

The Book of Job
Session 8: Scene on Earth
By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 8, Scene on Earth.

Introduction: Job 1:1-5, the Land of Uz [00:22-1:26]

So, now we're ready to get into the actual Book of Job. We've talked all about it. We've talked about a lot of aspects of it, and now we're ready to talk about the content of the book itself. In this segment, we're going to be dealing just with the scene on earth, the first five verses of the book. And so, we're introduced to Job as someone from the land of Uz. That means that he's a foreigner and he's from some obscure, mysterious place, barely on the perimeter of the known world for an ancient Israelite audience. So, he's from this mysterious desert region, a region of the Syrian desert, perhaps associated with Edom. It's an area known for its wisdom.

His friends are also from that region. So, for instance, we have a Temanite. So, he's from Teman. So, it's that region that's to the south and east of the land of Israel.

Genesis 36 connects Uz with Esau, and again that places things in that region. The earliest interpretation of the book of Job, which is found in the Septuagint, locates Uz between Idumea and Arabia. So again, basically, that region. So, as we've mentioned, Job is not an Israelite; he's an outsider in that regard, even though the book deals with Israelite issues and is addressed to an Israelite audience.

Job's Character and Actions in the Extreme [1:26-3:58]

We find in the description of Job himself everything is painted in extremes. So, Job is blameless. The Hebrew word is *tam*, and he's upright, *yashar*. These refer respectively to his character and his actions. And so, here is the person who is just faithful in every way. He's a man of integrity. There is no blame associated with him or guilt. He's someone who behaves according to God's expectations and enjoys God's favor. If we looked for words opposite to describe Job, we would look for words like

someone who is proclaimed guilty or to be considered wicked, that is standing under condemnation. Job is not those things. The words that describe him are the opposites of those.

At the same time, these are not words of sinless perfection. Job is not in the divine realm in terms of his behavior, but it's the best that a person can be, the best that a human can be.

He fears God, the word for God here is Elohim, not Yahweh. So, he fears Elohim. That means he takes him seriously based on what is known of him. We have other people kind of outside Israel described that way. For instance, the sailors in the Book of Jonah are described as fearing God. And that's based on what little they know of him. Even in the book of Genesis, Abimelech is described that way in contrast to Abraham, who has a personal relationship with Yahweh. So, all of these terms portrayed Job in the highest possible standing. And again, we've mentioned the use of extremes to describe things.

Job's Possessions in the Extreme [3:58-4:46]

Now his possessions and his status are also in the ideal realm. They're not necessarily contrived, but everything's immense. So, these are stereotypes of how many cattle, how many camels, how many sheep and goats, everything is portrayed in ideal terms. He has achieved success and prosperity by the highest possible standards. And so, again, in that way, we have extremes portrayed. Just because they're extremes doesn't mean they're not true or accurate, of course. But we have to notice that the extremes are very important so that they move those easy answers off the table. So, here we have then the description of Job.

Job's Piety: ritual practices [4:46-6:24]

Now, what is arguably the most intriguing of these issues is the question of his piety. In verses four and five, a scene is described for us when his sons and daughters would gather for, apparently, birthday parties, or banquets of some sort. Job would have

this ritual that he performed afterward. It's a setting that addresses that there is just the outside possibility that some offense had been committed. If we read the verses, it says, "His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays. And they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning, he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' This was Job's regular custom." So, we find this practice. It's also in the banquet setting that they eventually meet their demise in chapter one, verses 18 and 19. They are actually banqueting when the house collapses on them and the fire, and they lose their lives. Job is worried that they perhaps cursed God in their hearts.

Children cursing "In their hearts" [6:24-7:07]

Now this "in their hearts" idea, when you use that to apply to an individual, it refers to private thoughts, but this is not about them as individuals. It's about their corporate get-togethers, their banqueting. When a group of people is part of the scene, it can refer to corporate thinking or shared confidentially. And we find places in Deuteronomy like Deuteronomy 8:17, 18:21, and likewise, Psalm 78:18, where this idea of "in their hearts" is a corporate conversation taking place.

Curse/bless God [7:07-10:59]

Also, when it says "cursed God in their hearts," it doesn't use the Hebrew word for "curse." It uses the Hebrew word for "bless." And so, this is a euphemistic use of "bless." To put the word "curse" and God next to each other was considered in bad taste. And so, they used blessed God. So, this actually says that perhaps "they have blessed God in their hearts." Now this is just the first of a good deal of interplay between blessing and cursing in these early chapters of Job. So, in 1.11, also in 2.5 the Challenger is suggested Job will bless, that is, curse God to his face, in contrast to the fears Job had, that his children might bless or curse God in their hearts. Instead, Job truly does bless

God, not curse God, although it's the same verb that the Challenger had suggested. Job's wife urges him to curse God; again, the verb is to bless/to curse God blatantly and die in chapter two, verse nine. Job does not respond with blessing God after that second round, but neither does he curse God. Instead, he curses the day of his birth. We find that in chapter three. Beyond this specific use of terms in establishing a literary motif, the underlying narrative framework should also be considered as we think about how these words work. In the narrative, remember God has blessed Job with children and possessions in chapter one, verse 10. Not only that, but God has orally blessed Job by praising him to the Challenger. Sometimes a blessing is accomplished by praise. The nature of that oral blessing, God blessing Job in front of the Challenger, becomes a curse in a sense as it was made the basis for the challenge that leads to the loss of Job's material prosperity.

Eventually, of course, God restores that material blessing as we get toward the end of the book. So, the curse-bless antithesis stands as a significant element of a motif in the book. Now, what exactly would be entailed in cursing God? What would that look like? Cursing God can be thought of in a variety of ways. Using God's name and a frivolous oath would be one way. Using God's name along with elicit words of power. So, a hex or something of that sort. Using words of power against a God, in something like an incantation. Even speaking in a denigrating, contemptuous or slanderous way about God, basically insulting God. Holding God in contempt by stating implicitly or explicitly that God is powerless to act, or that God is corrupt in his actions or motives, that God has needs, or that God can be manipulated making God less than God.

Now, Job arguably does some of these in his accusations against God, but he's expressing anger, not contempt. And he still maintains the integrity, as we'll talk about later. Perhaps it's best to think of cursing God as involving contemptuous renunciation, disavowing, neglect the proper honors. And, of course, Job did not do that.

Job's Ritual Behaviors, God as Petty [10:59-14:52]

Most important in this whole scene is to try to understand Job's ritual behavior. What Job does is not so much indicative of what he thinks about his children but rather what he thinks about God. What does this scene in verses one through five tell us about what Job thought about God? Job is considering the possibility that unguarded statements by his sons and daughters might be made in the context of the banquet and that God would take offense at such unguarded, not very complimentary statements.

Despite perhaps even the innocent intentions of the speaker, we know that this was considered a real possibility in the ancient world. We have an Assyrian piece called a Prayer to Every God. And in it, the worshiper is very worried he apparently is suffering some negative experiences. This prayer is trying to work toward a solution. He says, "if I've inadvertently stepped on a place that's holy to my god or to my goddess or to a god that I don't know, or to a goddess that I don't know. If I maybe have pronounced a word that is offensive to my god or to my goddess or true god that I don't know, or a goddess that I don't know." And he goes through this whole checklist of things he might have inadvertently done that might have offended his god or his goddess or the god he doesn't know or the goddess he doesn't know.

We can see then that a prayer like this is an expression of the idea that the gods can be pretty petty. They can be demanding things that human beings would have no way to know about. Job's character and behavior are above reproach. But in my understanding, these two verses about Job's ritual piety suggest that his view of God may be flawed. It suggests that he may be thinking of God as petty.

It's that kind of expression that opens the path for the challenge against him by the Challenger. If Job is inclined to think of God as petty, he may well be ready to think that, that it's really all about benefits and that it's not about righteousness per se. It's about trying to please an easily offended God.

So, I'm inclined to think that verses four and five in chapter one are not actually part of the positive characterizations of Job. It actually shows where the weakness in his

armor might be that already he's thinking about God as petty. And the fact is, in his speeches, that's going to come back, and he's going to express those things more straightforwardly.

Summary of Job 1:1-5 [14:52-15:19]

So, in verses one through four, we have a setup for the narrative to continue. We've learned about Job being above reproach. We've also learned that there's a chink in his armor, and that can be exploited. We'll find out more about that when the scene in heaven opens.

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