

The Book of Job
Session 18: Job's Discourse, Job 29-31
By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 18, Job's Discourse, Job 29-31.

Introduction to Discourse Section in Job [00:24-00:58]

The discourse section of the Book of Job is made up of three major discourses, one by Job, one by Elihu, and one by Yahweh. But already that's misleading because each of them has several speeches, and therefore we have complex discourses. Job has three speeches. Elihu's has four, and Yahweh's has two. This is a very interesting offsetting pattern where it makes it seem like Elihu is the main speaker. But, of course, that's not the case.

Job's Three Speeches Summarized (Job 29-31) [00:58-2:39]

So, in this segment, we're going to take a look at Job's discourses, his three speeches, in the discourse section. In summary, in chapter 29, Job is thinking about the coherence of the past. Ah, the good old days when everything was comfortable and right with the world. The retribution principle was working, and he was a happy camper, fearing God, and everything was going well. That's chapter 29.

Chapter 30 describes the incoherence of the present. Here we find a very poignant statement by Job about how he is treated. He is obviously not just hanging around at the dung pile; he's around town and things like that. People despise him and they reject him. He's ostracized in every way. So, the incoherence of the present.

Job, in chapter 31, Job looks for coherence, not by revising his expectations or his focus on justice, that's really what he should do, but he's not there yet. But rather, he tries to force God's hand through an oath of innocence. This strategy is not designed to regain his prosperity but rather, still as always, to receive vindication. But he takes an approach that sort of tacitly will give him vindication.

Contrast with the Dialogues [2:39-5:29]

So, let's contrast that to what we had found in the dialogues, just to make sure we're tracking with the rhetorical strategy of the book. In the dialogues, the friends were offering Job a solution to find coherence and equilibrium. They were trying to help him to know how to get his stuff back. But it came with a cost. It would have shown his righteousness to have been motivated by gain. That would have been the way to achieve coherence. Their worldview considered the cosmos to be founded on justice. In which case, coherence could be sustained by adopting the great symbiosis that we've spoken of, with appeasement as the all-purpose equilibrater. If God's angry, then his needs aren't being met, you meet his needs, and then he'll be appeased, and he'll return to taking care of you and making your prosperity will be restored. So, the idea that Job's strategy then, as the friends would have painted it, Job's strategy should be to find a path to appeasement, to regain the favor of the deity, and to have the restoration of his prosperity and blessing. That's their equation.

If Job regained coherence through that particular strategy, he would have had to adopt a perspective of self-interested righteousness. That is, it's all about the benefits, all about the stuff. The underlying issue in the dialogue section of the book was whether Job's righteousness was disinterested.

In Job's discourses, the focus changes. He seeks his own path to coherence in equilibrium. He's not going to adopt the friends' suggestions. His own path, the underlying issue now concerns the more familiar question: why should God's policies allow righteous people to suffer? If Job's purposes are carried out, his course of action will inevitably lead to the conclusion that God's policies are incoherent. In this way, the challenge to God's policies continues. In the dialogue section, Job demonstrated that his righteousness was more important to him than the benefits of prosperity.

Job's Righteousness over God's Reputation [5:29-6:39]

In this discourse of Job, it becomes clear that his righteousness is more important to him than God's reputation. So, now that's a problem. He seeks coherence based on himself rather than on God. Remember when we talked about the triangle? Job builds his fort in his own corner, his righteousness, and that leads him to question what God is doing. His oath of innocence in chapter 31 is intended to vindicate him. In that vindication, he expects to find restored coherence and equilibrium. Though Job never shows interest in regaining his prosperity. He is interested in regaining his status as a righteous person in the community. But this is still disinterested righteousness because it is a status based on righteousness, not based on stuff.

Job's Oath of Innocence Versus God's Silence (Job 31) [6:39-10:14]

So, let's take a look at this oath of innocence. It's one of the most important chapters in the book. What Job does is he goes through a whole list of things that he swears he has not done. They're all kinds of crimes or offenses that would have been perceived as against God and contrary to righteous living. In this scenario, Job does not necessarily regain any of his former prosperity, but his reputation he hopes will be vindicated, and his claim to righteousness will be upheld.

How is it working? Job has been frustrated, that's probably too mild a word, but he's been frustrated by God's silence. Remember, through the dialogues; he kept pleading for God to enter into court, to come and engage the conversation. Remember, Job views himself as a plaintiff in a civil trial seeking restitution. And so, he keeps calling God into court. He keeps asking for an advocate, a mediator. He wants this confrontation, and God's silence has been deafening. God won't respond. So, Job has been plagued by God's silence because as long as his experiences continue to be so negative and God doesn't speak, the assumption is that Job is out of favor, that he's being punished.

So, Job is seeking in this oath of innocence to reverse the impact of God's silence. When he takes his oath of innocence, he swears that he has not done this whole range, almost comprehensive range; he's not committed these offenses. By swearing that,

he is throwing the ball into God's court because by swearing to it, if God's going to uphold his oath, God has to act against him. In other words, he's trying to force God into action. Strike him dead, strike him dead, if he's done any of these things. What that means is that if God does not strike him dead, he's exonerated. If God remained silent, he could claim vindication. What a clever strategy. He's trying to manipulate God, or at least the silence of God, to work for his benefit instead of working against him.

So again, Job would not regain any of his former prosperity, but if he can claim he has been vindicated by the fact that God has not struck him dead and thereby exonerated, he can hope to reclaim his standing and status in the community. See how it works.

God as Job's Chaos Creature [10:14-11:32]

Coherence on this level is not found in the retribution principle but in Job's personal feeling of self-righteousness. If Job wins this, if this strategy works, it leaves God's policies dismantled and his reputation in shambles. If Job wins in this confrontation with God, God is reduced to a powerful being characterized by neither wisdom nor justice, in effect, a chaos creature.

Remember all the way back in Job's lament in chapter three, Job said, why are you treating me like a chaos creature? And now he turns it around and is treating God as a chaos creature.

This is worse than the results that could have come from the dialogue scenario. There God would have been reduced to a deity like those throughout the ancient Near East, participating in the great symbiosis, and doling out benefits so that people will continue to support his needs. That wouldn't have been good.

God's Reputation at Stake [11:32-12:37]

But in Job's scenario, if Job wins through this strategy, God is no God at all. Job's oath of innocence puts a serious card on the table. God's reputation is at stake. Now

it's not Job's reputation. It's not Job's motivation. It's God's reputation and God's motivation. In that sense, Job's accusation carries a threat of doing more damage to God, his reputation, and his policies than the Challenger's did. This is a serious challenge. We'll start looking at how it's resolved as we work through the other discourses. Before we get to God's response, we have to take a careful look at Elihu, and we'll do that in the next segment.

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