

The Book of Job

Session 18: Job's Discourse, Job 29-31

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Source: Biblealearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Job, John Walton, Discourse, Coherence, Oath of Innocence, Vindication, Chaos Creature, Silence, Reputation, Trust

Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton transitions to the discourse section of the Book of Job, focusing on Job's final three speeches in chapters 29 through 31. He outlines how Job contrasts the coherence of his prosperous past with the deep incoherence of his present ostracized state, culminating in a bold oath of innocence designed to force God's hand. Walton highlights the critical theological shift where Job prioritizes his personal righteousness over God's reputation, presenting a challenge to divine policies that unintentionally threatens to reduce God to a chaos creature.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Discourse Section in Job

- **A. Overarching Structure of the Discourses**
 - 1. Composed of three major discourses: Job, Elihu, and Yahweh.
 - 2. Each speaker features multiple speeches, creating a complex dialogue pattern.
 - 3. Structural offset: Job delivers 3 speeches, Elihu delivers 4, and Yahweh delivers 2.
 - 4. Despite Elihu having the highest quantity of speeches, he is not the main speaker of the book.

II. Summary of Job's Three Speeches (Job 29-31)

- **A. Chapter 29: The Coherence of the Past**
 - 1. Job looks back on the "good old days" when everything was comfortable, prosperous, and orderly.
 - 2. He recalls a period when he feared God, enjoyed His favor, and saw the retribution principle function predictably.
- **B. Chapter 30: The Incoherence of the Present**
 - 1. Describes Job's deep pain regarding his present ostracization and loss of status.
 - 2. He is not merely sitting passively on the dung pile, but moves around town where people actively despise, mock, and reject him.
- **C. Chapter 31: The Search for Coherence**

- 1. Job seeks to restore equilibrium not by adjusting his expectations of justice, but by forcing God's hand.
- 2. He deploys a formal oath of innocence to achieve vindication rather than the return of his wealth.

III. Critical Contrast with the Dialogues

• A. The Friends' Transactional Solution

- 1. The friends offered a pathway to coherence by urging Job to repent and appease God.
- 2. Their worldview was based on the retribution principle and the "great symbiosis" (divine-human codependency).
- 3. They viewed appeasement as an all-purpose tool: meet God's needs, appease His anger, and get your "stuff" back.

• B. The Cost of the Friends' Approach

- 1. Had Job repented merely to regain prosperity, he would have proven that his righteousness was motivated by gain.
- 2. This would have validated the Challenger's accusation that Job's righteousness was purely self-interested.

• C. The Core Shift in the Discourse Section

- 1. In the dialogues, the core question was whether Job's righteousness was disinterested (proven true when he refused their advice).
- 2. In the discourses, the focus changes to Job's question: why do God's policies allow righteous people to suffer?
- 3. Job seeks his own path to coherence, which ultimately challenges the coherence of God's sovereign policies.

IV. Job's Righteousness over God's Reputation

• A. Prioritizing Self over Creator

- 1. Job's discourses reveal that his personal righteousness is more important to him than God's reputation.
- 2. Job builds his defense in his own corner of the "Triangle of Claims," which forces him to accuse God of injustice.

• B. The Nature of Job's Desired Vindication

- 1. Job remains uninterested in regaining his material possessions or physical wealth.
- 2. He seeks to reclaim his moral status and honorable standing in the community as a righteous person.
- 3. Because he pursues status rather than material wealth, his righteousness remains technically disinterested.

V. Job's Oath of Innocence vs. God's Silence (Job 31)

• A. Frustration with Divine Silence

- 1. Job has been tormented by God's silence throughout the dialogues.
- 2. He views himself as a civil plaintiff seeking restitution, calling God to court to answer for his suffering.

- 3. In the ancient world, continued suffering combined with divine silence led the community to assume the individual was under active punishment.
- **B. The Mechanics of the Oath of Innocence**
 - 1. Job lists a comprehensive range of moral crimes and offenses, swearing he has not committed any of them.
 - 2. Under ancient Near Eastern law, taking such an oath forced the deity's hand: if the oath was false, the deity was expected to strike the oath-taker dead.
 - 3. This legal move places the burden on God: if God does not strike Job dead, Job is legally exonerated and vindicated by God's continued silence.
 - 4. This represents a highly sophisticated strategy to manipulate God's silence into a form of active vindication.
 - 5. If successful, Job can reclaim his social and moral status in the community, even without his physical wealth.

VI. The Theological Threat: God as a Chaos Creature

- **A. Dismantling Divine Policies**
 - 1. Job's strategy seeks coherence in his personal feelings of self-righteousness, not in the retribution principle.
 - 2. If Job wins this legal case, God's reputation is left in shambles and His policies are dismantled.
- **B. Reducing God to a Chaos Creature**
 - 1. Proving God wrong reduces Him to a powerful being characterized by neither wisdom nor justice—essentially, a chaos creature.
 - 2. This reverses Job's chapter 3 lament ("Why do you treat me like a chaos creature?"), with Job now treating God as one.
- **C. The Threat Compared to the Dialogues**
 - 1. In the dialogues, God would have been reduced to a typical ancient Near Eastern deity codependent on human appeasement.
 - 2. In Job's discourse scenario, if Job wins, God is shown to be no God at all.
 - 3. Job's oath of innocence puts a far more dangerous threat on the table than the Challenger's did, directly targeting God's reputation and policies.