

The Book of Job

Session 8: Scene on Earth

Author: Dr. John Walton

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Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton begins examining the text of Job, focusing specifically on the earthly scene depicted in the first five verses of chapter one. He highlights how Job's character, possessions, and status are painted in extreme terms to remove easy explanations for his subsequent suffering. Walton also explores Job's peculiar ritual practices, suggesting that Job's preventative sacrifices reveal a flawed, ancient Near Eastern view of God as a petty deity who is easily offended. Ultimately, this subtle weakness in Job's theological perspective prepares the reader for the heavenly challenge and Job's subsequent speeches.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Scene on Earth (Job 1:1-5)

A. Setting the Stage

1. Focuses on the first five verses of chapter one, shifting from general introductory background to the actual biblical text.
2. Introduces Job as a resident of the land of Uz.

B. The Land of Uz

1. Represents a foreign, obscure, and mysterious place on the perimeter of the known ancient Israelite world.
2. Located in a desert region, likely associated with Edom or the Syrian desert.
3. Renowned as an area known for wisdom, with Job's friend Eliphaz the Temanite also hailing from this region.
4. Genesis 36 connects Uz with Esau, while the Septuagint locates Uz between Idumea and Arabia.
5. Establishes Job as a non-Israelite outsider, though the book addresses Israelite audience concerns.

II. Job's Character and Possessions in the Extreme

A. Job's Perfect Character

1. Described using the Hebrew terms "tam" (blameless) and "yashar" (upright) to represent his outstanding character and actions.

2. Indicates that Job is a man of integrity who behaves according to God's expectations and enjoys His favor.
3. Portrays Job in the highest possible moral standing, representing the best a human can be, though not implying sinless perfection.
4. Fearing "Elohim" (rather than Yahweh) signifies taking God seriously based on what is known of Him, a trait shared with other non-Israelite figures like the sailors in Jonah.

B. Job's Vast Possessions

1. Possessions and social status are depicted in the ideal, immense realm utilizing stereotypical numbers of livestock.
2. Establishes Job as someone who has achieved success and prosperity by the highest possible standards of his culture.
3. The literary use of extremes is crucial to strip away "easy answers" for Job's suffering; his trials cannot be dismissed as minor or deserved.

III. Job's Piety and Ritual Practices (Job 1:4-5)

A. The Birthday Feasts and Post-Feast Purification

1. Job's sons and daughters regularly gathered for banquets and feasts in their homes.
2. Following these feasting cycles, Job would systematically arrange for their purification.
3. Job offered burnt offerings early in the morning for each child out of concern that they might have sinned.

B. Children Cursing God "In Their Hearts"

1. The phrase "in their hearts" in this context refers to corporate thinking or shared confidentiality during their social gatherings rather than purely private, individual thoughts.
2. The Hebrew text euphemistically uses the word "bless" ("barak") instead of "curse" to avoid placing a curse word directly adjacent to the name of God.

C. The Blessing and Cursing Motif

1. Introduces a significant wordplay and literary motif of blessing and cursing in the prologue.
2. Highlights the contrast between Job's preventative fears and the Challenger's claim that Job will curse God to His face.
3. Job's wife urges him to curse God and die, whereas Job refuses to curse God, choosing instead to curse the day of his birth.
4. God's oral blessing (praise) of Job to the Challenger ironically serves as the catalyst for Job's earthly curse (suffering).
5. Cursing God in antiquity included: using His name in frivolous oaths, casting hexes or incantations, speaking in contemptuous or slanderous ways, or treating Him as powerless, corrupt, needy, or easily manipulated.

IV. Job's Ritual Behavior and Flawed View of God

A. Worry Over Unguarded Statements

1. Job's preventative sacrifices demonstrate an anxiety that God might take offense at unguarded, uncomplimentary comments made during feasts.

B. Mesopotamian Parallels: "Prayer to Every God"

1. An Assyrian text illustrates that worshippers in the ancient Near East were deeply anxious about inadvertently offending unknown gods or stepping on holy ground.
2. This reveals a common cultural belief that the gods are exceptionally petty, demanding, and easily offended by minor, accidental infractions.

C. The Chink in Job's Armor

1. Job's meticulous ritual piety suggests that he, too, holds a flawed view of God as a petty deity who must be placated.
2. This view implies that serving God is transactional—focused on pleasing an easily offended God to secure and protect personal benefits rather than desiring righteousness for its own sake.
3. Rather than a purely positive characterization, verses 4 and 5 expose a vulnerability in Job's theology that the Challenger exploits and Job's later speeches expose.