

# OpenTheo

## April 14th: Job 12 & Hebrews 4:1-13

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The terrible inscrutability of the wisdom of God. "Today, if you hear his voice..."

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Job chapter 12. Then Job answered and said, No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. But I have understanding as well as you.

I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these? I am a laughingstock to my friends. I who called to God, and he answered me, a just and blameless man, am a laughingstock.

In the thought of one who is at ease, there is contempt for misfortune. It is ready for those whose feet slip, the tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure, who bring their God in their hand. But ask the beasts, and they will teach you, the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you, or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand

is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind. Does not the ear test words, as the palate tastes food? Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days. With God are wisdom and might.

He has counsel and understanding. If he tears down, none can rebuild. If he shuts a man in, none can open.

If he withholds the waters, they dry up. If he sends them out, they overwhelm the land. With him are strength and sound wisdom.

The deceived and deceiver are his. He leads counsellors away stripped, and judges he makes fools. He looses the bonds of kings, and binds a waistcloth on their hips.

He leads priests away stripped, and overthrows the mighty. He deprives of speech those who are trusted, and takes away the discernment of the elders. He pours contempt on princes, and loosens the belt of the strong.

He uncovers the deeps out of darkness, and brings deep darkness to light. He makes nations great, and he destroys them. He enlarges nations, and leads them away.

He takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth, and makes them wander in a trackless waste. They grope in the dark without light, and he makes them stagger like a drunken man. Job chapter 12 is the start of the conclusion of the first cycle of discourse, Job's speech following Zophar the Nehemothite's address.

Within it Job is speaking not merely to Zophar, but to all of his friends. It is one of the longest of Job's speeches, second only to his final speech. Much as the general tone adopted by his friends at the start of their speeches to him, Job begins his speech here in a somewhat contemptuous and dismissive tone.

No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. The friends of Job have put themselves forward as authorities on wisdom, indeed almost as if they had a corner on it, leaving the spectator wondering whether if they die, wisdom will die out with them. Job insists that they do not have a monopoly on wisdom.

He has wisdom too. He is not inferior to them. He implies that he knows a few things that they might not.

The opening section of Job's speech in verses 2-4 forms a bookend or *inclusio* with chapter 13 verses 1-5. David Clines observes the repetition of the words, I am not inferior to you, from verse 3 in chapter 13 verse 2. What you know I also know. I am not inferior to you.

Norman Harville observes the way that the theme of wisdom recurs at the end. Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom. Job expresses his situation in verse

4. He is a laughing stock to his friends.

They may not literally be ridiculing him, but in their speeches to him they are clearly dismissive of his plight. Here Job expresses something of what his friends do not fully realise. He knows for himself that he is one who has called upon the Lord.

He is a just and a blameless man, and yet nonetheless he finds himself in this position. They may have tidy systems of guilt and retribution, but Job, from his own experience, knows that something has to give. Verses 5 and 6 are difficult to understand, and a number of commentators puzzle about how they are to be fitted within their context.

Verse 5 might refer to the posture adopted by the friends of Job. They do not look with pity, but with contempt upon someone who has experienced misfortune, in this case Job. They of course see it as a sign that Job has done something wrong.

In their position they are proud and self-righteous, ready to dispense advice, but unable to enter into true compassion with someone in Job's position. Just as Job is someone who is righteous, yet has suffered severe misfortune, Job expresses the other side of the situation in verse 6. Bandits and marauders, whose actions call out for God's judgement, enjoy peace, no matter how much they provoke God. One might imagine Job thinking back to the events of chapter 1, and the Sabaeans and Chaldean raiders who had killed so many of his servants, and also taken his oxen, donkeys and camels.

Is Job really the sinner to be judged in this situation, and not them? Yet they seem to have gotten away with their crimes, and indeed profited by their injustice. While Job, for his part, a blameless and righteous man, languishes in ignominy. Where is the justice in that? The meaning of the end of verse 6 is difficult to understand.

What does it mean that the robbers bring their God in their hand? John Hartley mentions a number of different possibilities. It might be a reference, for instance, to their idolatry. They have idols that can be held in their hands.

Alternatively, it might be a reference to their swords being their gods. Or finally, it might be a claim that they are as powerful as God. Job's friends had appealed to a number of different authorities, and Job draws their attention to nature itself.

He brings forward the beasts, the birds of the heaven, the bushes of the earth, the fish of the sea, all as witnesses for his cause. They know about the sovereign hand of the Lord in all the affairs of creation, and Job's friends might learn a thing or two from them. The life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind, is in the hand of God.

As Proverbs 29, verse 13 puts it, The poor man and the oppressor meet together. The Lord gives light to the eyes of both. Perhaps Job's intent is to suggest that by this sovereign preservation of all creatures in life, any simplistic scheme of retribution is unsettled.

Even while they are performing their acts of robbery, the Lord is sustaining the robber in his existence. And years after he has committed his crime, he may continue to do so. Verse 9 is noteworthy in that it contains the only reference to the name of the Lord in the whole of the speeches of the book of Job.

Virtually all other references are to God. The friends had brought forward different authorities. The authority of visions, like Eliphaz, the authority of the ancients' wisdom, as in the case of Bildad, and then the authority of deep wisdom, in the case of Zophar.

Job raises a challenge to these. The understanding person can discern and test wisdom. He does not merely have to accept it on the basis of some authority.

Like the pallet tastes food, he can taste what is true wisdom and what is false. Verse 12 might be a question. Is wisdom indeed with the ages? Is understanding really something that comes with longevity? In verse 13, Job appeals to a deeper source of wisdom.

God himself is the one who possesses wisdom and might. Verses 13 to 25 are a sort of doxological hymn. However, Norman Harbell suggests it involves an inversion of the themes of Proverbs 8, verses 14 to 16, picking up words like counsel, efficiency, understanding, power, kings, the great, and judges.

Those verses read, I have counsel and sound wisdom. I have insight. I have strength.

By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just. By me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly. Job here describes God in similar terms, but the actions of God's wisdom described here are not so much those actions of upholding and creating the order, as that of throwing the order into disarray and disorder.

Harbell notes the presence of three sections here that can be distinguished by their literary features. First, the way that God destroys the established order in verses 13 to 16, the way that he deprives leaders of their efficiency in verses 17 to 21, and the way that he disorients nations and leaders in verses 22 to 25. God has wisdom and might, but what does he do? He shuts a man in.

He tears down. He withholds the waters in drought, or sends them out in deluge. Yes, he has strength and sound wisdom, but he is the one who upholds both the deceiver and the deceived.

He is the God of all wisdom, but he frustrates counsel. He leads counsellors away naked. He makes fools of judges.

He frustrates the rule of kings, divests priests, and overthrows those who have strength. He brings princes to shame and weakens the strong. He is the God who said, let there be light, but he is the master of the darkness, the one that can throw people into blindness and lead them in disarray and disorientation.

In his reference to the deep and the darkness, Job might be picking up on some of the themes of Zophar's speech. In chapter 11, verses 7 to 8, for instance, can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven. What can you do? Deeper than Sheol.

What can you know? A question to consider, where else in scripture do we have portraits of God as the unsearchable and inscrutable Almighty who brings disaster mysteriously? Hebrews chapter 4, verses 1 to 13. Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.

For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest. Although his works were finished from the foundation of the world, for he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way, and God rested on the seventh day from all his works. And again in this passage he said, They shall not enter my rest.

Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, today, saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works, as God did from his.

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

The author of Hebrews presents the experience of the Christians to whom he is writing, in terms of the experience of the generation of the children of Israel in the wilderness during the exodus. Like the Israelites, they are in a realm between realms, no longer in Egypt, but not yet having entered into the rest of the awaited promise. They must faithfully persevere.

Hebrews chapter 4 is part of an argument that the writer has been developing since the preceding chapter, expounding Psalm 95 verses 7 to 11, and exhorting the people in terms of it. As Paul does in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, he encourages the heroes of the epistle to consider themselves in terms of the experience of Israel, learning from their cautionary example. All of the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, but on account of their unbelief, an entire generation perished in the wilderness before entering into the

land, into the rest that God had promised them.

The people to whom Hebrews is written are the people of Christ, who is greater than Moses. Moses was the one who led the Israelites, and they need to learn from the failures of the people of Moses. If Hebrews chapter 3 mostly looks back to the cautionary example of the wilderness generation of the Israelites, reading the verses from Psalm 95 against the backdrop of Numbers chapter 14, and the judgment that came upon them, Hebrews chapter 4 focuses upon looking forward to the rest promised to us, and reads the verses from Psalm 95 against the backdrop of Genesis chapter 2 verses 1 to 3, where God first establishes the Sabbath.

In chapter 4 verse 1, the fear is repeated, not so much in terms of rebellion and punishment as it was earlier, but in terms of missing out on promise. As in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, the point is strengthened by heightening the awareness of an analogy between the experience of the Christians that are being addressed in the epistle, and the experience of Israel. Good news! A gospel came to Israel, just as it had come in their days.

However, the good news of the rest of the promised land that the Israelites received did them no good, as they failed to grasp hold of it by faith. The seed of the word fell on poor soil. True faith effectively receives the promise of God, responds with obedience, and holds fast to him.

Those who believe do enter into the promised rest, the rest that is testified to, even in the warning of Psalm 95 verse 11. That rest is God's own Sabbath rest. It's established when he first created the world.

At this point, he's moving from the unbelief of the wilderness generation that we should learn from, and focusing upon the promise that is still held out to us. Psalm 95's mention of rest was not merely about the promised land of Canaan being offered to the wilderness generation. It looked beyond that to entering into the fullness of God's Sabbath rest, the rest that is described in Genesis chapter 2. This movement from the immediate promise of entry into the land, to promise of entry into a greater, a more fundamental, and more permanent rest, is already anticipated in the Psalm, which takes the historical statement made to the wilderness generation, and addresses it in the present to those singing and hearing the Psalm.

They are expected to recognize that behind the historic rest of the land promised to Israel is a greater rest. The very fact that entering God's rest is spoken of, as it is in Psalm 95, implies something that is still open for us. God promised that people would one day enter into his rest, a promise that looks all the way back to Genesis chapter 2, where God rested from his work in creation on the Sabbath day.

This promise remains. It's a fact testified to by the word today within Psalm 95 from

David's day. This clearly demonstrates that even though Joshua brought them into the land, this did not achieve full entry into God's rest.

Canaan wasn't the great Sabbath for which they had been waiting. Even as they enjoyed the land of Canaan, Israel recognized that there were sojourners and pilgrims awaiting a greater homeland. Hebrews chapter 11 verses 13 to 16 and 39 to 40 say, And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

This notion is not novel to the New Testament. Leviticus chapter 25 verse 23 declares, Even when settled in the land, Israel still hasn't truly arrived at rest and their true homeland. Consequently, there remains a Sabbath rest for us to look forward to and to strive to enter as the people of God, Jews and Gentiles alike.

The heroes of Hebrews faced the same danger as the Israelites of the wilderness generation. If they didn't strive to enter into God's rest, they could fall short through disobedience, like the Israelites. The word of the living God is itself living and powerful to discern and to test the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

As God speaks, he exposes hearts. Every creature is naked and exposed in God's sight, to him to whom we must give account. Faced with the wonderful continued promise of rest, the fearful risk of falling short of it, and the unmasking power of the word of God, we must respond to that dividing word with faith, holding on firmly to the promise of sharing in God's Sabbath and entering into it.

A question to consider, where in the Old Testament might we see a connection between God's rest on the Sabbath day and his work of bringing Israel into the land?