

The Book of Job
Session 7: Theological Foundation of the Book of Job,
Retribution Principle Triangle

By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 7, Theological Foundation of the Book of Job, Retribution Principle Triangle.

Introduction to the Retribution Principle [00:26-2:46]

Before we move on to the book itself, we need to expand on the purpose of the book to talk about some of the theological foundations of the book. In that way, we're moving beyond the idea in the ancient world of the great symbiosis specifically to talk about what's called the retribution principle. The retribution principle is basically the idea that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer. Basically, people get what they deserve. When I say the righteous, the observant, the faithful, substitute any of those words, and they'll prosper. Well, that could be, you know, good health, success, their crops grow, whatever it might be, happy families. And the wicked are those who are not faithful, not righteous, not upright, they will suffer again, whether that's a disaster at one level or another. So, it's just a way to talk about this idea that people get what they deserve. The righteous will prosper; the wicked will suffer. We call it the retribution principle.

Now it's, of course, common for people to believe that their circumstances in life somehow reflect that they are in favor with God or the gods or out of favor. And that they've done something that has brought the circumstances upon them. Again, whether it be evil or whether it be good. That they're in favor or out of favor, and that reflects itself in their circumstances, it was recognized in the ancient Near East about people thought that way. And it's likewise very common for people to think that way today, that their circumstances reflect being in favor or out of favor.

We even talk very casually when something goes well, "Oh, I must've done something right." Or "What did I do to earn this?" when things go badly. So, it's this retribution principle that is at the foundation of the Book of Job.

Retribution Principle in Job [2:46-4:06]

In fact, the Book of Job puts the retribution principle under the microscope because Job and his friends all believe very firmly in the retribution principle. That's really part of the problem. They see the retribution principle; not only do you assume that if someone is righteous, they will prosper, and if someone is wicked, they will suffer, but they also turn that around. If someone is suffering, they must be wicked. If someone is prospering, they must have done something right. And so, when Job's circumstances turn so dramatically, so tragically, we know what conclusion everyone is going to draw. They'll decide he must've done something really, really bad to bring this kind of disaster, to go from the heights to the depths. This goes back to the extremes that we talked about earlier. Job is at the highest height of humanity, and he goes to the lowest depths of suffering. Those extremes are important so that we can really think about the retribution principle with a clear mind.

The Challenger and the Retribution Principle [4:06-5:53]

So, the Book of Job looks at this retribution principle. After all, remember the Challenger's question, does Job serve God for nothing? How's the retribution principle play into all of this? In the retribution principle, there's an attempt to understand what God is doing in the world, to articulate it, to justify it, to systematize the logic of how God is working in the world, that God is working a justice system. You do good; you get good. You do bad; bad things happen. So, the retribution principle assumes an understanding of how God works in the world. It's an attempt to sort of quantify it or systematize it.

The Challenger's claim is that the retribution principle bringing benefits, and prosperity to righteous people is detrimental to the development of true righteousness

because it sets up this ulterior motive, the anticipation of gain, doing it for what you get out of it. So, the Challenger is focusing attention on the retribution principle as to whether that truly is part of God's policies. And Job's claim, if the retribution principle is not enforced, if righteous people suffer, well, then God's justice becomes suspect. So, you can see that in the two prongs of accusation that we've talked about in the book, the retribution principle is central to the conversation.

Retribution Triangle of Claims [5:53-7:12]

Now we can understand this a little better if you can imagine a triangle. I call it the triangle of claims. And at one lower corner of the triangle, you have the retribution principle; at the other lower corner of the triangle, you have Job's righteousness. And at the top of the triangle, the third corner, you have God's justice.

Now, as long as Job is prospering, that triangle holds very conveniently, very comfortably. God is doing justice. Job is righteous, the retribution principle is true, and everything's happy. But When Job begins suffering, we look at that triangle, and something's got to go. You can't hold on to all three corners: to God doing justice, to Job being righteous, and to the retribution principle. You can't hold on to all three. Something's got to give. And as the book unfolds, we discover who is going to give up what. It's really an interesting way to think about the book.

Job's Friends and the Retribution Triangle of Claims [7:12-8:24]

Start with Job's friends, for instance. Job's friends, I'll use the idea of building their fort in that corner. They choose the retribution principle corner of the triangle, and they build their fort there. Over and over and over again in their speeches, they affirm the retribution principle. They apply it to the situation. They use it as part of the argumentation. They are champions of the retribution principle. So, there they build their fort. They're going to defend that.

From that vantage point, they look out to the other two corners of the triangle; which one's going to go? Are they going to say, well, God really isn't working in justice, or are they going to say Job isn't really righteous?

Well, we know where they go. They're very happy to affirm that God is working justly. And so, with the retribution principle true and God not being under scrutiny, of course, the problem is Job. He must not be as righteous as he seemed to us, not as righteous as he seemed to everyone from the outside. And certainly, he is not as righteous as he seems to think he is. The problem is Job. So, they build their fort in the retribution principle corner, and they give up on Job's corner. That's the one that's got to go.

Job and the Retribution Triangle of Claims [8:24-9:57]

When we think about Job and his perspective, of course, it's very different. It's very clear where he builds his fort. He builds his fort in his own corner. His righteousness is unassailable in his mind. But, of course, that creates a little bit of awkwardness because now he's got to look out and which one are you going to give up? Is he going to give up the retribution principle, or is he going to give up the idea that God acts justly? It's a conundrum for poor Job. But what we find is over and over again, he affirms the retribution principle. He tries to find a weakness in it, but he really can't. And so he turns his eyes toward God. And as Job's speeches continue through the book, it becomes more and more accusing of God; it becomes more and more doubtful, skeptical about God and whether he does justice at all. So, Job builds his fort in his own corner, and he's giving up God's corner as he holds onto the retribution principle.

Elihu and the Retribution Triangle of Claims [9:57-14:59]

Now, besides the three friends that come in all through the dialogue section, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, we have a fourth character, Elihu. It doesn't come in until the second discourse toward the end of the book. But Elihu is still engaged in the triangle. Elihu builds his fort at the top of the triangle of God's justice. Now, at that point, you say, okay, so what's Elihu going to give up? Is he going to give up the retribution principle, or, like Job's other friends, is he going to question Job's righteousness?

Some people have read the book and thought that Elihu really isn't much different than the other friends. But I disagree with that strongly. Elihu positions himself

differently on the triangle and comes to the conclusion that the friends aren't even close to him.

So, when we ask the question, which of the other two corners does Elihu give up? We find that, well, he cheats; he's clever. What he does is he look at the retribution principle, and he says the retribution principle is true, but I think we've got it wrong. We have to renounce it and expand it. See, most people thought of the retribution principle as you've done bad things in the past, so now bad things are happening to you. So, your circumstances are a response to past behavior. Elihu comes along and says, maybe it's more complex than that. That way of looking at the retribution principle makes it remedial, fixing, addressing, and responding to what's gone wrong.

What if we think of the retribution principle as more preventative. Here's how it would look. It's not so much something you did in the past that's causing negative consequences, it's something that you are just ready to get involved in that you're on the brink of this kind of behavior that it's supposed to kind of turn you away from it. And so, the retribution principle could be a response to, kind of, present developing things instead of things in the past.

Now, what that does, it means that, unlike the friends, he doesn't have to find unrighteousness in Job's past. Instead, now he looks at Job differently. And he says, "So here's the problem Job. Here's what is the reason for your suffering? Look at your self-righteousness, your willingness to vindicate yourself, justify yourself, at the expense of God." He says, "The problem is not what you did before your suffering began. The problem has become evident in how you have responded once the suffering started. The problem, then Job, is what is very evident, your self-righteous behavior."

That's why I say he cheated. He redefined terms. And in redefining them, it gave him an alternative that the other friends never thought of, and Job himself is less in a position to defend himself. Even as he continues to affirm his righteousness, his self-righteousness becomes very evident, and his willingness to accuse God.

So, Elihu has built his fort on God acting justly. And in the process, he's held onto the retribution principle, though he's redefined it. And that has given him a different sort of attack against Job's righteousness. Elihu is more right than any of the other human characters in the book. He gets closest. He transcends what the friends think, and he really sees Job more realistically, more appropriately.

The problem with Elihu is that even though he's closer to the truth than anyone else, he's got his own problems. And, in the end, he's still making the retribution principle the basis for understanding how things work. He just redefines it. And as we go through the book, we're going to get to Elihu's part, and we'll evaluate that more closely.

Retribution Triangle of Claims Attempted Resolutions [14:59-15:18]

So, we've got our triangle, the triangle of claims, how different parties kind of pick up different positions, and how to view the scenario of the book from those different positions. Now we will try to resolve some of these tensions. How did people resolve the tension of the retribution principle? After all, most people, at some time or another, come to experience life in such a way that the retribution principle looks suspect to them. Then how are those tensions resolved?

One way is to come to some qualifications regarding the nature of God. This is certainly what they did in the ancient Near East. They had no confidence that God was acting justly. They believed the retribution principle, but they really didn't have a triangle tightly pieced together. They just had compromised on the nature of God.

Other times people might compromise or qualify regarding the purpose of suffering. Some people talk about suffering as educational--character building. Maybe even to talk about it as participation with Christ in his sufferings. And so, they end up qualifying the purpose of suffering. That kind of resolves some tensions in the retribution principle.

Retribution Triangle of Claims Elsewhere in the Bible: Timing [15:18-18:02]

In the biblical texts, some people will resolve the tension; the Psalmist sometimes, for instance, resolves the tension by thinking about timing.

The Psalmist says, you know, in the Lament Psalms, most of the times, they're lamenting in the context of retribution principle. Their enemies are triumphing over them. And why should that happen? The enemy is the bad guy. I'm the good guy. Why is this happening? And so that question about the retribution principle is underlying many of the Lament Psalms. And lots of times, a Psalm is treated in terms of timing. Eventually, things are going to smooth out. You know, God will in his appropriate time, act against the enemy and restore the Psalmist.

So, at times, of course, Christian theology even goes further that maybe things are bad now, but we've got eternity. We've got eternity with God, an eternity in heaven. And so, things will be fine. And on the scale of eternity, the small things we suffer now are minor. So, some people qualify the retribution principle with the extended time concept.

Justice and the World as a Solution [18:02-19:07]

Some people qualify the retribution principle with regard to the role of justice in the world. You can talk about the world not being just, even if you still talk about God acting justly. That is that in this world, non-order continues. We view the idea that justice is not the sole foundation of how God works in the world. That doesn't compromise him. But the question is, has he made the world conform to his own justice? And we know that he hasn't because we're sinful people, and yet we still exist. If the world fully conformed to God's justice, it wouldn't be a world that we could live in. And so, given a fallen world, perfect justice is not attainable.

God's Complex of Attributes [19:07-20:47]

The basis for God's operation in the world is his entire character, his entire range of attributes, not just one attribute or another. You can say that God is love, and

that covers everything. No, it doesn't. He's lots of other things too. So, the one way to qualify the retribution principle without somehow being detrimental to the character of God has to understand that God and his world are different and that he has not imposed justice on it.

God, in his wisdom, is concerned with justice. But that's all given the parameters of an imperfect world, a fallen world, and even a not yet fully ordered world; God has brought order into a world of non-order, and disorder, sin has also come into the picture. But we're not living in a perfectly ordered world. And therefore, it's not one that reflects God's attributes throughout.

There are affirmations that we find of the retribution principle. And we find them in Psalms, especially wisdom Psalms. We find them in Proverbs. These affirmations are not intended to be a full theological description of how the world works according to God's attributes and his doing justice. They are proverbial in nature.

Retribution Principle Not a Theology Solution [20:47-23:08]

The retribution principle needs to be understood by us as proverbial in nature. That means it's how things often act but not how things always work. It's not a guarantee. It's not a promise. The retribution principle does not function well to offer an explanation of suffering and evil in the world. The technical term for that is theodicy explaining why there's suffering and evil in the world. The retribution principle does not offer a theodicy. The retribution principle is not an explanation of how God operates at all times in all places in the world.

It is an affirmation, in part, of who God is. That is, God delights in bringing good things to his faithful servants. And God takes seriously punishing wicked people, but he doesn't carry those things out throughout because, again, it's a fallen world, and none of us could live through that. It tells us, though, about the identity of God, about the heart of God. And his identity and his character are bound to have ramifications in the world--ripple effects. And that's why sometimes it looks to us like the retribution principle is working out sometimes. Indeed, it is. But we shouldn't expect it to work out

all the time in every circumstance. So, we have the theology; this is what God is like standing against the theodicy; this explains life as we experience it. They're contrasting positions. And the Book of Job performs some radical surgery to separate those two so that we don't make the mistake of thinking that theology leads to a theodicy.

God Needs No Defense [23:08-24:18]

Yahweh's justice must be taken on faith rather than worked out philosophically on a moment-by-moment analysis of our experiences. He does not need to be defended. In one sense, theodicy, our attempts at theodicy, are a bit of an insult to God. He doesn't need our defense, and we're really not in a position to defend him very ably. He doesn't need to be defended. He wants to be trusted. The entire constellation of God's attributes is at work in a complex, coordinated manner. We can never tell when God is going to choose justice or when he's going to choose mercy. We can never tell where his compassion might override something that he ought to be doing. Justice is a part of that constellation but doesn't trump all the other attributes that God has.

Jesus Shifting from Cause to Purpose, Theodicy to Theology [24:18-27:59]

Here's a way that can help us sort this out. In the New Testament, Jesus is confronted and challenged with retribution principle questions. In John 9, the man born blind, the disciples see a great opportunity. Here's this man who was born blind. And the question they posed to Jesus is the retribution principle question. "Who sinned, this man or his parents." See, this is a great conundrum because if it's, how could it have been the man who sinned because he was born this way? And if it were his parents, how come the man suffers for it? And so, this is just the key point. And they were probably, you know, really excited because now they're going to get an answer to the question of the ages because Jesus stands in front of them. And so, they say, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Now you can see that their question is a theodicy question. What explanation is going to account for this man's suffering? So, when they ask a question of cause, it's a theodicy question and kind of moves toward an expanded theology, which is what Jesus

does. Jesus turns them away from the theodicy to the theology. Isn't it intriguing that he says, "Neither this man nor his parents," by that time, the disciples have stopped kind of excitedly. And now they're going, "Oh no, he's doing it again." He's doing it again; he's not going to answer the question we asked; he's going to answer the question we should have asked. He says, "It neither was this man nor his parents, but that the son of God might be glorified."

Now it's really an interesting question because what he does is basically say, don't look to the past and ask the question about cause; you're not getting that answer. Instead, what Jesus answers, Jesus doesn't give them a cause. He doesn't give him an explanation of the past. But he says what you should do is turn your attention to the future and look for purpose. The glory of God is a purpose. It's not a cause. It's not a reason. And so, Jesus turns their attention away from the past and away from cause to look at purpose. No explanation of the suffering is forthcoming. None is possible; none is necessary.

We have to trust God's wisdom and seek out his purpose. So, Jesus gives that same kind of answer. And it's the same answer that Job ends up getting. Trust God's wisdom and seek out his purpose. Don't expect to get explanations of the cause. It's not about reasons.

Jesus and Luke 13 Falling Tower [cause to purpose shift] [27:59-29:52]

Jesus is, again, confronted with this in Luke chapter 13, verses one through five. Here he is asked, what about this tower that collapsed on people while they're there for a festival? How do you explain this sort of random-looking disaster? And again, Jesus turns their attention away from the cause. That has nothing to do with who was righteous and who was wicked. He states that a one-to-one correspondence between sin and punishment should not be made, but rather, he encourages them to view the incident as a warning. He refuses to engage the question of cause and directs the attention of his audience to the purpose of such incidents, give us warning.

They exhort us to think, in different terms, to think of how life can end so quickly, to think about how suffering can come. It's not about a one-to-one correspondence.

So, we see that when Jesus addresses the retribution principle issues that he's confronted with, he consistently turns away from giving reasons or explanations for cause. And that's a large part of what the Book of Job is going to do as we begin to adjust our expectations as we think about our own experiences in the world.

We're now ready to get into the Book of Job itself, section by section. And we'll begin that in the next portion.

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