

# The Book of Job

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

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Retribution, Triangle, Justice, Righteousness, Elihu, Theodicy, Theology, Suffering, Purpose, Cause

### Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton introduces the Retribution Principle—the belief that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer—as the foundational theological framework under scrutiny in the Book of Job. He illustrates this conflict using the "Triangle of Claims," which consists of God's justice, Job's righteousness, and the Retribution Principle, showing how Job, his friends, and Elihu each sacrifice a different corner of the triangle to resolve the tension of Job's suffering. Walton further explores how biblical wisdom and New Testament teachings, particularly from Jesus, shift the focus from past causes (theodicy) to future purposes (theology). Ultimately, he argues that God does not need to be philosophically defended but rather trusted through His infinite wisdom and complex constellation of divine attributes.

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### Outline

#### I. Introduction to the Retribution Principle

##### A. Definition of the Retribution Principle

1. The basic idea: the righteous (observant, faithful) will prosper, and the wicked will suffer.
2. Concept represents a belief that people get what they deserve in life (good health, crops, success vs. disaster).

##### B. Prevalence of the Principle

1. Widely recognized in the ancient Near East as reflecting favor or disfavor with the gods.
2. Remains common today; casual phrases like "I must have done something right" or "What did I do to earn this?" demonstrate its persistence.

##### C. Under the Microscope in Job

1. Job and his friends all firmly believe in this principle, which forms the foundation of their conflict.

2. The principle is applied in reverse: if someone is suffering, they must be wicked; if prospering, they must be righteous.
3. The extreme setup of Job's narrative—going from the highest height to the lowest depth of suffering—forces a clear-minded examination of this principle.

## **II. The Challenger and the Retribution Principle**

### **A. The Question of Motivation**

1. Challenger asks: "Does Job serve God for nothing?"
2. Questions whether rewarding righteousness with prosperity corrupts true righteousness by introducing selfish motives (anticipation of gain).

### **B. Critique of God's Policies**

1. The Challenger argues that the Retribution Principle is a bad policy because it trains people to act as mercenaries.
2. Job argues that if the principle is not enforced (i.e., if the righteous suffer), then God's justice becomes suspect.

## **III. The Retribution Triangle of Claims**

### **A. The Structure of the Triangle**

1. Lower left corner: Job's Righteousness.
2. Lower right corner: The Retribution Principle.
3. Top corner: God's Justice.

### **B. The Gridlock of Suffering**

1. As long as Job prospers, all three corners hold comfortably in harmony.
2. When Job suffers, the triangle is broken: one cannot hold onto God's justice, Job's righteousness, and the Retribution Principle simultaneously; one corner must be abandoned.

### **C. The Friends' Position**

1. Build their "fort" on the Retribution Principle corner.
2. They vigorously defend God's justice and the Retribution Principle.
3. Consequently, they sacrifice Job's righteousness, concluding he must have committed grievous sins.

### **D. Job's Position**

1. Builds his "fort" on his own Righteousness, which is unassailable in his mind.
2. He continues to hold onto the Retribution Principle, trying but failing to find a logical weakness in it.
3. Consequently, he sacrifices God's corner, becoming increasingly skeptical and accusing God of injustice.

### **E. Elihu's Position**

1. Builds his "fort" on the top corner of God's Justice.
2. Redefines the Retribution Principle to make it preventative rather than remedial.
  - a. Traditional view (friends): Suffering is remedial, reacting to past sins.
  - b. Elihu's view: Suffering is preventative, warning against developing pride or self-righteousness.
3. By redefining the principle, Elihu avoids finding past sins in Job, but targets Job's self-righteousness and accusations against God that arose during his suffering.
4. Elihu is the closest to the truth of any human character, but still erroneously relies on the Retribution Principle as the baseline for how the world works.

#### **IV. Resolving Tensions and Qualifying the Principle**

##### **A. Ancient Near Eastern Resolutions**

1. Resolved the tension by compromising on the nature of the gods, viewing them as capricious and unjust.

##### **B. Alternate Human Explanations**

1. Suffering as educational or character-building.
2. Suffering as participation with Christ (in Christian theology).

##### **C. Biblical Resolutions**

1. The Psalmist (Lament Psalms): Resolves tension through timing, anticipating that God will eventually restore order and defeat enemies.
2. Christian Theology: Qualifies suffering through the lens of eternity, making present hardships minor in comparison.
3. Perfect Justice vs. A Fallen World: God has not forced the physical, fallen world to perfectly conform to His justice. A perfectly just world would result in immediate human destruction.
4. Proverbial Nature of Wisdom: Statements in Psalms and Proverbs affirming the Retribution Principle are proverbial observations of general truths, not absolute theological guarantees.

##### **D. Theology vs. Theodicy**

1. Theodicy attempts to explain why there is suffering and evil, whereas theology is an affirmation of who God is.
2. The Book of Job performs radical surgery to separate theology from theodicy, showing that our theology cannot be reduced to a neat explanation of our experiences.
3. God wants to be trusted rather than defended; human attempts at theodicy can be seen as an insult to Him.

#### **V. The New Testament Shift: Jesus on Cause vs. Purpose**

##### **A. Healing the Man Born Blind (John 9)**

1. Disciples ask a cause-based theodicy question: "Who sinned, this man or his parents?"

2. Jesus rejects both options, shifting the focus away from past cause/explanation to future divine purpose: "that the works of God might be displayed."
3. Like Job, the blind man is given no explanation of cause, only a call to trust God's purpose.

#### **B. The Collapse of the Tower of Siloam (Luke 13)**

1. Jesus is asked about a random disaster that killed many people.
2. Rejects any one-to-one correspondence between sin and disaster.
3. Shifts focus from cause to purpose, utilizing the disaster as a warning to emphasize the brevity of life and the necessity of repentance.

### **VI. Conclusion**

#### **A. Rejecting Explanations for Trust**

1. Jesus, like the Book of Job, consistently refuses to provide past-oriented reasons or explanations for suffering.
2. The book adjusts our expectations, showing that we must rely on God's wisdom rather than seeking a mechanical explanation of cause.