

The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

Job and the Problem of Suffering

Readings: *Job 25:1-31:40* (see additional text provided)

Reflections:

- Bildad now makes his final brief speech, only six verses long. As Job increasingly turns to a negative posture against God, Bildad responds with increasing advocacy for the power and supremacy of God. God is all powerful and perfect. Humans are like maggots and worms compared to God. Here we see the Biblical explanation of “worm theology.” The idea that God’s perfection means that humans are worms. What is missed by Job’s friends and by those who obsess about the power and perfection of God is that God is a God of incredible grace and because of his grace he takes our broken condition and raises us up in his presence. Again, in the meta-narrative, our smallness, weakness, and frailty is what reveals the power of God’s grace to triumph over the powerful with the weak.
- The next sections are debated by scholars. It is all attributed to Job but the content of these verses do not align well with his arguments. Most scholars believe that this lengthy discourse was originally the continuation between Job and his friends, Bildad and Zophar, but because Job’s content became increasingly negative and his friends increasingly affirm the power and greatness of God, that later editors erased the divisions. At the end of the notes we are provided what most scholars see was the original division of the text. For the purpose of these notes we will work with the division suggested by most scholars.
- Job doesn’t disagree with Bildad’s comments about the worm-ness of humanity but simply points out that he as a friend has not offered any help or encouragement. Just as God has been indifferent to Job, his friends have offered no help. Job concludes that even the dead are in anguish, even those that reside in the watery grave of the sea, the place of death that the Jews most feared (see the story of Jonah).
- Bildad’s response to Job is that God is lord of everything, even death and the watery grave. The great mythical sea monster Rahab that was mentioned by Job in Job 9:13 reappears here with the bold declaration that God in his wisdom cuts this monster to pieces. The following statement of God piercing the gliding serpent, could this be a

reference to evil itself? Satan was first portrayed in Scripture as a serpent. Is Bildad affirming God's ultimate judgment of evil? Bildad concludes that God's power is so great, how can anyone understand it.

- Job's response is simple. Job simply declares what he knows to be true and he won't deny it. "I am innocent and I won't deny it." Even when attacked by his friends, even when he is compared to the perfection of God, Job will not let go of his conviction that he is completely righteous. Job believes he has been denied justice by God but he won't give us his case.
- Zophar returns and provides a final wrap up for all of the arguments of his friends. God will judge the wicked. They may be wealthy for a time but they will die in judgment. Zophar's final words confront Job that he is going to die in his sin because of his wickedness. This is a final word of complete hopelessness for Job.
- Chapter 28 does not fit at all within the flow of the dialogue. It appears to be a poem about the search for wisdom inserted between Zophar's final speech and Job's final soliloquy. It would appear to be in the voice of the writer of Job as a dramatic pause from the flow of the discourse to challenge the listener with the search for wisdom. This chapter fits well within the body of wisdom literature in Scripture and this period and should be treated as a standalone piece. This poem has three sections: there is no known pathway to find wisdom (1-11); no amount of wealth can buy it (12-19); only God has it and only by revelation can man possess it (20-28). Here is the basic point of the poem: there is only one place to find wisdom and understanding – fear God and shun evil.
- Job then presents his final soliloquy. It is divided by the three chapters: Job reviews his previous life circumstance (29:1-25); his present suffering (30:1-31); and his vindication of his life (31:1-40).
- As Job remembers his former days (Job 29), what does he delight in? "...when God's intimate friendship blessed my house." Job, like Moses and Abraham, is portrayed as a friend of God. He was honored by the community. He served the poor and needy. He was sought for his wisdom. His life was what everyone dreams to experience. Again in the grandeur of this text, we see that this is most likely a parable to reveal a higher truth.
- As Job now reflects on his present condition (Job 30), he mourns that he has lost it all. He is mocked rather than honored. He is turned to dust rather than secure and whole. He is now full of suffering and pain.
- Job makes his final case (Job 31). He starts with his heart and declares that he is without sin, even in something as common as lust. He declares that God knows everything, his every step. Job has been faithful to his wife, treated his servants well, been generous with the poor, rejected idolatry and the worship of wealth, kind to his enemies, welcomed strangers, and lived without the slightest bit of hypocrisy. Job is the model of

righteousness and justice and yet he has suffered beyond what anyone would ever imagine. He concludes with a confident challenge to God: "Oh that I had someone to hear me!" To Job, God was completely indifferent to him. "...let my accuser put his indictment in writing...I would put it on like a crown. I would give him an account of my every step; like a prince I would approach him.

- The last three verses, Job 31:38-40 are probably best understood as following 31:34 rather than in this sequence.
- A final question: why would later editors group all of this content under Job than keep the titles of the different friends? It would seem that later scribes felt the discomfort of how badly Job looks at that the end of this story. His reputation of being a righteous sufferer would be tarnished. In fact, the parable it would reveal is not how the righteous suffer but rather what happens within our hearts when we look on suffering and when we suffer. Again, in the story of what doesn't work, Job gives us a detailed look at the human heart that needs to be changed from the inside out.

BONUS MATERIAL – TEXT OF JOB ORGANIZED AS SUGGESTED BY SCHOLARS

Job 25

Bildad

- ¹ Then Bildad the Shuhite replied:
- ² "Dominion and awe belong to God;
he establishes order in the heights of heaven.
- ³ Can his forces be numbered?
Upon whom does his light not rise?
- ⁴ How then can a man be righteous before God?
How can one born of woman be pure?
- ⁵ If even the moon is not bright
and the stars are not pure in his eyes,
- ⁶ how much less man, who is but a maggot—
a son of man, who is only a worm!"

Job 26

Then Job replied:

- ² "How you have helped the powerless!
How you have saved the arm that is feeble!
- ³ What advice you have offered to one without wisdom!
And what great insight you have displayed!
- ⁴ Who has helped you utter these words?
And whose spirit spoke from your mouth?
- ⁵ "The dead are in deep anguish,
those beneath the waters and all that live in them.

(Bildad continues his speech?)

- ⁶ Death is naked before God;
Destruction lies uncovered.
- ⁷ He spreads out the northern skies over empty space;
he suspends the earth over nothing.
- ⁸ He wraps up the waters in his clouds,
yet the clouds do not burst under their weight.
- ⁹ He covers the face of the full moon,
spreading his clouds over it.
- ¹⁰ He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters
for a boundary between light and darkness.
- ¹¹ The pillars of the heavens quake,
aghast at his rebuke.
- ¹² By his power he churned up the sea;
by his wisdom he cut Rahab to pieces.
- ¹³ By his breath the skies became fair;
his hand pierced the gliding serpent.
- ¹⁴ And these are but the outer fringe of his works;
how faint the whisper we hear of him!
Who then can understand the thunder of his power?"

Job 27

- ¹ ***And Job continued his discourse:***
- ² "As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice,
the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul,
- ³ as long as I have life within me,
the breath of God in my nostrils,
- ⁴ my lips will not speak wickedness,
and my tongue will utter no deceit.
- ⁵ I will never admit you are in the right;
till I die, I will not deny my integrity.
- ⁶ I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it;
my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.

(Zophar's Third Speech?)

- ⁷ "May my enemies be like the wicked,
my adversaries like the unjust!
- ⁸ For what hope has the godless when he is cut off,
when God takes away his life?
- ⁹ Does God listen to his cry
when distress comes upon him?
- ¹⁰ Will he find delight in the Almighty?
Will he call upon God at all times?
- ¹¹ "I will teach you about the power of God;
the ways of the Almighty I will not conceal.

- ¹² You have all seen this yourselves.
Why then this meaningless talk?
- ¹³ "Here is the fate God allots to the wicked,
the heritage a ruthless man receives from the Almighty:
- ¹⁴ However many his children, their fate is the sword;
his offspring will never have enough to eat.
- ¹⁵ The plague will bury those who survive him,
and their widows will not weep for them.
- ¹⁶ Though he heaps up silver like dust
and clothes like piles of clay,
- ¹⁷ what he lays up the righteous will wear,
and the innocent will divide his silver.
- ¹⁸ The house he builds is like a moth's cocoon,
like a hut made by a watchman.
- ¹⁹ He lies down wealthy, but will do so no more;
when he opens his eyes, all is gone.
- ²⁰ Terrors overtake him like a flood;
a tempest snatches him away in the night.
- ²¹ The east wind carries him off, and he is gone;
it sweeps him out of his place.
- ²² It hurls itself against him without mercy
as he flees headlong from its power.
- ²³ It claps its hands in derision
and hisses him out of his place.

Job 28

(A poem about wisdom – This could be by the writer/editor of Job)

- ¹ "There is a mine for silver
and a place where gold is refined.
- ² Iron is taken from the earth,
and copper is smelted from ore.
- ³ Man puts an end to the darkness;
he searches the farthest recesses
for ore in the blackest darkness.
- ⁴ Far from where people dwell he cuts a shaft,
in places forgotten by the foot of man;
far from men he dangles and sways.
- ⁵ The earth, from which food comes,
is transformed below as by fire;
- ⁶ sapphires come from its rocks,
and its dust contains nuggets of gold.
- ⁷ No bird of prey knows that hidden path,
no falcon's eye has seen it.
- ⁸ Proud beasts do not set foot on it,
and no lion prowls there.

⁹ Man's hand assaults the flinty rock
and lays bare the roots of the mountains.
¹⁰ He tunnels through the rock;
his eyes see all its treasures.
¹¹ He searches the sources of the rivers
and brings hidden things to light.
¹² "But where can wisdom be found?
Where does understanding dwell?
¹³ Man does not comprehend its worth;
it cannot be found in the land of the living.
¹⁴ The deep says, 'It is not in me';
the sea says, 'It is not with me.'
¹⁵ It cannot be bought with the finest gold,
nor can its price be weighed in silver.
¹⁶ It cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir,
with precious onyx or sapphires.
¹⁷ Neither gold nor crystal can compare with it,
nor can it be had for jewels of gold.
¹⁸ Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention;
the price of wisdom is beyond rubies.
¹⁹ The topaz of Cush cannot compare with it;
it cannot be bought with pure gold.
²⁰ "Where then does wisdom come from?
Where does understanding dwell?
²¹ It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing,
concealed even from the birds of the air.
²² Destruction and Death say,
'Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.'
²³ God understands the way to it
and he alone knows where it dwells,
²⁴ for he views the ends of the earth
and sees everything under the heavens.
²⁵ When he established the force of the wind
and measured out the waters,
²⁶ when he made a decree for the rain
and a path for the thunderstorm,
²⁷ then he looked at wisdom and appraised it;
he confirmed it and tested it.
²⁸ And he said to man,
'The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom,
and to shun evil is understanding.' "

Job 29 – *Job reviews his past*

¹ Job continued his discourse:
² "How I long for the months gone by,
for the days when God watched over me,

³ when his lamp shone upon my head
and by his light I walked through darkness!
⁴ Oh, for the days when I was in my prime,
when God's intimate friendship blessed my house,
⁵ when the Almighty was still with me
and my children were around me,
⁶ when my path was drenched with cream
and the rock poured out for me streams of olive oil.
⁷ "When I went to the gate of the city
and took my seat in the public square,
⁸ the young men saw me and stepped aside
and the old men rose to their feet;
⁹ the chief men refrained from speaking
and covered their mouths with their hands;
¹⁰ the voices of the nobles were hushed,
and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.
¹¹ Whoever heard me spoke well of me,
and those who saw me commended me,
¹² because I rescued the poor who cried for help,
and the fatherless who had none to assist him.
¹³ The man who was dying blessed me;
I made the widow's heart sing.
¹⁴ I put on righteousness as my clothing;
justice was my robe and my turban.
¹⁵ I was eyes to the blind
and feet to the lame.
¹⁶ I was a father to the needy;
I took up the case of the stranger.
¹⁷ I broke the fangs of the wicked
and snatched the victims from their teeth.
¹⁸ "I thought, 'I will die in my own house,
my days as numerous as the grains of sand.
¹⁹ My roots will reach to the water,
and the dew will lie all night on my branches.
²⁰ My glory will remain fresh in me,
the bow ever new in my hand.'
²¹ "Men listened to me expectantly,
waiting in silence for my counsel.
²² After I had spoken, they spoke no more;
my words fell gently on their ears.
²³ They waited for me as for showers
and drank in my words as the spring rain.
²⁴ When I smiled at them, they scarcely believed it;
the light of my face was precious to them. ^[a]

²⁵ I chose the way for them and sat as their chief;
I dwelt as a king among his troops;
I was like one who comforts mourners.

Job 30 – *Job reviews his suffering*

¹ "But now they mock me,
men younger than I,
whose fathers I would have disdained
to put with my sheep dogs.
² Of what use was the strength of their hands to me,
since their vigor had gone from them?
³ Haggard from want and hunger,
they roamed ^[a] the parched land
in desolate wastelands at night.
⁴ In the brush they gathered salt herbs,
and their food ^[b] was the root of the broom tree.
⁵ They were banished from their fellow men,
shouted at as if they were thieves.
⁶ They were forced to live in the dry stream beds,
among the rocks and in holes in the ground.
⁷ They brayed among the bushes
and huddled in the undergrowth.
⁸ A base and nameless brood,
they were driven out of the land.
⁹ "And now their sons mock me in song;
I have become a byword among them.
¹⁰ They detest me and keep their distance;
they do not hesitate to spit in my face.
¹¹ Now that God has unstrung my bow and afflicted me,
they throw off restraint in my presence.
¹² On my right the tribe ^[c] attacks;
they lay snares for my feet,
they build their siege ramps against me.
¹³ They break up my road;
they succeed in destroying me—
without anyone's helping them. ^[d]
¹⁴ They advance as through a gaping breach;
amid the ruins they come rolling in.
¹⁵ Terrors overwhelm me;
my dignity is driven away as by the wind,
my safety vanishes like a cloud.
¹⁶ "And now my life ebbs away;
days of suffering grip me.
¹⁷ Night pierces my bones;
my gnawing pains never rest.

18 In his great power God becomes like clothing to me ^{le} ;
he binds me like the neck of my garment.
19 He throws me into the mud,
and I am reduced to dust and ashes.
20 "I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer;
I stand up, but you merely look at me.
21 You turn on me ruthlessly;
with the might of your hand you attack me.
22 You snatch me up and drive me before the wind;
you toss me about in the storm.
23 I know you will bring me down to death,
to the place appointed for all the living.
24 "Surely no one lays a hand on a broken man
when he cries for help in his distress.
25 Have I not wept for those in trouble?
Has not my soul grieved for the poor?
26 Yet when I hoped for good, evil came;
when I looked for light, then came darkness.
27 The churning inside me never stops;
days of suffering confront me.
28 I go about blackened, but not by the sun;
I stand up in the assembly and cry for help.
29 I have become a brother of jackals,
a companion of owls.
30 My skin grows black and peels;
my body burns with fever.
31 My harp is tuned to mourning,
and my flute to the sound of wailing.

Job 31 – *Job declares his vindication*

1 "I made a covenant with my eyes
not to look lustfully at a girl.
2 For what is man's lot from God above,
his heritage from the Almighty on high?
3 Is it not ruin for the wicked,
disaster for those who do wrong?
4 Does he not see my ways
and count my every step?
5 "If I have walked in falsehood
or my foot has hurried after deceit-
6 let God weigh me in honest scales
and he will know that I am blameless-
7 if my steps have turned from the path,
if my heart has been led by my eyes,
or if my hands have been defiled,

⁸ then may others eat what I have sown,
and may my crops be uprooted.

⁹ "If my heart has been enticed by a woman,
or if I have lurked at my neighbor's door,

¹⁰ then may my wife grind another man's grain,
and may other men sleep with her.

¹¹ For that would have been shameful,
a sin to be judged.

¹² It is a fire that burns to Destruction;
it would have uprooted my harvest.

¹³ "If I have denied justice to my menservants and maidservants
when they had a grievance against me,

¹⁴ what will I do when God confronts me?
What will I answer when called to account?

¹⁵ Did not he who made me in the womb make them?
Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?

¹⁶ "If I have denied the desires of the poor
or let the eyes of the widow grow weary,

¹⁷ if I have kept my bread to myself,
not sharing it with the fatherless-

¹⁸ but from my youth I reared him as would a father,
and from my birth I guided the widow-

¹⁹ if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing,
or a needy man without a garment,

²⁰ and his heart did not bless me
for warming him with the fleece from my sheep,

²¹ if I have raised my hand against the fatherless,
knowing that I had influence in court,

²² then let my arm fall from the shoulder,
let it be broken off at the joint.

²³ For I dreaded destruction from God,
and for fear of his splendor I could not do such things.

²⁴ "If I have put my trust in gold
or said to pure gold, 'You are my security,'

²⁵ if I have rejoiced over my great wealth,
the fortune my hands had gained,

²⁶ if I have regarded the sun in its radiance
or the moon moving in splendor,

²⁷ so that my heart was secretly enticed
and my hand offered them a kiss of homage,

²⁸ then these also would be sins to be judged,
for I would have been unfaithful to God on high.

²⁹ "If I have rejoiced at my enemy's misfortune
or gloated over the trouble that came to him-

³⁰ I have not allowed my mouth to sin
by invoking a curse against his life-

³¹ if the men of my household have never said,
 'Who has not had his fill of Job's meat?'-
³² but no stranger had to spend the night in the street,
 for my door was always open to the traveler-
³³ if I have concealed my sin as men do,
 by hiding my guilt in my heart
³⁴ because I so feared the crowd
 and so dreaded the contempt of the clans
 that I kept silent and would not go outside

(moved text)

³⁸ "if my land cries out against me
 and all its furrows are wet with tears,
³⁹ if I have devoured its yield without payment
 or broken the spirit of its tenants,
⁴⁰ then let briers come up instead of wheat
 and weeds instead of barley."

³⁵ "Oh, that I had someone to hear me!
 I sign now my defense—let the Almighty answer me;
 let my accuser put his indictment in writing.
³⁶ Surely I would wear it on my shoulder,
 I would put it on like a crown.
³⁷ I would give him an account of my every step;
 like a prince I would approach him.

The words of Job are ended.