

# OpenTheo

## April 28th: Job 27 & James 2:1-13

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Job holds fast to his integrity. Avoiding partiality.

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## Transcript

Job chapter 27. And Job again took up his discourse and said, As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter, as long as my breath is in me, and the Spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit. Far be it from me to say that you are right.

Till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I will hold fast my righteousness, Godless and will not let it go. My heart does not reproach me for any of my days.

Let my enemy be as the wicked. Let him who rises up against me be as the unrighteous. For what is the hope of the Godless when God cuts him off, when God takes away his life? Will God hear his cry when distress comes upon him? Will he take delight in the Almighty? Will he call upon God at all times? I will teach you concerning the hand of God.

What is with the Almighty I will not conceal. Behold, all of you have seen it yourselves. Why then have you become altogether vain? This is the portion of a wicked man with God, and the heritage that oppressors receive from the Almighty.

If his children are multiplied, it is for the sword, and his descendants have not enough bread. Those who survive him the pestilence buries, and his widows do not weep. Though he heap up silver like dust, and pile up clothing like clay, he may pile it up, but the righteous will wear it, and the innocent will divide the silver.

He builds his house like a moth's, like a booth that a watchman makes. He goes to bed rich, but will do so no more. He opens his eyes, and his wealth is gone.

Terrors overtake him like a flood. In the night a whirlwind carries him off. The east wind lifts him up, and he is gone.

It sweeps him out of his place. It hurls at him without pity. He flees from its power in headlong flight.

It claps its hands at him, and hisses at him from its place. From chapter 24, questions of the proper ordering of the material of the Book of Job have vexed commentators. This continues to be an issue in chapter 27, where many commentators believe that the material in our Bibles is wrongly ordered.

In taking this position, commentators are responding to several difficulties in the text itself. The final cycle of speeches is anomalous. Only two of the friends speak, Eliphaz and Bildad.

Each previous cycle involved a final speech by Zophar, but that's missing here. Bildad's speech is also incredibly short. By contrast, Job speaks for most of the next few chapters, and all of the way from chapter 26 to 31, if we don't believe that chapter 28 and its poem concerning wisdom comes from a different hand.

By itself this is not an overwhelming problem to account for. As several commentators have observed, the arguments of the friends have clearly reached an impasse. They were reheating stale old arguments on the one hand, and becoming more forcefully condemnatory of Job on the other.

And it's very clear by this point there's little to be gained by continuing. What potential the conversation ever had seems to have been exhausted by this point. Indeed, as Gerald Janssen argues, Job chapter 26 may be Job interrupting Bildad before his speech can build up any momentum.

The point that Job's speech is excessively long is also relatively easily answered. First, Job's speeches have always been significantly longer than his friends. Second, if chapter 28 is a different speaker, then chapters 26 and 27 are not a long speech at all, and

chapters 29-31 would be a final statement summing matters up.

Third, chapter 27 begins with an introductory statement, suggesting that it is a distinct speech from that of chapter 26. The tougher issue to address is the presence of material in chapters 24, 26 and 27 that seems to represent not Job's position, but that of his friends. More particularly, chapter 24 verses 18-24, chapter 26 verses 6-14 and chapter 27 verses 7-23.

In this chapter verses 13-23 present an especially keen problem for the interpreter, as their portrayal of the wicked is something that we have come to expect from the mouths of the friends, but definitely not from Job. On the surface of it, some might even wonder whether Job has given in to the friends' interpretation of matters. While he attributes chapter 26 verses 6-14 to Job, John Hartley relocates chapter 27 verses 13-23 after 25 verses 1-6 and reads it as the words of Bildad, drawing upon Zophar.

Norman Harvel's position, one of the most popular approaches, treats the first twelve verses as Job's and the rest of the chapter as Zophar, the missing speech. Janssen suggests that chapter 27 verses 13-23 are Job's anticipatory parody of Zophar. Perhaps the pause before this speech was Job waiting for Zophar to take his turn, but Zophar said nothing and now Job gives his speech for him.

David Clines forms a third speech for Zophar by joining in order chapter 27 verses 7-10, verses 13-17, chapter 24 verses 18-24 and chapter 27 verses 18-23, leaving verses 1-6 and 11-12 of this chapter as Job's own speech. Marvin Pope cuts off the speech of Job at verse 7 and attributes verses 8-23 to Zophar. Harold Rowley only attributes the first six verses to Job.

Other commentators seem to be just perplexed and uncertain about what to make of the anomalous elements. C.S. Rudd, for instance, seems to fall into this camp. There are plenty of commentators though who still read the entirety of chapter 27 as the words of Job, even without stretching the idea of Job's voice to the extent that Janssen does.

They don't believe it's necessary to see Job as engaging in a parody at this point. Toby Sumter, reading the book in terms of the theories of René Girard, stresses the importance of the political background of what's taking place in the book. Job is the king of his people and what the Friends are doing in their discourses with him is trying to discredit him and undermine his rule.

They are claiming that God has decisively ruled against him and as a result he should be divested of authority. This should help us to recognise that even for the Friends this was never a detached discussion of God, evil and suffering. It was an attempt to gain political power.

The issue of the book isn't just a narrow question of suffering. Why do bad things happen

to good people? Nor is it even just about personal vindication and being in right relationship with God, which is clearly a concern for Job. There is more going on here.

Job's desire for vindication is not just a private thing. It's a desire for public vindication, for restoration to his societal and political standing, for deliverance from people like his Friends who are playing the satanic role of the accuser. Sumter writes, The argument has always been a rhetorical wrestling for political power.

It is only here where God has suddenly started turning the tables that Job takes control of the conversation and like Solomon can speak proverbs, can speak of what God does to evil doers. They are punished and the innocent are delivered. The rich and the oppressive go down to death and are carried away in the storm and the wind.

This is only out of place if Job is in exactly the same spot as he began. Yet Job has emerged into the light and while the dust has not yet settled the momentum of the battle has turned and Job can affirm without impunity that the wicked will be blown away by the storm because that is even now happening. While I am not completely persuaded of this reading I think it is a promising approach to the text and may have some insights to give us.

Job begins chapter 27 with an extended oath. His friends have been trying to persuade him to give in and to admit that he has done something wrong, to confess, to acknowledge his crime. Eliphaz gave a listening of different sins that he thought that Job must be guilty of back in his first speech of the third cycle.

As in a show trial in a totalitarian society the verdict has already been determined. The important thing being sought is the accused person's submission to the accusations and acknowledgement of his guilt. This is really what the friends are looking for.

The strength of Job's refusal at this point needs to be seen in light of that. I believe that Rene Girard and Sumter are correct in seeing that the friends are not just looking for Job's admission of his guilt to support some theories that they have about God's justice. They are looking for something more.

They have a political end in view. All of this gives Job's refusal to give in a greater force. From his oath to maintain his innocence Job moves to an imprecatory statement, a curse concerning the people who are opposing him.

As he has been doing throughout the book, Job is calling for God to act decisively in history to establish justice, bringing wicked accusers to shame and upholding the righteous against their adversaries. There is no reason to believe that Job has abandoned any belief in justice. He is greatly dismayed that it is not being done in his situation and he also points out a great many other situations where it is absent.

But his very stubbornness and appealing to God consistently suggests that there is more

going on here. He refuses to let go of a belief in divine justice. Even when all of the appearances are otherwise, he will appeal to it.

In verses 11-23, as we have seen, the reader is faced with a great many questions, while verses 11-12 are more generally acknowledged to be Job's words. How they relate to what follows is unclear. The you that is being addressed is plural, so it would be strange to put these words in the mouths of the friends towards Job.

Robert Alden writes, Because the canonical shape of the book must have made sense to its first readers, and there is no compelling reason to amend the text, it is best to understand these verses as Job's. He argues in a manner similar to Janzen that Job is summarising the arguments of the friends in the final verses. It certainly seems to pick up on earlier themes in their portraits of the wicked, particularly in the second cycle of speeches.

Job refers to meaningless talk or vain talk in verse 12. Alden argues that this is referring to what he summarises in verses 13-23. Perhaps another consideration when we approach verses 13-23 is that it matters who speaks particular words.

In the mouth of Zophar, these would mean very different things than they mean in the mouth of Job. Perhaps the reader is being challenged to reflect upon this. This is a point made in Proverbs 26 verses 7 and 9. Like a lame man's legs which hang useless is a proverb in the mouth of fools.

Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools. Job, if these are his words, has not abandoned a sense of justice. He calls upon God to act with justice not just in his own situation but against his adversaries.

Here, again if these are his words, he expresses a confidence in the way that God will bring justice to pass in history, the way that the wicked will be brought to nothing. However, this hope is not just a mechanical hope. It is connected with prayer for divine vindication and action.

It is an expression of faith, not just of sight. It does not deny the existence of anomalies, nor does it try to pretend that the acts of God are completely scrutable as the friends have often tried to do. When we hear these words coming from the mouth of Job, we know that they come with all these other qualifications.

We know that they are balanced, that they come with a sense of faith, not sight. Such statements, we should recall, are found at many points in scripture, particularly in the Psalms and the Book of Proverbs. The statements given by the friends are often seemingly biblical ones, but yet the way that they are using them is profoundly foolish.

Perhaps by forcing the reader to hear similar words from the mouth of Job himself, we are being taught to think a bit more carefully about the way that wisdom in speech

relates to speaker, context and words, and those things can't be separated from each other. Job presents a number of images here of the wicked being cut off or brought to nothing. The primary focus is on inheritance and legacy.

The legacy of the wicked is cut off. His children and descendants are brought to nothing. His wealth falls into other hands.

People do not mourn him. His house proves as fragile as a moth's chrysalis. He piles up riches, but they will soon be required of him.

He is suddenly removed and there is nothing left. And God in his power mocks at him. A question to consider.

Can you think of other ways and places in which the scripture teaches us how to use wise words wisely? James chapter 2 verses 1-13 Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called? If you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. You are doing well.

But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, Do not commit adultery, also said, Do not murder.

If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.

Mercy triumphs over judgment. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. You shall do no injustice in court.

You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great. But in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour. You shall not be partial in judgment.

You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone. For the judgment is God's.

The danger of such an attitude of partiality and favouritism in the church is immense. It directly undermines some of the central truths of the faith. And such favouritism can be displayed in the ways that different people are welcomed into a congregation.

When people see the rich man, they see the possibility of a beneficial association for them. The poor man, by contrast, offers no such beneficial association. Jesus speaks to

such attitudes in Luke 14, verses 12-14, when he taught concerning invitations to feasts.

Partiality to the rich over the poor compromises judgment and the truth of God in order to please men. The assembly of the Lord's people is not a place where rich people should be receiving special attention and treatment over the poor. Yet it seems that this is precisely what is happening in various situations.

This is the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory. He should be the one exalted. Giving glory to other human beings in the presence of Christ is entirely inappropriate.

And James makes his point by giving an illustration of the form that this can take. Two people walk into an assembly. The assembly is described here using the language of a synagogue, perhaps suggesting a gathering of Jewish Christians.

The rich man is treated with great honour and respect. He is given special attention. Whereas the poor man is dishonoured, treated as an inconvenience and an embarrassment.

Such different treatment of the visitors reveals the hearts of those showing such discrimination, and the hold that non-Christian values still have over them. They have become judges with evil thoughts. What James does here is recognise the deeper significance of what they are doing.

They are exhibiting the fundamental forms of injustice that are condemned in judges within the Old Testament law. By speaking of them as judges with evil thoughts, perhaps he wants to alert them that they are held to a higher standard as the people of Christ. A task of judgement has been committed to them, and it is imperative that they fulfil it justly.

Such standards of judgement are utterly opposed to God's own standards, as James now makes very clear. James' arguments here are reminiscent of Paul's points in 1 Corinthians 1, verses 26-31. God's action in salvation challenges and overturns human values.

The Beatitudes is a good example of God's favouring of people dishonoured or marginalised in the world. However, the people that James is writing to here dishonour the poor while honouring the rich, the very people who dishonour Christ and his people. Behind this is the question of the true source of honour.

If you are looking merely to human appearances, it would seem that the rich and the powerful and the influential are the source of honour. But if you truly live by faith, you see that God is the true source of honour. And if we truly want to be honoured, we must act towards God, rather than merely to get the glory of other human beings.

Christ is the patron of the poor. The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord.

Throughout the New Testament we see special concern given to the poor.

Partiality either to the rich or to the poor is condemned. But partiality to the rich is generally much more of an immediate problem. While people typically seek to associate with the rich, the powerful and the influential, this is much less likely to happen in the case of the poor.

However, God is a God who does associate with the weak and the poor and the despised. Christ came in the form of a servant, the one who was rich associated with us in our poverty, so that we might become rich in him. As Christians we should be fulfilling the royal law of Christ.

The royal law is, love your neighbour as yourself. This refers back to Leviticus 19, verse 18. This is part of a section that also, in verse 15, condemns partiality.

Partiality to the rich over the poor is a fundamental failure of love to neighbour. It renders a person guilty as a transgressor, and it is a far more fundamental sin than many might think. The very golden rule, or royal law, of loving our neighbour as ourself, tackles that partiality at his very heart, the way in which we naturally prefer ourselves and those associated with us over others.

If we truly love our neighbour as ourselves, partiality will be one of the first things to go. The royal law here is similar to what James has spoken of in chapter 1, verse 25, the perfect law, or the law of liberty. Why is it called the royal law? Perhaps it is because it is the pre-eminent law.

It is the law that sums up and comes at the head of a great many other laws. It is a law that gives unity and focus to much of the body of the commandments. Perhaps it is also called the royal law as it is the law of Christ our King, a law that expresses his commandment that we love one another.

It is the law of the principle of love that should be operative within the life of the people of Christ. Jesus spoke of the importance of this law in Matthew chapter 22, verses 35 to 40, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And he said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment, and a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

While God may not be an egalitarian, he has formed people in many different stations in life, given them different abilities and skills and powers that will lead to very different outcomes, there is a concern for a sort of equality throughout the whole of the scripture. This concern for equality is not about wealth per se. Inequality in possessions is not



treated as an injustice as such.

It is not necessarily a result of the fall or of sin that some people have more wealth than others, any more than some people being stronger, or more attractive, or more intelligent. However, God is very concerned about the dignity that should be accorded to every human being, a dignity that is recognised in their standing before the law, a dignity that is seen in such things as the protection of their lives, and a dignity that should be seen in society's honouring and protecting their part in its life. This is one of the places where we most see concern for the poor.

The poor are those who are most commonly frozen out of society's life, not seen as having the same dignity as those who have wealth. It is very easy to overlook the humanity of the poor, to deny them face in society, to deny them agency, and a standing and a part that is recognised and protected by their neighbours. God routinely speaks of himself as the patron of such persons, charging his people to be concerned for the stranger, for the widow, for the orphan, and for the person who is poor.

Of all the people in the land, these are by far the most vulnerable. God also challenges his people to see themselves in the shoes of such persons. While we all like to associate with the rich, there is in the condition of the poor something that is truer to our condition as human beings relative to God, as we as Christians recognise our spiritual affinity with the poor, we should be a lot more concerned for their material conditions, and a lot less awed by the rich.

We can't pick and choose commandments. God's will for his people is indivisible. This is one of the things that Jesus highlights in his teaching.

The law hangs together. One of the points of the royal law is that it sums up a larger body of the law. The entirety of the law ultimately comes from the one lawgiver, and our treatment of the law expresses our attitude towards that lawgiver.

If we're accepting certain things and neglecting others, we're treating the laws as if they were isolated from each other, and not ultimately related back to the one source. We will be judged under the law of liberty. Therefore we must take care with our own judgments.

We must measure with the measure that we would be measured by, and be wary of judgments that are according to standards that we would not be judged by. A question to consider. Why do you think that James so singles out this issue of partiality?