

Job 31

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[0 : 00] Welcome to Holy Trinity Church. My name is Robert, and I have the privilege of opening up God's Word with you this evening. If you want to keep your finger in Job 31, we will be looking at that whole chapter this evening.

But first, let me pray. Great God in heaven, purify my heart and cleanse my lips, that your voice, that your voice may be heard.

Give us your spirit that we may understand your Word and love and do your will. To the glory of your name. Amen. First, let me say I really appreciate hearing you all say thanks be to God after the reading of the Word, because it is encouraging to me, especially on a night where the passage is one where it's so easy to not be thankful for it.

The theme tonight is a simple one. It's righteousness. And the structure of the poem in Job 31 is likewise simple.

Eight stanzas in which Job defends his personal righteousness or holiness. Rather than structure this sermon around each of those stanzas and talking about the standard of righteousness being held here by Job, I thought it might be a little more helpful to tackle some aspects of the poem as a whole.

[1 : 32] So we're going to look at, number one, its structure. Number two, its implications. And number three, its emphasis. So let's begin.

Number one, the structure of the poem. Before we can talk about the big picture, we need to understand the way this poem works. Let's look at the first stanza, verses one through four.

I've made a covenant with my eyes. How then could I gaze at a virgin? What would be my portion from God above and my heritage from the Almighty on high? Is not calamity for the unrighteous and disaster for the workers of iniquity?

Does not he see my ways? A number are all my steps. The first line carries a sense of if. And is followed by either a combination of a rhetorical question or a rhetorical question and an imprecation or curse.

Or sometimes simply just a curse. The sense of it is, I did this thing. How then could I do this other thing? Let something awful happen to me.

[2 : 47] Each of the rest of the stanzas makes this pattern more explicit. So, glance down very quickly at verses five, nine, thirteen, sixteen, twenty-four, twenty-nine, and thirty-eight.

I hope you all got that. But notice how each of these stanzas begins with an if statement. Or even a series of if statements.

And then is followed by a series of rhetorical questions and imprecations. Again, curses. Called down should the if statement prove true.

This is a particular kind of legal rhetoric. He's saying, if I can be proved to have done this sinful thing, what advantage could there possibly be for me?

Let God rain down his judgment upon me. Now, not all of the parts are uniform across all of the eight stanzas. That's for sure.

- [3 : 52] Sometimes he skips right from the if to the cursing. That's to be expected. But I think it's important to see that each of these stanzas sort of adopts this pattern.
- Second, I want you to look at the particular content of each stanza. Stanza one, starting in verse one. I've made a covenant with my eyes.
- How then could I gaze at a virgin? He's talking about the crime or the sin of lust. Stanza two, verse five. If I have walked with falsehood.
- He's talking about deceit or dishonesty. Stanza three, starting with verse nine. If my heart has been enticed toward a woman and I have lain in wait at my neighbor's door.
- He's talking about adultery. Covetous adultery. Stanza four, starting in verse 13. If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant when they brought a complaint against me.
- [4 : 56] He's talking about oppression. Stanza five, verse 16. If I have withheld anything that the poor desired or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, etc., etc.
- Mercilessness. Or I think he's really tackling a kind of selfishness. Stanza six, starting in verse 24. If I've made gold my trust, etc., etc.
- Greed. Idolatrous greed. Stanza seven. Rejoiced at the ruin of him who hated me. The Germans, I love the Germans, came up with the perfect word for this.
- Schadenfreude. Vindictiveness. Stanza eight. If my land has cried out against me. He's talking about exploitation.
- And within each of these stanzas, there are several other if statements, particularly toward the end, covering the sins of inhospitality. Inhospitality?
- [5 : 57] I don't know. Hypocrisy and idolatry. Job is not offering himself up to a series of examinations here.
- This is important to see in the context. He's not offering himself up to a series of examinations to see if he has sinned. There is no doubt in his mind what his state of righteousness is.
- We've seen it since chapter three in this series. Job is claiming that he is innocent of the possible charges laid out here in chapter 31. He's claiming to be innocent.
- He has not lusted or deceived or oppressed or exploited, etc. Rather, Job's argument is that he has been righteous. The immediate context makes this abundantly clear.
- The speech really begins back in chapter 29, which is a catalog of Job talking about how good of a guy he is to the people around him. And then in chapter 30, it turns to a re-examination of his plight, his suffering, and hitting a high point with verses 19 to 21 in chapter 30.
- [7 : 09] Let's turn over there real quick. God has cast me into the mire, and I've become like dust and ashes. I cry to you for help, and you do not answer me.
- I stand, and you only look at me. You have turned cruel to me. With the might of your hand, you persecute me. That it is persecution from God and not punishment depends on Job's claim to righteousness.
- And so the speech ends with chapter 31, a catalog of all the sins Job did not commit. With no shadow of a doubt in his mind or a hint of doubt in his words, Job declares himself innocent in this court.
- What are the implications of this? So number two, implications. The implications of a passage like this can be hard for us. I think they were probably hard for Job, and certainly hard for Job's friends.
- It would be hard for anyone. I mean, we were told at several points early in the book that Job is blameless and upright, feared God, and turned away from evil.

[8 : 20] And so in chapter 31, we shouldn't be surprised that Job is articulating an incredibly high and, frankly, unreachable standard of righteousness.

And the implication then is that we, as followers of God, are also to be keeping this high standard of righteousness. The New Testament doesn't back down from this idea.

Matthew 5, 48. Jesus talking to his disciples, You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. How about 1 Peter?

For those of us who have been born again, we are called to be holy, just as God is himself holy. It's 1 Peter 1, 13 to 16, if you're curious.

And there he's actually citing something that pops up in Leviticus two or three times. So, you might be thinking to yourself right now, Wait a minute, Kenny. You got this all wrong.

[9 : 27] Sounds like you're saying that Job was sinless, and that we, as Christians, are also supposed to be sinless. Well, that's not quite what I'm saying.

But it's close. I don't think Job is necessarily sinless in the Pauline sense. I think this for a handful of reasons. First, there's the witness of the whole Bible.

We would never want to understand Job apart from the rest of Scripture. And so, despite what he says here, I don't think he is blameless enough that he merits God's favor.

I think that can be argued pretty clearly from Paul in the New Testament. Second, I don't think that's actually what Job is necessarily claiming.

He's speaking here in poetry, a medium which tends toward stating complex ideas and concepts in more definite terms than is really possible.

[10 : 29] Though, if he were claiming total perfection, it's possible to say he's also overstating his case. He certainly wouldn't be the first one in this book to overstate his case.

Third, I don't think Job's intention is to argue total perfection on his part because he's actually already made room on a few occasions, 920, 1326, and 1904, for the possibility that, yes, in fact, he has sinned.

And fourth, I think the structure of this speech is suggestive. I mean, again, remember, he starts in 29, showing himself to be a relatively good guy in the community. Chapter 30, he talks about the depth of his suffering and how it is out of proportion to his goodness.

And so chapter 31 here is not so much a blanket claim to righteousness as it is a comparison back to chapter 30.

Hey, my righteousness means I deserve better than what I'm getting in light of 30. It's not total righteousness, I think. Job defends himself here, not in absolute terms, but in contrast to the extremity of his suffering in chapter 30.

[11 : 48] And so the argument then, I think, is this. He doesn't deserve this level of punishment. He doesn't deserve the magnitude of suffering he has experienced in this book.

The loss of property, the death of family, and the destruction of his own health. God's apparent anger toward him is out of proportion to what he deserves, is his argument.

With that said, we still have to wrestle with the other question. Is this calling us to perfection? Is it calling us to sinlessness?

Is that, in fact, what I'm going to call, number three, the emphasis of the poem? Yes. The emphasis of the passage seems to be a catalog of actions, some simply within the confines of the mind, by which we are invited to measure our righteousness.

Job's claims here are an example for us, a standard to which we must hold ourselves as Christians. And I would invite you to do so this week, to commit to considering these sins.

[13 : 06] Many of these sins, because they only show in the mind, I think, are very easy to commit in the darkness, in the shadows, away from the gaze of other Christians. And I think, especially in a place like this university, that prizes so highly the life of the mind, that's the easiest place to give in to temptation.

And so we need to, all the more, examine ourselves. Stanza one was lust. Our culture, young men, does not make this one easy on us.

But that doesn't lessen the standard. And frankly, it's not just for men. It can be a problem for anyone. Stanza two, deceit and dishonesty.

In a culture driven by success, misrepresenting ourselves, as better than we are, is a constant temptation. Stanza three, adultery. Yes, Jesus relates this to lust, but again, this gets at the notion of sexual purity, and in an age like today, of inconsequential sex, outside of the bounds of marriage.

This may come as a shock to some of the students, but sex outside of marriage is a sin. Stanza four, oppression.

[14 : 30] We seek our own advantage over the welfare of others constantly. Stanza five, mercilessness and selfishness. How do we treat those less fortunate than we are?

Are we people of mercy and compassion? Or are we only caring for ourselves? Stanza six, greed. Do we worship at the idol of wealth?

Have we oriented our studies and our career trajectories around the pursuit of riches or success or a good reputation? idolatry of any sort.

Stanza seven, vindictiveness. God may give us justice in thwarting our enemies or ruin our sin, those who sin against us in our midst.

Do we feel that momentary surge of joy? Or do we mourn the loss of an opportunity for repentance and reconciliation?

[15 : 33] Do we care for other people who hate us or only care what others think of us? Stanza eight, exploitation.

I love it that this one made the list. Because I don't think we talk about it enough in Christian circles. Yes, how are we stewarding creation? Do we exploit the land and those who work it?

The emphasis I think here is clear. Job is a model for us in demonstrating a high standard of righteousness, a standard we are to pursue as Christians. Can we achieve this standard?

No, not on our own. We are called to holiness, to perfection, to sinlessness, as new creations. But we do not get there on our own merits.

We get there through only Jesus Christ. Jesus, like Job, was a perfect example of righteousness. But unlike Job, Jesus did not only provide an example, but he provided a means.

[16 : 38] He is both our chief model of perfection, having faced all the temptations of humanity, including lust and greed and deception, but having not sinned.

And he is also our means to living in perfection, having died in order to take the penalty for our sins. If you haven't believed that, if this is a new idea for you, consider it now.

Christ died for you that you might be saved. And in being saved, that you might become his righteousness. Second Corinthians 5.21.

For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And I think even more clearly in Philippians 3, 8 and 9.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through the faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

[18 : 02] To the believers in the room, yes, perfect righteousness is available to us, but only through the gospel. Jesus died to take away the sin of the world and rose again that we might live with him in perfection.

The gospel by which we are saved is the gospel by which we are called to live. So as you consider the sins listed here in the coming week, and as you realize that there is hardly a one that you have not committed, remember the gospel.

As the communion liturgy, which we will say later, states, Christ died for you. So as we feed on him in our hearts by faith, we ought to remember that it is in thanksgiving.

If you have truly wrestled with the depth of your sin and the grace of Jesus Christ in rescuing you from its penalty, how could you feel anything other than gratitude?

How could you want to live in any other way than the righteousness to which we have been called? Yes, we will not get to something that looks like perfection in this life, but through Christ Jesus, we have it nevertheless.

[19 : 22] Yes, we will continue to sin, but through Christ Jesus, we keep moving toward righteousness. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, thank you that you sent your Son to die for us, taking away the sin, taking away the penalty, and because of your resurrection, taking away the fear of death.

Help us this week, Lord, to see clearly those sins that linger. And please remove them. Help us to kill those sins in gratitude for your saving act, that you may be glorified in our lives.

We pray this in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.