

“I Will Maintain My Righteousness”

Texts: Job 22:1-27:23; Romans 3:21-26

It started in chapter three with Job’s heart-felt lament. Then his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar ended their silence, apparently seeking to comfort their suffering friend. But it soon became clear that Job’s friends were not trying to comfort him as much as they were trying to confront him. And Job will have none of it. And so a dialogue between friends quickly escalates into a full-blown argument. Job defiantly rejects the self-righteous counsel from his friends, all of whom believe that the reason why Job is suffering has to do with the fact that Job had committed some secret sin which brought down the retributive justice of God upon his head. Job not only denies he has committed such a sin, he rejects their analysis of the facts at hand. He will continue to defend himself and his honor and proclaim his innocence.

We now wrap up what is described as the “debate” section of Job, as we turn to the third and final cycle of these ever-intensifying speeches from Job’s friends, along with Job’s increasingly defiant replies. What had been only hinted at in the opening cycle of speeches—that Job must have committed some secret sin—is now fully out in the open. Not only do Job’s friends openly accuse him of wrong-doing, they regard Job’s denial of having sinned and his rejection of their understanding of the principle of divine retribution as concrete evidence that Job is not the righteous man people think that he is. Job’s audacious defense of his good name, and his complete rejection of his friend’s position that God necessarily punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous in this life, strikes all of Job’s friends as a denial of a fundamental theological truth. Job’s friends cannot understand why Job fails to see the obvious! While it is true that God must punish the wicked, what Job is starting to realize and that his friends do not see, is that God may have a purpose in the suffering of the righteous, which is not connected to a principle of retributive justice. Something Job’s friends refuse to even consider.

As we have seen throughout the earlier chapters of Job, keeping the context and structure of this book in mind is absolutely essential if we are to understand the book’s primary message, which is that Job’s suffering points us ahead to the greater Job, Jesus Christ, in whom all the mysteries of God’s providence will be finally and fully revealed. Based upon the heavenly scene in the prologue (Job 1-2), we know the reason why Job is suffering. Thinking that Job is a self-righteous hypocrite, Satan asked God’s permission to take away Job’s possessions and his family, and when that failed to expose Job’s supposed hypocrisy, Satan asks God to take away Job’s health. Thus, Job must undergo a trial by ordeal so as to establish one of the fundamental principles of redemptive history, that Satan will be defeated by the suffering and perfect obedience of Jesus Christ.

But neither Job nor his friends know this to be the case. The great irony is that while Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar relentlessly seek to convince Job of their understanding of the nature of things—that God must punish the wicked in this life—Job has moved on from this misunderstanding of God’s justice, to probe the deeper mysteries of God’s providence. The depths and degree of his suffering have pushed Job well beyond the superficial and self-righteous judgments of his friends. While Job is becoming convinced that what he needs is a mediator (a *go el*, a kinsman redeemer, who will argue his case before God on his behalf), the great irony is that all three of his friends think Job is a hypocrite because Job denies their faulty understanding of God’s retributive justice. This is the same assessment of Job made by Satan, as

we saw in the prologue. And so in the name of defending God and his honor, just as Job's wife had done, Job's friends are actually doing the Devil's bidding, when they insist that Job is no true servant of God, seen in the fact of his suffering and in his stubborn refusal to heed the counsel of his friends.¹

Despite the depths of his pain and despair, in the previous round of speeches we have witnessed Job "get his dander up". While his friends continue to ignore his feelings and don't demonstrate even a modicum of compassion to their friend, Job's faith and hope are ever so slowly being rekindled throughout these cycles of dialogue. In Job 19:23-27, we hear these remarkable words from Job, "*Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever! I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes-I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!*"

Job wants an abiding record of his innocence written in stone so that long after he is dead and gone his good name will live on. Despite the repeated assertions from his friends that the suffering of the wicked is proof that their understanding of the retributive principle of divine justice is the right one, instead Job's eyes are firmly fixed on the future. Job longs for a mediator. He not only knows his redeemer lives; Job firmly believes that one day this same redeemer will stand upon the earth and that Job will see him with his own eyes. Job longs for that day of resurrection when his diseased flesh will be raised from the grave imperishable. It is clear that Job's understanding of these matters now greatly exceeds the faulty application of the principle of retributive justice on the part of his friends. The sufferer is becoming wise, while those who think themselves to be wise reveal the depths of their folly.

And so with that we now come to Job 22 and cycle three—round one, which includes the final speech from Eliphaz, along with Job's response.

Apparently realizing that Job is not at all impressed with his arguments that the wicked live miserable lives and die young, Eliphaz greatly ratchets up the intensity of his words. He is obviously worried about Job's soul. Sadly, Eliphaz has utterly failed to grasp either the substance of Job's arguments, nor is Eliphaz able to empathize with Job. Job does not need a theological lecture, but compassion from his friends. Then again, since Eliphaz thinks Job is self-deceived, instead he tries to point out that Job's assertion that God does not care, only proves the point that he has been trying to make all along—Job is not the upright and blameless man everyone has thought him to be.

The growing intensity of this debate is clearly seen in verses 1-4 of Job 22. "*Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied: `Can a man be of benefit to God? Can even a wise man benefit him? What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous? What would he gain if your ways were blameless? `Is it for your piety that he rebukes you and brings charges against you?`"* According to Eliphaz, Job is not being punished because he fears God. No, he's being punished because he is guilty of blasphemy, for stating that God is indifferent to human behavior—good or evil. Job, supposedly, has denied the principle of retributive justice. For that alone, he should be punished by God.

Then in verses 5-11, Eliphaz openly accuses Job of being a sinner. "*Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? You demanded security from your brothers for no reason; you stripped men of their clothing, leaving them naked. You gave no water to the weary and you withheld food from the*

¹ Kline, "Job," p. 477.

hungry, though you were a powerful man, owning land-an honored man, living on it. And you sent widows away empty-handed and broke the strength of the fatherless. That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you, why it is so dark you cannot see, and why a flood of water covers you.” Having no proof whatsoever of any wrong-doing on Job’s part, Eliphaz directly accuses Job of misusing his wealth so as to exploit the poor. In Eliphaz’s flawed thinking, this explains why Job’s wealth was taken from him. Not knowing that Job’s trial by ordeal has its roots in God’s redemptive purposes and not in some sin Job has supposedly committed,² Eliphaz’s remarks are not only patently false, they are utterly cruel. The intended comforter has become an accuser—a mouthpiece of Satan.

Thinking that what his suffering friend needs most is to be reminded of God’s greatness so that he will repent, in verses 12-20 Eliphaz turns Job’s words on their head, putting blasphemies in Job’s mouth which he never uttered.³ While Job has complained about feeling like he is under God’s constant surveillance, without being able to see the hand of God in his afflictions, Eliphaz turns this into an argument that Job’s view separates God from the world.⁴ Eliphaz drones on, “*is not God in the heights of heaven? And see how lofty are the highest stars! Yet you say, 'What does God know? Does he judge through such darkness? Thick clouds veil him, so he does not see us as he goes about in the vaulted heavens.' Will you keep to the old path that evil men have trod? They were carried off before their time, their foundations washed away by a flood. They said to God, 'Leave us alone! What can the Almighty do to us?' Yet it was he who filled their houses with good things, so I stand aloof from the counsel of the wicked. The righteous see their ruin and rejoice; the innocent mock them, saying, 'Surely our foes are destroyed, and fire devours their wealth.'”*

This is not what Job said, nor what he meant. Eliphaz hasn’t been listening. What Job did do is tell his friends how he feels—like God has abandoned him. But his friends never once put themselves in Job’s place. They see Job’s comments as fruit of a hidden, dark side of his life, filled with sin. Given their understanding of God’s retributive justice, there can be no other explanation—unless they are wrong. But they are not wrong, because they are not the ones suffering. Job knows that he is innocent and that he has committed no secret sin. He cannot understand why all of this has come to pass. He also knows that righteous people suffer and that wicked people prosper. He has never denied that God must punish the wicked. Job is beginning to understand that God may indeed have a purpose in his own suffering and that God’s punishment of sinners and rewarding of the righteous may not take place until the day of judgment. It may well be that we cannot tell by observation whether people are righteous or sinful, solely based upon whether they suffer or prosper—the erroneous view of Job’s friends.

Since Eliphaz cannot understand how a blameless and upright man could say the things that Job has said, he is clearly concerned for the state of Job’s soul. If Job wants to be delivered from his predicament he needs to stop arguing with his friends, heed their instruction, and repent of his sins. This concern for his friend, certainly explains why in verses 21-30, Eliphaz urges Job to seek the mercy of God, before it is too late. “*Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you. Accept instruction from his mouth and lay up his words in your heart. If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored: If you remove wickedness far from your tent and assign your nuggets to the dust, your gold of*

² Kline, “Job,” p. 478.

³ Kline, “Job,” p. 478

⁴ Andersen, *Job*, p. 204.

Ophir to the rocks in the ravines, then the Almighty will be your gold, the choicest silver for you. Surely then you will find delight in the Almighty and will lift up your face to God. You will pray to him, and he will hear you, and you will fulfill your vows. What you decide on will be done, and light will shine on your ways. When men are brought low and you say, 'Lift them up!' then he will save the downcast. He will deliver even one who is not innocent, who will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands."

Again, Eliphaz is speaking the truth. But the issue is that his words do not apply to Job.⁵ Job has not committed some secret sin. God has already told us that even in the depths of his despair, Job has not sinned by charging God with wrong-doing. Furthermore, Eliphaz speaks with a self-righteous, Pharisaical tone, based upon the erroneous assumption that Job is wrong and that Eliphaz absolutely has it down pat. Given Eliphaz's condescending attitude, we wonder how his own words must have come back to haunt him, when at the conclusion of the story (Job 42:7-9), we learn that Job must make intercession with God on behalf of his friends.⁶ Job will be vindicated in the end!

In his response (Job 23), Job completely ignores Eliphaz's speech, returning to the themes of his prior speech in Job 21. What strikes Job is the great mystery of God's providence. Job cannot see what his three friends think is self-evident. Job cannot understand why the righteous suffer, nor why the wicked prosper. But he knows he has not sinned and he digs in his heels all the more against the notion that his own suffering is divine retribution. Only a person who is innocent puts up this kind of fight. This is why in Job 23:2-9, Job wants to appear before God so as to be vindicated. What troubles Job is that it seems to him as though God cannot be found.⁷ *"Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say. Would he oppose me with great power? No, he would not press charges against me. There an upright man could present his case before him, and I would be delivered forever from my judge. `But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him."*

But God knows where to find Job. In verses 10-17, Job continues to defend his conduct. *"But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold. My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his way without turning aside. I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread. `But he stands alone, and who can oppose him? He does whatever he pleases. He carries out his decree against me, and many such plans he still has in store. That is why I am terrified before him; when I think of all this, I fear him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me. Yet I am not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers my face."* If Job has not sinned, and if the righteous suffer in this life, then Job realizes that he's run directly into the mystery of God's sovereign decree which determines whatsoever comes to pass. The thought of this strikes Job with terror. Yet, he must speak in his defense!

If God's retributive justice cannot be reduced to the simplistic formulas of his three friends, then why do the righteous suffer and the wicked go unpunished? What purpose does God have in all of this? Job

⁵ Andersen, *Job*, p. 205.

⁶ Kline, "Job," p. 478.

⁷ Kline, "Job," p. 478.

continues in verses 1-12 of Job 24, “*Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days? Men move boundary stones; they pasture flocks they have stolen. They drive away the orphan's donkey and take the widow's ox in pledge. They thrust the needy from the path and force all the poor of the land into hiding. Like wild donkeys in the desert, the poor go about their labor of foraging food; the wasteland provides food for their children. They gather fodder in the fields and glean in the vineyards of the wicked. Lacking clothes, they spend the night naked; they have nothing to cover themselves in the cold. They are drenched by mountain rains and hug the rocks for lack of shelter. The fatherless child is snatched from the breast; the infant of the poor is seized for a debt. Lacking clothes, they go about naked; they carry the sheaves, but still go hungry. They crush olives among the terraces; they tread the winepresses, yet suffer thirst. The groans of the dying rise from the city, and the souls of the wounded cry out for help. But God charges no one with wrongdoing.*” Job does not understand. How can God allow the strong to exploit the weak? When will judgment befall them? Why? When? How? None of this fits with Job’s hope in a coming redeemer.

It is not until we come to Job 24:22-25 that Job’s “thinking out loud,” comes to its logical conclusion. “*But God drags away the mighty by his power; though they become established, they have no assurance of life. He may let them rest in a feeling of security, but his eyes are on their ways. For a little while they are exalted, and then they are gone; they are brought low and gathered up like all others; they are cut off like heads of grain. If this is not so, who can prove me false and reduce my words to nothing?*” Yes, the wicked will get what is coming to them! No doubt, there is truth in what his friends have been saying. God will judge the wicked who exploit others. What Job cannot yet answer is that question which has haunted him from the beginning. None of this applies to him. And yet, why is he suffering?⁸

In Job 25, we have the very short and final speech from Bildad, along with Job’s response.

After three increasingly heated exchanges, Job and his friends have clearly run out of steam. But like trains passing on parallel tracks, Job and Eliphaz have been speaking past each other. The same holds true for the speeches of Bildad and Zophar. The wisdom of Job’s friends can take them no farther than their own observation and their misguided view that the wicked live miserable lives and die young. Job has heard their case and has repeatedly pointed out the flaws of this argument, although he himself is still struggling to come to terms with the mysteries of God’s providence.

This time Bildad has very little to say, merely parroting Eliphaz. Most notably, Bildad completely avoids Job’s challenge in verse 24 of the previous chapter altogether—“*who can prove me false?*” Bildad does not even try, and Zophar does not even speak, something noted by Job later on in 29:22—“*After I had spoken, they spoke no more; my words fell gently on their ears.*” So the heated argument abruptly grinds to a halt with the lame words from Bildad recorded in Job 25: “*Then Bildad the Shuhite replied: Dominion and awe belong to God; he establishes order in the heights of heaven. Can his forces be numbered? Upon whom does his light not rise? How then can a man be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure? If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his eyes, how much less man, who is but a maggot—a son of man, who is only a worm!*” In contrast to the glories of the heavens, Job is but a worm of a man. For Bildad, Job’s situation is plain. God is holy and must punish sin. Since Job is obviously being punished for his sins, Job is not a righteous man. Simply repeating the same thing over and over will have no impact upon Job, who has heard it all before.

⁸ Andersen, *Job*, p. 213.

In Job 26-27, we have the first part of a long discourse in which Job defends his righteousness.

Job's response to Bildad is a response to this final speech and also serves as Job's response to all the prior speeches from his friends. In fact, Job's discourse runs all the way to the end of Job 31, before a new character, Elihu begins to speak in Job 32. We will tackle the first part of Job's discourse (chapters 26-27) in which a strange role reversal now begins to take place. Aware that his friends cannot deal with the mysteries of God's providence and the suffering of the righteous and after sarcastically responding to Bildad in chapter 26, in chapter 27 Job begins to assume the role of the teacher, not only proclaiming his own righteousness, but contrasting his own personal experience of suffering with that of the wicked.

Job is beginning to see that ultimately the explanation for his suffering is connected to the wisdom of God. Bildad and his friends have already made this point. After berating Bildad, Job points out that God's wisdom so far surpasses our comprehension, that we only expose our foolishness by limiting God's ways to a faulty and wooden application of the principle of divine retribution as his friends have done. Thus, in the first four verses of Job 26, Job responds to Bildad with utter disdain. *"Then Job replied: 'How you have helped the powerless! How you have saved the arm that is feeble! What advice you have offered to one without wisdom! And what great insight you have displayed! Who has helped you utter these words? And whose spirit spoke from your mouth?'"* It is clear to Job that Bildad's wisdom is not so wise after all. Job senses, but does not know, what the reader knows—that the final speeches from Eliphaz and Bildad actually echo the words of Satan, not God.⁹

As Job begins to consider the mysterious ways of God, he considers that God's dominion is without end or limit. In verses 5-14, Job describes the glories and powers of the sovereign God. *"The dead are in deep anguish, those beneath the waters and all that live in them. Death is naked before God; Destruction lies uncovered. He spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing. He wraps up the waters in his clouds, yet the clouds do not burst under their weight. He covers the face of the full moon, spreading his clouds over it. He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters for a boundary between light and darkness. The pillars of the heavens quake, aghast at his rebuke. By his power he churned up the sea; by his wisdom he cut Rahab [the name of the serpent] to pieces. By his breath the skies became fair; his hand pierced the gliding serpent. And these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?"* Obviously, Job knows that Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar do not understand the ways of the Lord. They cannot explain the obvious—the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper.

Beginning in Job 27, Job now assumes his role as teacher. He begins by asserting one more time that he is a righteous man, who has not brought down God's wrath through some secret sin. In verses 1-7, Job swears an oath which clearly illustrates the heart of his dilemma. *"And Job continued his discourse: 'As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul, as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils, my lips will not speak wickedness, and my tongue will utter no deceit. I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live. 'May my enemies be like the wicked, my adversaries like the unjust!'"*

On the one hand, Job boldly proclaims his faith in the living God, while on the other, Job complains about feeling like he is being treated unjustly. Job is not going to admit to something he did not do

⁹ Kline, "Job," p. 479.

despite all that his wife and friends have put him through. Job knows that God is sovereign and that he can do with Job whatever he wishes. Job does not deny that. Nor, does Job accuse God of wrong-doing. What Job is saying is that his conscience is clean. He has trusted in God to save him from his sins. His great piety is a fruit of that justifying faith. His friends are wrong. But what Job does demand is an explanation from God. Job does not understand how God's mercy toward sinners can be squared with God's justice. Why is the judgment of the wicked delayed? Why must the righteous suffer? It is not until Job's hoped-for mediator and redeemer has come that we get our answer!

What Job does not know is that God's mercy and justice will embrace in a glorious messianic age yet to come. It falls to the apostle Paul, who sets out the precise relationship between God's justice and mercy in Romans 3:21-26: *"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."* It will take a sinless and perfectly obedient savior, who bears God's wrath in his own body, to resolve what Job sees as an unresolvable dilemma, "how can God be both just and merciful?"

Having declared his innocence and silenced his friends and with his faith and hope beginning to grow, Job (who is a graduate of the school of suffering) is able to clearly contrast his suffering with that of the wicked. Beginning in verse 8 of Job 27, Job states, *"for what hope has the godless when he is cut off, when God takes away his life? Does God listen to his cry when distress comes upon him?"* The obvious implication is that God is still listening to Job, unlike the wicked. *"Will he find delight in the Almighty? Will he call upon God at all times?"* Obviously not. And yet Job has called upon God all along.

Taking the role of teacher, Job tells his friends in verse 11: *"I will teach you about the power of God; the ways of the Almighty I will not conceal. You have all seen this yourselves. Why then this meaningless talk? Here is the fate God allots to the wicked, the heritage a ruthless man receives from the Almighty: However many his children, their fate is the sword; his offspring will never have enough to eat. The plague will bury those who survive him, and their widows will not weep for them. Though he heaps up silver like dust and clothes like piles of clay, what he lays up the righteous will wear, and the innocent will divide his silver. The house he builds is like a moth's cocoon, like a hut made by a watchman. He lies down wealthy, but will do so no more; when he opens his eyes, all is gone. Terrors overtake him like a flood; a tempest snatches him away in the night. The east wind carries him off, and he is gone; it sweeps him out of his place. It hurls itself against him without mercy as he flees headlong from its power. It claps its hands in derision and hisses him out of his place."*

Yes, Job has learned something from the arguments of his friends. God punishes the wicked—sometimes in this life. But what his friends cannot understand is that the wicked may prosper for a season, and as Job the veteran sufferer can tell us, there is no necessarily and observable connection between someone's current suffering and whether or not they are wicked. Nothing has hurt Job as deeply as three armchair theologians trying to correct him based upon a faulty application of God's justice, when they should have been showing their suffering friend some compassion. And yet what Job does not know as he struggles for an answer to the mysterious purposes of God is that he will get one, from God himself. And Job will be silenced when God speaks to him from the midst of a whirlwind. Be careful about what you ask for! God might just give you an answer and it may not be what you want to hear.