

Job 19

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Date: 19 February 2012

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[0 : 0 0] By this point, it seems quite clear that Job is in pain. If you've been traveling along with us as we've looked at Job, you are undoubtedly aware that Job has lost everything and is quite upset by this.

His laments are familiar. The profound uselessness of his friends is familiar. Perhaps we are even starting to grow tired of this story.

Just imagine if we hadn't skipped 13 of the first 18 chapters. Our chapter today gives us Job's response to Bildad, which we looked at last week.

And I think the stanzas work this way. Stanza 1 is verses 2 to 7. Then Job responds to the torment of his friends. Stanza 2, verses 8 to 20, he takes a hard look at the destruction of his life by God.

And in stanza 3, verses 21 to 22, he briefly turns back to his friends. So I'm going to take these first three stanzas together under the header, hopelessness.

[1 : 1 7] Then there's stanza 4, verses 23 to 29, where he states his hope. So let's dig in.

The first stanza, verses 2 to 7, are Job's appeal to his friends. He believes they've misunderstood him and his circumstances. So Bildad's more sort of academic, unfeeling, even cruel account of the wicked man and his implication that Job must therefore be a wicked man has, I think, gotten to Job a little bit here.

He's frustrated. Look at verse 2. How long will you torment me and break me in pieces with words? How long, friends, he's saying.

How long are you going to keep accusing me and saying things that are not only misrepresentations of what's going on, but actually hurtful? See, Job understands his situation very differently than the friends understand it.

He does not believe God is dealing with him on the basis of sort of simplistic theological laws, such as the wicked always suffer and the righteous always prosper, which is what Bildad and Eliphaz seem to have been arguing.

[2 : 4 3] Rather, Job has rejected this scheme, that his sin means his punishment is just, and that this sin means that punishment, and this sin means that punishment.

Job's actually rejected this scheme from the very beginning. He maintains in verse 4 that even if he has erred, see that there in verse 4?

Even if he has erred, his punishment does not quite fit in that scheme. Rather, by verses 6 and 7, he's identified God as tormenting him.

It's actually God who is attacking him. Know then that God has put me in the wrong and closed his net about me. Behold, I cry violence, but I am not answered.

I call for help, but there is no justice. He's saying that his punishment is way out of proportion to any possible sins he might have committed, and that God therefore needs to explain himself.

[3 : 5 8] The second stanza demonstrates just how abandoned Job feels at this point. Verses 8 to 12 draw on military metaphors.

God has become his adversary almost. But verses 13 to 19 capture his feelings in terms of social isolation. Look at them with me.

Starting in verse 13. His brothers, his relatives, servants and strangers, his wife, random children, and even his closest friends, all abhor him.

And he says so quite poetically. I'm particularly drawn to, my breath is strange to my wife. I'm a stench to the children of my own mother. I mean, he is abhorred by everyone around him.

And verse 20 returns to the notion that his own body is wasting away in rejection of him.

[5 : 04] So it's not just God. It's not just everyone around him. But his own body has rejected him. And so the cumulative effect of this picture he is painting is bleak.

And not actually all that unlike the picture that Bildad painted in the last chapter. Job knows that Bildad sees his pain.

Bildad can accurately describe and measure it. Yet the cause remains something of a disagreement.

Bildad looks to Job's wickedness. And Job looks to and points his finger at God. More than anything about his own state of righteousness, Job looks at his circumstances as the working of God.

And because Job's friends don't see it that way, they continue to insult and chase and accuse him. And in Job's mind, as we see in verses 21 and 22, he feels almost as abused and abandoned by them as he does by God.

[6 : 09] Hopelessness. And then the poem takes something of a turn. Job makes a surprising statement here.

I mean, he's been accusing God of tormenting him for 22 verses, really for 18 chapters, and then turns to God. And the rhetoric here shifts pretty dramatically.

Oh, that my words were written, verse 23. Oh, that they were inscribed in a book. Oh, that man, oh, that with an iron pen and lead, they were engraved in the rock forever.

Why? Why? Why is Job changing his rhetoric here? For I know that my Redeemer lives.

Verse 25. And at the last he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God. Whom shall I see for myself?

[7 : 19] And my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me. These are some of the most fascinating and frankly difficult verses in the whole book.

And it's the first hint in 19 chapters that Job sees something specific that gives him hope. What does he see?

Well, he sees a mediator. He sees a Redeemer. That's what he says. I mean, notice the repetition on sight.

He expects that with the coming of the Redeemer, he will be face to face with God. The Hebrew word here, goel, is an important word in the Bible. And it provides a sort of range of definitions that we might understand to be used here.

In human terms, the goel, the Redeemer, is the closest relative, the one who has the responsibility of restoring the rights of a person whose rights have been violated or avenging him.

[8 : 26] This includes everything from purchasing the kinsman out of slavery or purchasing back property that the kinsman has sold because of financial constraints.

It even includes, like, marrying the kinsman's widow if the kinsman and the widow had not produced an heir. There's also another use of goel that I think is compelling, and that is when it refers to God himself.

God is frequently referred to as a goel in places where, like, David in Psalm 19 refers to God as his goel, his Redeemer.

This term is especially important. It's used a couple dozen times in the later chapters of Isaiah. For example, when God refers to himself in Isaiah 43, 1.

If you want to turn there real quick. Isaiah 43, verse 1. But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel, fear not, for I have redeemed you.

[9 : 40] I have called you by name. You are mine. So this statement is a bit of a conundrum, I think, for Job's scholars.

He's accused God for 22 verses, and he desperately wants to be vindicated. And so he calls upon his goel, his Redeemer.

He actually expresses confidence that his Redeemer will stand up for him, will justify him before God and God's wrath.

Why is it a conundrum? Well, how can God be both the one who torments him, as Job makes clear in verses 1 to 22, and yet the one on whom Job counts to redeem him?

See, the grammar here, the rhetoric here in the chapter, all point to God not just being the one who torments, but the one who also redeems.

[10 : 44] Job is looking to be vindicated before God by God. On the surface, of course, that seems to make zero sense. Job composes this beautiful stanza of poetry to say just that, however.

That he holds in perfect balance a very personal understanding that God rightly brings wrath, including a warning to his friends in the last two verses. See that in 28 and 29?

And yet God is the one who ultimately will redeem him. The words of the hymn, his hope is built on nothing less. So, what does this mean for us?

Well, I think it means a few things. I think it should encourage us, whether it's a conundrum or not. In the face of God's certain and coming wrath, a much-deserved wrath, if we're completely honest about our sin, in whom shall we hope for redemption if not God?

In the face of challenges of this life, in whom shall we hope if not God? Second, I think Job's example is powerful.

[11 : 58] He could have looked anywhere to find a way through. He could have relied on his own human efforts to survive these horrible circumstances. He could have gone back to what seemed to work quite well back in chapter 1, his sacrificing scheme.

I mean, there are any number of alternatives he could have employed, but instead, he looked straight up into heaven and expressed his solitary hope that God will come and redeem him.

And I think this is the big application for us, because we like to rely on ourselves, really on anything other than God, when faced with Job-like, or even not especially Job-like circumstances.

We love to make ourselves feel better with the proverbial wisdom of Yahoo Answers and chicken soup for the soul. And Yahoo Answers, by the way, is, I think, only second to YouTube in terms of a place to find the most entertaining commentary of whack jobs.

But it's true. I mean, see if this one's familiar. God never gives you more than you can handle. Or the even less vaguely biblical, God helps those who help themselves.

[13 : 23] See, these are, I think, two sides of the same coin. The first, God never gives you more than you can handle, supposed to comfort us, right? We're supposed to believe that God is somehow up in heaven and looking down on us, just like he did with Job, and saying, he's kind of made me mad.

I'm going to send some punishment his way, but not too much. Nothing more than he can handle. Just enough. And of course, God will never send us more punishment than we can handle.

He will never send us worse circumstances than we can handle. I mean, that's very affirming, isn't it? That makes you feel good. No matter how bad I mess things up, no matter how big of a mess I create, God has enabled me to handle it.

The other side of the coin, God helps those who help themselves. That offers us the actual alternative, right? We've got bad circumstances. God seems to have struck us with some awful stuff.

Better start picking up the pieces, right? Time to work hard. You have only yourself to help you. If I can handle it, which is promised to me because God doesn't give us more than we can handle.

[14 : 45] If I can handle it, then I'd better start handling it. I mean, this is the great theological notion of bootstrapping. Pick yourself up by your bootstraps, right?

It's a way of talking about socioeconomic improvement using a metaphor of boots and their laces and an imagined feat of lifting oneself up off the ground by the straps of one's boots.

Or as James Joyce put it in Ulysses when he first published it, there were others who had forced their way up to the top from the lowest rung by the aid of their bootstraps.

The concept, of course, dates back to at least Horatio Alger, I think in like the 1890s, and his fictional rags-to-riches stories about young boys who worked their way out of poverty.

Of course, Alger was articulating a concept in literature that was later put to paper by the sociologist, who I'm sure is more familiar to all of you at the U of C, Max Weber, right?

[15 : 50] The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. And it's been a part of the American zeitgeist ever since, hasn't it? You can hardly look at a political election where somebody isn't, and it doesn't matter which side of the ideological divide they're on.

They are giving you the narrative of how they came from nothing, and they picked themselves up by their own bootstraps to become something important and worth voting for. Right?

Nearly every successful politician has done that. It turns into, we'd better, we should do better for ourselves. We should do better for our children.

And it's a good, right, and noble sentiment. We should work hard. Make the lives of those around us better. But, and this is, I think, the wonderful irony of the metaphor, picking oneself up by one's bootstraps is impossible.

I mean, it's kind of a ridiculous metaphor when you think about it. It doesn't matter how hard you pull on the straps of your boot. You are not going to lift yourself off the ground. All the hard work and all the determination in the world will not suddenly break you free of gravity.

[17 : 03] And the beauty of all this, of course, is that Job did not buy into these myths, these two sides of this coin, which you should just throw back on the ground right now.

He came face to face with a situation he knew he could not handle, the seemingly undeserved wrath of God. And rather than relying on the empty joys of an affirmational culture, not that we should confuse his friends with that, and rather than trying to pick himself up by his own bootstraps and just soldier on, he turned to the only place that he could possibly turn, the hope that God would not only be the one to destroy him, but the one to save him, the one to redeem him.

God will not give you more than you can handle. Job disagrees. And he disagrees because it's wrong. Of course God gives us more than we can handle.

This is the very essence of the gospel. So make no mistake, as you do battle with this world, as you fight the good fight of righteousness versus wickedness, as you live a life surrounded by evil, and with evil welling up even inside of you, you need a redeemer just like Job.

I need a redeemer just like Job. We need the grace that can only come from God. So when we face the much-deserved wrath of God one day, and we will, our only hope is not in our kinsmen, who like Job, will have abandoned us.

[18 : 51] It's not in ourselves, no matter how good we are at pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. Our only hope is in that of God himself, in the form of Jesus Christ, who redeemed us.

See, it's in his death and resurrection, the most glorious event we are about to celebrate in the table, that he has cleansed us from sin and freed us from the need to earn his favor and the results of inevitably failing.

For I know that my redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.

After my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for your Son, that in his death and resurrection you have redeemed us.

Give us great confidence, not in our own efforts, but in the hope that comes from faith in your redemptive act and your glorious sacrifice to save us.

[20 : 09] We pray this all in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.