

***THE BOOK OF JOB***  
***Job 26-31***

***By Dr. James E. Potts***

When Bildad lost his cool, he also lost out in the discussion. There was no need for Job to retaliate. Instead, we see him feeling sorry for his friends because they have failed in their mission. Assuming to be comforters, they have not helped him (26:2); assumed to be wise, they have not given him any fresh insight (26:3); assumed to be godly, they have spoken only with defensive bitterness (26:4).

From time to time each of us becomes a counselor for others. And the quality of our counseling is tested by the same three questions Job raised with his friends: 1) Are we encouraging? 2) Are we insightful? 3) Are we gracious? These three questions and our responses to them determine that values not only of our counseling but of our daily communication as well. As believers who represents Christ in our neighborhoods and towns, it is important that we be able to respond affirmatively to all three.

We all know from practical experiences that a conversation with certain people leaves us with the taste of ashes in our mouths. The negative attitude of such folks depresses us. On the other hand, a few words with other people send us back into life with fresh hope and an uplifted attitude as we are reminded that God is in His heaven, so everything is all right.

After his long conversations with his three friends, no doubt Job learned a valuable lesson. If the time ever comes when he is sought out as a counselor, his words will become encouraging, insightful, and gracious—important marks in the conversation of any believer.

It is not surprising at this stage that Job's response to Bildad takes on a completely different tone. For the first time in these extended conversations, he places emphasis on the spiritual and mystical nature of God. Up until now the discussion or debate has centered around knowing and understanding God through His natural creation and through human reason. Now, Job reminds himself and his friends that God is the powerful and spiritual Creator. In vivid poetry Job speaks of God as forming the sky and suspending the earth in its place (26:7). With references to the Genesis creation account he credits his God with the separation of the water, with the dividing of light from darkness, and of giving order and form to all of His creation (26:8-13).

Then after painting a vivid picture of the greatness and magnificence of God as seen in His mighty creation activities, Job now says this is just one side of the coin, one side of the story, for all ***“these are parts [edges] of his ways.”*** Nature does not begin to show us all of God, and the vast universe is nothing more than a small reflection of God’s majesty, a faint whisper of the awe-filled God (26:14).

We see in these words that somehow Job’s perception of God has moved from the natural to the spiritual. Like a blind man groping in the dark, Job is searching for, reaching out to the God of grace. As Job finishes this picture of a God who is far off and powerful but also near at hand, he seems to pause as if waiting a response of some kind from Bildad. But Job is now thinking way beyond the boundaries of anything Bildad can understand. To think of creation out of nothingness or mercy out of love is beyond him. Matter of fact, it is beyond the understanding of all three friends, for all are silent.

Motivated by the silence of his friends, Job continues (27:1). Once more, without the slightest hint of an apology, he reaffirms his integrity, his righteousness, and his innocence before God, even though it appears God has turned against him (27:2-6). Then he warns his friends that they, not he, will be the objects of God’s judgment (27:7-10). And he next makes the bold pronouncement that must have taken his listeners by surprise, ***“I will teach you by the hand [power] of God”*** (27:11).

Earlier, you will remember, it was Eliphaz who adopted the role of a wise teacher with a superior knowledge of God. Now, Job turns the tables and announces that he is the teacher because he has knowledge of the truth which his friends do not have. And with a touch of sarcasm, he justifies his position by saying that if they had known what he now does, they would not have wasted a lot of time in senseless conversation (27:12).

Job now shares his thinking with his friends on two subjects—wickedness and wisdom. They had a great deal to say about these two. Now it is his turn. His comments on wickedness are pretty much a repetition of what has been said before. He agrees with his friends who have developed a picture of a wicked person as a rich man who oppresses the poor and widows and then lives in horror for fear of reprisal. And he further agrees that such a person will receive God’s judgment in due time (27:13-23).

In speaking of wisdom now Job proves that he has no friend in his understanding of wisdom (28:1-28). In these verses Job speaks of the marvelous genius of the human mind that can locate and mine precious metals, level mountains, and build dams. He

seems to anticipate the advanced technologies of all future time, and then goes on to say that even people who can do all those things cannot create, discover, buy, or understand the meaning of authentic wisdom. As brilliant as these achievements have been from the beginning of time, none of them gives us definitions of wisdom, for God alone understands it.

Then follows Job's God-given insight, "***Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding***" (28:28). In these words, he has reaffirmed the essentials of his faith. Yes, he believes in the justice and mercy of God, and he knows that it is through fear of God alone that wisdom is attained. Job's insight carry a powerful message for twenty-first century people; and their truth is just as up to date today as it was thousands of years ago, except that the technology wonders we take for granted would have been way beyond Job's imagination.

Space travel, communication satellites, laser surgery, organ transplants, solar power—all of these and much more are now a part of our daily routines. It is amazing the insights that God has given us. Yet none of these constitute authentic wisdom—it is still the fear of the Lord accompanied by turning our backs on evil that is the source of wisdom. It is not our genius but our knowledge of God that gives true meaning to life.

Having restated his beliefs, Job seems to pause again to give one of his friends the opportunity to respond to what he has said, but there is silence. There is nothing that Eliphaz or Bildad or Zohar could add to the discussion. This meant that Job was free to continue. And he does. Job has spoken about the essentials that hold his faith together. Now he describes the contradiction that tests his faith. In one of the most moving pictures in human literature he recalls the glory of his past and then describes the shame of his present condition.

In the opening of the Book of Job we were introduced to him as a righteous man of health, wealth, family, and fame. Now, in his own words we learn the details of the blessing which God had given him. We can identify with him as he says, "***Oh that I were as in months past***" (29:2). Then he goes on to spell out the past as he says it was then that "***God preserved me***" ... ***it was then 'his candle shined upon my head,' and it was then "the secret of God was upon my tabernacle [God blessed my home]"*** ... ***it was then "the Almighty was yet with me" and "my children were about me" ... it was then "I washed my steps with butter [my pathway was wet with cream or milk]"*** ... ***and it was then "the rock poured me out rivers of oil [the rocks were full of olive oil]"*** (29:2-6). In other words, this was a time when God was with him, when his family was intact, and when he had everything for a comfortable life.

As Job continued to explore his memories of past glory another scene fills his mind (29:7-17). He sees himself going to the city gate, taking his place in the seat of honor, and receiving the accolades of the young and old, princes and nobles alike. He remembers, too, that he did not have their respect mainly because of his wealth and power but because of his compassion for the poor, his right standing with God, and his sense of justice for the oppressed.

Somewhat different to Eliphaz's accusation that he oppressed the poor, Job remembers that he was actively involved in rescuing them from those who were taking cruel advantage of them (29:17). In other words, Job saw himself as a man who in the affairs of city life was attentive to the needs of people less fortunate than he was.

Even though in the past Job expressed his gratitude for God's blessings, he now realizes that he took them for granted. He admitted that he expected to die in comfort after living out a long life with health, wealth, and glory (29:18-20). How like Job most of us are! We, too, are guilty of taking God's blessings for granted. And the more blessings we have, the more we want and think we deserve. Then, if for whatever reason we do not have what we think we should, we complain and turn against God.

Another scene moves on to Job's memory-stage (29:21-25). He remembers when people everywhere in his part of the country looked him up and asked him for his wise counsel. With this scene we catch another glimpse into Job's soul. We see that his power and influence did not come from wealth or position but from the wise words and compassionate spirit that he made available to those in need.

Now, after wallowing in the glory of his past, Job turns to the shame of his present condition. No human drama is more grabbing. Whether from history, literature, theater, or the news, we are all moved by stories of the rise and fall of persons, institutions, and nations. But no human story is more powerful than the nosedive of Jesus Christ from the glory of heaven to the shame of the cross.

Paul captured the "emptying" of Jesus in his letter to the church at Philippi when he wrote, ***"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made Himself of no reputation and took upon Him the form of a servant [slave], and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross"*** (Phil. 2:5-8).

We have seen in our lessons that Job, too, was emptied of his glory. But there is a significant difference between Jesus and Job. Jesus voluntarily gave up His glory and took on the shame of the cross for our salvation. Job, on the other hand, suffered his shame involuntarily. Matter of fact, he believed that God had even become an enemy who attacked him for no understandable reason. Now, as we move ahead in this study, we are exposed to the raw edges of the extremes of Job's glory and his shame.

From the respect of all people, Job became the object of mockery by young hooligans (30:1-2) ... from a position of authority, he became powerless at the hands of fools (30:8) ... from great fame, Job became the butt of cruel jokes (30:9) ... from the protective comfort of home, he became the victim of terror (30:15) ... from the picture of health, Job became a bag of bones (30:17-18) ... from enjoying the presence of God, he became an abandoned person (30:20) ... from living under God's protection Job became the target of God's attack (30:21) ... from being a part of the congregation or assembly of God, Job was reduced to a companion of animals (30:28-29) ... and from the joy of beautiful and happy music, he became the player of sorrows (30:31).

Only someone who has known similar heights of glory and depths of shame can identify with Job's dilemma. He is totally perplexed by the contradiction between his circumstances and the teaching of justice that assured him of prosperity because of his righteousness. And so, it is that Job, like Jesus, can identify with all who weep and mourn.

But in the depths of his being, Job knows that his troubles are not the result of his sin. For this reason, he makes a bold move. He will exercise a special privilege of a person accused of crime before an ancient Eastern court of law—he will take a Public Oath of Innocence. He is willing to write the accusations against him on a sign which he will wear around his neck as he walks through the streets. Everyone he meets will have an opportunity to read the accusations and be a witness against him. It is a big risk, but Job is willing to take it in order to prove his innocence.

We have seen that Job has been accused throughout this discussion with his friends of just about every form of human sin—lust, deceit, covetousness, discrimination, neglect, greed, idolatry, vengeance, and selfishness. Eliphaz, in his last speech admitted that Job was a righteous man—outwardly—but he accused him of the secret sins of the rich and famous. It is these so-called “heart sins” that Job is willing to put on the sign that he will wear in public.

The “heart sins” or secret sins Job lists run something like this—looking at a woman with lust (31:1-4) ... being deceitful (31:5-8) ... coveting a neighbor’s wife (31:9-12) ... oppressing his servants (31:13-15) ... forgetting the poor, the widows, and orphans (31:16-23) ... trusting in wealth (31:24-28) ... being happy over the misfortune of his enemies (31:29-31) ... serving second best to strangers (31:31-32).

Understand now, that in the list of “heart sins” Job does not admit to being guilty of any of them. In each case he begins his description with the words, **“If I have ...”** He has no fear of public exposure. He knows deep inside he is not guilty.

Job next turns to God and makes one more plea for a hearing and for understanding, **“Oh that one would hear me! Behold, my desire is, that the Almighty would answer me” (31:35)**. Then Job gets carried away as he reacts to Bildad’s description of him as a worm. Instead, Job exalts himself as a son of man who sees himself entering the presence of God, **“As a prince I would go near Him” (31:37)**.

Finally, almost as an afterthought, Job adds one more “sin of the heart” to his list of possible accusations (31:38-40). In the rugged country east of the Jordan River good farm and pastureland was scarce. To waste or rape the land was an unforgivable sin. So, Job throws out another **“If”** challenge as he dares anyone to accuse him of doing anything that would damage the land in a way that would reduce the production of food on which their survival depended.

The closing words of Chapter 31 speak volumes, **“The words of Job are ended.”** He has said it all. Throughout this long discussion with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar he has wrestled with the religious thinking of his time. He has agonized over the criticism of his friends, even as he has struggled with God’s silence. Through it all Job felt very much alone. Yet he remained convinced that he was not guilty of sin even though he suffered the loss of social position, of family, and of personal wealth. Somehow his faith in God—a personal God—remained intact.

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