

Act IV Part I
JOB'S FINAL SPEECH
JOB 29-31

Introduction to Job 29-42

In Acts One to Three the author has taken us through three cycles of dialogue. Many interesting points have been raised, but the problem of the suffering of the innocent is no nearer to a solution. Chapter 28 has wrapped up these first three Acts, and could appear at first sight to act as a conclusion. However, what is wanting is a dialogue between Job and God. Job's three companions withdraw to the side of the stage, leaving Job alone to remember, to proclaim his sufferings, and to declare his innocence in his final speech (Chapters 29 to 31). Unseen by Job, God is listening from his heavenly balcony, and in the end Job succeeds in getting a response from God (Chapters 38 to 41).

A later writer has inserted his reflections in a speech by Elihu in chapters 32 to 37. It would be better to treat it as an interesting appendix, for where it stands it interrupts the movement of the book and lessens its impact.

From the Prologue, we know that Job is innocent, and we know that God cares for him and is attentive to him. Job proclaims his innocence, and is profoundly shaken by what he perceives as God's 'absence'. This goes to the heart of his suffering.

Job begins by recalling the past when he experienced God's closeness. He goes on to speak once more of his present agony. Finally, he reaffirms his innocence.

In this nostalgic remembrance of the way things were, we are given an insight into the ways in which Job's goodness (mentioned in general terms in the Prologue) was expressed – especially in works of mercy. We are also given a description of how his life was blessed (also mentioned briefly in the Prologue). The central aspect of this blessedness was his experience of God's friendship. He was also highly respected.

Job has been complaining that God is watching every step he takes so as to inflict punishment on him. Here he recalls the days when God watched over him to protect and bless him.

On verse 3 compare:

It is you who light my lamp; YHWH,
my God, lights up my darkness.

– Psalm 18:28

When I sit in darkness, YHWH will be
a light to me.

– Micah 7:8

Job is remembering the days when his life was full of fruit, blessed with a happy family and with God as an intimate guest in his home. Verse 6 uses milk and oil as symbols of material prosperity.

In verses 7-10 we move from the domestic to the public arena.

There is a parallel to this in the Book of Wisdom:

Because of Wisdom I shall have glory
among the multitudes and honour in
the presence of the elders, though I
am young. I shall be found keen in
judgment, and in the sight of rulers I
shall be admired. When I am silent
they will wait for me, and when I
speak they will give heed; if I speak
at greater length, they will put their
hands on their mouths.

– Wisdom 8:10-12

¹Job again took up his discourse and said:

**²Oh, that I were as in times past,
as in the days when God watched
over me;**

**³when his lamp shone over my head,
and by his light I walked through
the darkness!**

**⁴As I was in the prime of my life,
when God was an intimate friend
in my tent,**

**⁵the Almighty was still with me,
and my children were around me!**

**⁶My feet were washed with milk,
and the rock poured out for me
streams of oil.**

**⁷When I went out to the gate of the
city,**

and took my seat in the square,

**⁸the young men saw me and
withdrew,**

**and the aged rose up and remained
standing,**

**⁹the nobles refrained from talking,
putting their hand to their mouth,**

**¹⁰the voices of princes were hushed,
and their tongues stuck to the roof
of their mouths.**

Nostalgia for the past

**¹¹The ear that heard me was pleased with me,
the eye that saw me approved of me.**

**¹²I came to the rescue of the poor who begged
for help,
and the orphan who had no one to
defend him,**

**¹³I received the blessing of the beggar,
and the heart of the widow sang for joy;**

**¹⁴I clothed myself again and again in justice,
and righteousness was my mantle and
turban.**

**¹⁵I was eyes to the blind,
and feet to the lame.**

**¹⁶I was a father to the needy,
and I championed the cause of the stranger.**

**¹⁷I broke the fangs of the unrighteous,
and made them drop their prey from their
teeth.**

**¹⁸I thought, 'I shall die in my nest,
with days as numberless as the sands.'**

**¹⁹My roots spread out to drink in the waters,
all night the dew covered my branches;**

**²⁰my prestige grew with me,
and my bow renewed its strength in my
hand.**

**²¹They listened to me with joyous
expectation,
attentive in silence to my counsel;**

**²²after I spoke they had nothing more to say,
my words dropped upon them like dew.**

**²³They waited for them as for the early rains,
they drank them in as the fields drink in
the late rains.**

**²⁴Seeing me, they smiled as if it were too
good to be true,
and they did not let go one of my radiant
glances.**

**²⁵I showed them the way, and sat as chief,
enthroned like a king with his escort.
I guided them, and they let themselves be
guided by me.**

Job's reputation was based on his justice and mercy:

Job is defending himself against the false accusations levelled at him by Eliphaz (22:6-9). The Psalmist writes:

Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.

– Psalm 68:5

God delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.

\ He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

– Psalm 72:12-14

Clothing (verse 14) is important as a statement of one's state.

Compare Paul:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

– Colossians 3:12, 14

Breaking teeth (verse 17) is used in Psalm 3:7 and 58:6 for the exercise of justice against those who prey upon the innocent.

His home was impregnable, like an eagle's nest perched high on a mountain (verse 18).

Having recorded the way things were, Job goes on to complain about his present situation. Persecution has replaced respect. Where he once experienced blessing, now he has nothing but suffering, and where he once experienced God's intimacy, now God is hostile to him.

1. Banished from the community because of his condition, Job finds himself mocked by vagrants who live on the margins of the community.

- ¹But now they make sport of me,
those who are younger than I,
whose fathers my sheep dogs would have disdained
to include in my flock,
²whose arms would have been of no use to me,
lacking as they are in any strength.
³Emaciated from hunger and want, grazing on the open plain,
they wander by night in the desolate wasteland,
⁴nibbling at mallows and the bark of trees,
seeking nourishment from juniper roots.
⁵They are driven out from society,
people shout after them as after a thief.
⁶In the gullies of wadis they must live,
in holes in the ground, and in the rocks.
⁷Among the bushes they bray;
under the nettles they huddle together.
⁸A senseless, disreputable brood,
they have been whipped out of the land.
⁹And now they mock me in song;
I am a byword to them.
¹⁰They abhor me, they keep aloof from me;
they do not hesitate to spit in my face.**

2. To mockery they add physical abuse.

- ¹¹Because God has loosed my bowstring and humbled me,
they have cast off restraint in my presence.
¹²On my right hand the rabble rise up;
they set up ways to get rid of me.
¹³They break up my path, they conspire to destroy me;
and no one restrains them.
¹⁴As through a wide breach they burst;
they rush on like an avalanche.
¹⁵Terrors break over me;
my honour is dissipated by the wind,
and my prosperity vanishes like a cloud.**

Job's present desperation

3. Pain and suffering

¹⁶And now I wish to give vent to my feelings:
days of affliction have me in their grip.

¹⁷The night racks my bones,
and the pain that gnaws at me takes no respite.

4. God is hostile to him

¹⁸Violently he seizes me by my clothing
he grasps me by the collar of my tunic.

¹⁹He hurls me into the mire,
and covers me with dust and ash.

²⁰I cry to You for help, but you take no notice;
I keep trying, and you merely look at me.

²¹You have turned cruel to me;
with the might of your arm you attack me.

²²You lift me up. I hang there suspended,
and you toss me about in the roar of the storm.

²³I know that you have set me aside for death,
for the place assigned for all living.

5. The injustice of it all

²⁴Does not everyone stretch out his hand to the destitute,
or cry for help in misfortune?

²⁵Did I not weep for those who were oppressed?
Was not my soul grieved for the poor?

²⁶But when I looked for good, evil came;
and when I waited for light, darkness came.

²⁷My inward parts are in turmoil, and are never still;
days of affliction come to meet me.

²⁸I go about in gloom, far from the sun;
I stand up in the assembly and cry for help.

²⁹I have become a brother to the jackals,
a companion of ostriches.

³⁰My skin turns black and falls from me,
and my bones burn with fever.

³¹My lyre plays a dirge,
and my pipe accompanies a lament.

Job declares his innocence under oath (31:1-38)

- ¹I have made a covenant with my eyes
never to fix my gaze upon a young woman.
²And yet, what destiny is reserved for me from heaven by God,
what kind of inheritance do I have from the Almighty on high?
³It seems that he has reserved for me a criminal's disgrace,
an evildoer's ruin.
⁴Does he not see my ways,
and count all my steps?

In verses 5-6 Job begins a series of oaths.

- ⁵If I have walked with falsehood,
if my foot has hurried to deceit –
⁶let me be weighed in a just balance,
and let God test my integrity!

- ⁷If my steps have turned aside from the way,
following the whims of my eyes,
or if my hands have held onto something soiled,
⁸then let me sow, and another eat;
and let my shoots be rooted out.

- ⁹If I have allowed myself to be seduced by a married woman,
and I have lain in wait at my neighbour's door,
¹⁰then let my wife be used by another,
and let other men kneel over her!

Verses 11-12 have the appearance of a comment from a later scribe, keen to underline the reprehensible nature of the conduct repudiated by Job.

- ¹¹(That would be a heinous crime;
a criminal offense;
¹²a passion that devours even to the depths,
consuming all one's senses.)

- ¹³If I have trampled down the rights of my male or female slaves,
when they brought a complaint against me,
¹⁴what then shall I do when God rises up to pass judgment?
When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?

- ¹⁵Did not He who made me in the womb make them also?
Did not the same One fashion us in the womb?
¹⁸He raised me from my infancy like a father
and from my mother's womb he guided me.

Verse 18 fits better here.

Job's merciful deeds

Job goes on to recount his deeds of mercy.

¹⁶If I have withheld anything that the poor desired,
if I have let the tears of the widow fall in vain,
¹⁷if I have eaten my fill alone,
without sharing my food with the orphan,
¹⁹if I have seen a beggar without clothing,
or a poor person without covering,
²⁰and have not received his thanks,
when he enjoys the warmth of the fleece of my lambs;
²¹if I have raised my hand against the innocent,
when he counted on the support of the tribunal,
²²then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder,
and let my arm break away from its socket.
²³For the terror of God would overwhelm me,
and his majesty would reduce me to nothing.

Verses 38-40 fit better here (Pope puts them after verse 8).

³⁸If my land has cried out against me,
and its furrows have wept together;
³⁹if I have eaten its yield without paying my dues,
suffocating those who work the land;
⁴⁰let thorns grow instead of wheat,
and foul weeds instead of barley.
²⁴I swear that I have not placed my trust in gold,
nor sought my security in precious metals;
²⁵I have not found pleasure in my great wealth,
in the fortune built up by my own hands.
²⁶Looking at the sun shining in its glory,
or the moon moving in splendour,
²⁷has not secretly seduced me,
and I have never thrown them a kiss.

Like verses 11-12 verse 28 appears to be an inserted comment

²⁸(This too is a crime to be punished by the judges,
for I would have been false to the God of heaven.)
²⁹I have not taken pleasure in the ruin of my enemies,
or exulted when evil overtook them,
³⁰nor have I let my mouth sin
by wishing for their death.

This is demonstrated by Job's actions at the end of the story (see Job 42:7-19).

Pope understands verses 31-32 as Job's protecting the stranger from being sexually abused (see pages 236-237). There are allusions to Sodom (see Genesis 19:2) and to Judges 19:20.

³¹I swear that when those sharing my tent ever said,
'If only we might be sated with his flesh!'

³²I have not left the stranger to lodge in the street;
I have opened my doors to the traveller.

³³It is not as if I have tried to conceal my transgressions as Adam did,
hiding my iniquity in my bosom;

³⁴through fear of the shouting of the multitude,
or the contempt of my clan,
never did I stay hiding in my house, saying nothing.

³⁵Oh, that I had one to hear me!
Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!
Let my adversary put his allegations in writing!

³⁶Surely I would wear it on my shoulder;
I would bear it like a crown;

³⁷I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him.

³⁸The words of Job are ended.

