that is a grave misunderstanding of the book. By this point, Job is beginning to sound self-righteous because he has been driven, as it were, to distraction by his friends. We can learn some lessons from this.

In this second speech, then, God asks the key question: “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” As He develops this speech He emphasizes the vast difference between Job’s puny power and God’s power. In the first speech He was talking about Job’s knowledge: “What do you know?” And in this one He is saying, “Who would you charge? Whose problem is this? And what is your power? What kind of power do you have?” He even mentions those very curious creatures, the behemoth and leviathan. Much debate hovers around those. Some say we are dealing with

poetic descriptions of a hippopotamus and a crocodile. Others say that these are mythic figures that are brought into this poetical passage to make a point. I think the effect of it, though, is to elevate us into another dimension where there are these strange creatures that we know little about. God is in charge even in those mysterious realms that we have little knowledge of. His power is far superior to our own.

Job's response comes in 42:1-6:

Then Job replied to the LORD:

“I know that you can do all things;  
no plan of yours can be thwarted.  
You asked, “Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?”  
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me to know.

You said, “Listen now and I will speak;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.”  
My ears had heard of you,  
but now my eyes have seen you.  
Therefore I despise myself  
and repent in dust and ashes.

The effect of Job seeing God is that he now despises himself and repents in dust and ashes for his presumption of challenging God, saying to God, “Oh that my God would confront me; I would wear my defense on my sleeve.” Job was saying that he could defend his case; he would wear that as a badge before Him. He had heard many things, but now he has seen God and he falls silent.

The epilogue begins in 42:7. The Lord now turns to the three friends of Job in anger: “because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” What does He mean by that? Has He not just been castigating Job for speaking words without knowledge? Yet He turns around and says, “Job has spoken of me what is right and you have not.” Job was also speaking about God to the friends but he would keep turning his attention, bringing his case to God. One thing that we see in Job is that as dire as his distress was, he never turned his back on God though he was tempted to shake his fists at Him. He kept clamoring on God's door rather than turning and walking away, which is what the accuser had said he would do: “Take away all these blessings and see what he will do. He will curse you to your face and be done with you. He is only self-interested.” In another sense I think Job is commended for speaking what is right about God because Job was a man of integrity. He was not satisfied with pat, simplistic answers. He did not have the answer, but he did not settle for a wrong answer, a simplistic answer. His friends were quite content to just spout off their good theology, which was misapplied in his case. Thus they were dishonoring God by attributing to Him a punitive motive that was not at all involved in Job's case. They were speaking outright what was wrong about God, and God was angry with them. So in this sense Job has spoken what is right; he has maintained his integrity in the face of the misapplication of otherwise good theology. Also, he has now repented for having questioned God. His relationship is now restored.

One of the functions, I think, of the imprecatory psalms that we studied, is that in our distress we have models of those who bring to God the severest problems rather than saying, “I cannot cope with this. I am going to go out and do something drastic.” They say, “I cannot cope with this, therefore I will bring

it to God.” It is not so much the magnitude of his suffering that is striking, but the fact that in his suffering Job was driven to ask hard, honest, piercing questions of God. God honors that kind of honesty, as He does in this case. God did appear to Job, though it took a long time and Job may have thought, “He will never answer me,” God did appear to him in a rather magnificent fashion. I think that God does want us to be honest, and we need to be honest first with ourselves. If we deny our doubts or resentments, they will eat us up inside. Those of you who are doing counseling know far more about that than I do. It is good for us to allow those real questions and hurts to surface and bring them to God, even when we do not know what to do with them. The interesting thing to observe here is, when we have those questions, what are we looking for? When we have questions in our lives, we want answers. Job had a question and he wanted an answer, or thought he did. What did he get? A revelation of who God is. He did not get an answer. What does that tell us about our questions? Does it mean we will not find answers to any of our questions? No, it does not mean we should not be seeking answers, but it may show us that finding answers to all our questions is not the most important thing, nor is it something that we should expect to accomplish in this life.

One of the things that I struggle with periodically over the years is the problem of evil and putting that together with the sovereignty of God. Could not God have done things a little better so that we would not live in the knowledge that some of His creatures will spend eternity in hell? Is that not a frightening thought? The ten Boom sisters were asked in the concentration camp, “If your God is all-good and all-powerful, how can we be here?” They replied, “All we know is, there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.” And I think we can expand that and say, whatever the answer to the question of the presence of evil in a world created by God, He did not exempt Himself from that evil. In Christ God bore more pain and suffering, and had more evil inflicted upon Himself than we will ever know. He bore our sin on the tree so that we can say—though we do not have the answer—we do not have a God who sits in splendid isolation looking down and toying with us. Rather, He entered into our own suffering beyond what we will ever know. That is, in a way, seeing God and enabling us to fall silent. What I think is perhaps the major message of Job is that God is still God and we are not. But I have learned that it is okay not to know all the answers in life. That is tough for someone who teaches Bible or studies theology to admit, because we think we are in the business of knowing things and finding out how life works and how God works and being able to answer all the deepest issues of life. But the book of Job says to me that it is okay not to have all the answers. Furthermore, it says to me that sometimes we may suffer something or experience something in life that we will never understand. As much as we pursue it, as many people as we talk to, as many angles as we look at it from, and as many ways as we try to figure out what God is doing in it, we may never know until we see Him face to face. Job did not know. God appeared to him and gave two lengthy speeches. Job began with some questions, but God never saw fit to answer the questions. He could have. He could have explained to Job: “Job, I know it seemed senseless that you were suffering in this way, but if you only knew the challenge that had been issued in the celestial assembly. It was not just you that was under attack, Job, but I was, since I had proclaimed you blameless and upright. My integrity was being attacked. I was being called a fool or a liar. And so in your suffering you were suffering to defend my integrity. You came precariously close to denying my integrity to defend your own, but that is because you did not have all the answers. You were speaking words without knowledge.”

But He did not tell him that. And the application of that for us, I think, is that we need to press for as much theological understanding as we can, but then we need to recognize when we reach the boundary of our knowledge. To press beyond that would be to dishonor God, to claim that we know more than we do. There we need to fall silent and say that God is God and His ways are often times mysterious to us. And we do know certain things about God. We know that He does work things together for good, but we do not know how and we may not see it in this life.