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April 13th: Job 11 & Hebrews 3

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Zophar's first speech. Christ like Moses but much greater.

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

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Transcript

Job 11. Then Zophar the Naamathite answered and said, Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and a man full of talk be judged right? Should your babble silence men, and when you mock shall no one shame you? For you say, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes. But oh that God would speak, and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom, for he is manifold in understanding.

Know then that God exacts of you you less than your guilt deserves? 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? Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea.

If he passes through and imprisons and summons the court, who can turn him back? For he knows worthless men. When he sees iniquity, will he not consider it? But a stupid man will get understanding, when a wild donkey's colt is born a man. If you prepare your

heart, you will stretch out your hands toward him.

If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and let not injustice dwell in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish. You will be secure and will not fear.

You will forget your misery, you will remember it as waters that have passed away, and your life will be brighter than the noonday, its darkness will be like the morning, and you will feel secure because there is hope. You will look around and take your rest in security. You will lie down, and none will make you afraid.

Many will court your favor, but the eyes of the wicked will fail. All way of escape will be lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last. In Job chapter 11 we arrive at the third of the speeches of Job's friends, the final one in the first cycle.

Eliphaz had appealed to a vision in his speech, Bildad had appealed to tradition. Now Zophar, the Nehemiathite, appeals to the mysteries of the divine wisdom. On the surface of things this might seem promising.

Indeed, in many respects one might characterize the Lord's own response to Job as based upon such a principle. However, under closer examination, Zophar's approach, appealing to the divine wisdom, largely boils down to the fact that God presumably has reasons for punishing Job that are not understood simply because, unlike God, we do not have all of the information. If our knowledge of things were as full as God's, why God was punishing Job would be entirely obvious.

For Zophar, it doesn't seem to be in question at all that God is in fact punishing Job. That is entirely taken for granted. He begins his speech by challenging and rebuking Job, disputing the account that he gives of the situation.

After he has finished doing this, he turns in verse 13 to counsel Job about what he ought to do instead. Zophar's approach to Job is far more aggressive than either of the other friends. Eliphaz had appealed to the surpassing righteousness of God and had recognized that Job, for the most part, was a blameless man.

Bildad had claimed that Job's sons were guilty, but had still pulled his punches in his treatment of Job himself. Zophar is a lot more aggressive. Eliphaz had begun his speech in chapter 4 verse 2, If one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? Yet who can keep from speaking? Bildad had begun in chapter 8 verse 2, How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Like the other friends, Zophar adopts the typical language of a disputation.

However, he is noticeably more confrontational with Job than the other two, especially than Eliphaz. Zophar seems to be aggravated that Job has not been silenced by this point. The fact that Job is still expressing his opinion and has not closed his mouth in response to the speech of the other two friends angers Zophar, who sees it as his duty to

shame Job, effectively to shut him up.

The principle of verse 2 might be similar to that expressed in Proverbs chapter 10 verse 19, When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. Zophar characterizes Job's position in verse 4, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes. The characterization of Job as one who sees himself to be clean in God's eyes might be drawing upon Job's statements in places like chapter 9 verses 20-21, Though I am in the right, my own mouth would condemn me, though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.

I am blameless, I regard not myself, I loathe my life. While this part of Zophar's characterization of Job may seem to be justified, the other part, my doctrine is pure, might be rather unfair. Job is not acting as a teacher in a school, he is speaking about his own suffering and giving voice to his anguish, not delivering some abstract disquisition on the subject.

Zophar expresses his wish in verses 5 and following that God would disabuse Job of his ignorance. If God actually revealed the truth of the matter to Job, Job would in fact perceive the mercy of God. God is not punishing him as he deserves.

While Zophar talks about the mysteries of God's wisdom, his fundamental system of thought is entirely one of sin and retribution. He does not seem to be able to conceive the possibility that God might have some other purpose in Job's suffering, entirely unrelated to sin and punishment, as the reader in fact knows that he does. Zophar is here likely picking up on some of the themes that Job himself brought out in chapter 9 verses 11-12 and chapter 10 verses 13-14.

In chapter 6 verse 5, to explain his protest at his condition, Job had said, Does the wild donkey bray when he has grass? Were the ox low over his fodder? Implicitly comparing himself to a wild donkey in that situation. In verse 12, Zophar uses a proverb that refers to a wild donkey, But a stupid man will get understanding when a wild donkey's cunt is born a man. The exact translation and meaning of this proverb is debated, although the ESV's translation that I've just read is most likely correct.

The wild donkey giving birth to a man is clearly impossible, and by implication so is a stupid man gaining wisdom and understanding. It is likely that this is not a characterisation of Job himself, as Zophar goes on to hold out hope for Job if he will only repent. He needs to seek the Lord, put away sin from himself, and then he will be able to lift up his face in innocence, look to the Lord and receive blessing.

This of course contrasts with Job's protest of the preceding chapter. In verses 15-16, As Norman Harbell notes, within these verses, from verse 13-20, Zophar picks up a number of allusions and idioms from Job's own speeches, carefully integrating these into his counterpoint to Job's perspective. However, if Job rejects the counsel of Zophar and

continues in the way that he has been going, his fate will be that of the wicked described in verse 20.

Job's hope for death is much the same as theirs. It should be noted, however, that despite the strength of his challenge to Job, Zophar still expresses the thought of verse 20 in the third person, whereas verses 13-19 are in the second person. He presents Job's repentance as the most natural and expected course of action.

A question to consider, the mystery of God's providence is a recurring and prominent theme in the book of Job. What are some of the ways that this theme has directly been engaged with in the text to this point? Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later. But Christ is faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting and our hope.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, They always go astray in their heart, they have not known my ways. As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

As it is said, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, for who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief. Hebrews has presented Christ in his exalted relationship to God and over the angels, chiefly in the first chapter. In chapter 2 his relationship to mankind was explored, as the one who fully partakes in our condition, and after his humiliation is lifted up as our representative, our champion, our deliverer, and our high priest.

Chapter 3 now continues to speak of Christ as our high priest, especially in the first six verses, which speak of his status. This is followed by an exhortation from Psalm 95 verses 7 to 11, until the author returns to the theme of Christ as our high priest at the end of chapter 4. Thomas Long observes a sort of theology of the church in miniature in the opening line of this chapter. As brothers we are one, bound together in the family of God.

We are holy, set apart by God. We are apostolic, formed by the message of the great apostle, Jesus Christ himself, which is then passed on to his ministers. The author begins by comparing the faithfulness of Christ and his calling to the faithfulness of Moses, before proceeding to contrast the stature of these two figures.

Moses is an extremely important figure in the Old Testament. He's the paradigmatic leader. He's the great leader of Israel during the Exodus.

Moses' relationship to the Lord was unique in the Old Testament. Exodus 33 verse 11 reads, The author references one of the key passages concerning Moses in Numbers 12 verses 6 to 8, where the Lord speaks to Aaron and Miriam concerning Moses, who is described as the most meek man on the face of the earth. Not so with my servant Moses.

He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Moses was made as God both to Aaron in Exodus chapter 4 verse 16 and to Pharaoh in Exodus chapter 7 verse 1. Moses saw the Lord's back and entered the very presence of the Lord at Mount Sinai.

Moses was regarded as a lower sort of God by the Israelites, who sought to replace him with the golden calf when they feared that he had died. He intermediated for the entire people, bearing and leading them before the Lord. In Sirach chapter 45 verses 2 to 5, we have a sense of how Moses was viewed by other people of this period.

He made him equal in glory to the holy ones, and made him great to the terror of his enemies. By his words he performed swift miracles. The Lord glorified him in the presence of kings.

He gave him commandments for his people, and revealed to him his glory. For his faithfulness and meekness he consecrated him, choosing him out of all mankind. He allowed him to hear his voice, and led him into the dark cloud, and gave him the commandments face to face, the law of life and knowledge, so that he might teach Jacob the commandment, and Israel his decrees.

There were various legends about Moses circulating at this time, and many early Jewish Christians would wonder where Jesus might stand relative to Moses. The point is not to diminish Moses, so much as it is to elevate Jesus. Behind both this chapter and chapter 1, we might perceive many of the speculations that occurred about various figures of the heavenly courts.

We should also probably consider the place of Deuteronomy chapter 18, verses 15-19, and the expectation that this represented. And the Lord said to me, They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their

brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. Jesus is much greater than Moses though. Playing with the concept of Moses' faithfulness in God's house, in Numbers chapter 12, the author of Hebrews explores different aspects of that concept, the concept of the house.

Long uses the illustration of the jewel that is turned, so that the viewer can see different facets. The author starts by exploring the concept of the house as a physical building. Moses is part of the house, but Christ is the builder of the house.

Now a different facet is seen. The house is the household. Moses is the faithful servant and steward, but Christ is the son who is over the entire house as it belongs to him.

Finally, one further aspect is seen, as we ourselves are identified with the house. We are the household of the son, and we are the building that he is constructing. His glory says something about our elevated status as his people too.

We are the people of Christ, as Old Testament Israel were the people of Moses. The author has both compared and contrasted Moses and Christ. Now he develops this point by relating a warning given on the basis of the failure of the wilderness generation led by Moses in Psalm 95 to his hearer's situation in the first century AD.

At the beginning of chapter 2, after he had demonstrated the supremacy of Christ over the angels in chapter 1, he had delivered a warning to pay closer attention. If rejection of the law given by means of the angels came with such punishment, how much more rejection of the message of Christ? The logic of the quotation of Psalm 95 after his argument for the supremacy of Christ over Moses is much the same. The author will return to unpacking the character of Christ as high priest after this mini-sermon, but here his point is to drive home something of the practical import of the supremacy of Christ over Moses.

Within the passage that follows, he will especially work with the key hook words of today and rest. As he has connected and contrasted Moses with Christ, the author is now able to relate Old Testament scriptures concerning Moses and his people to the situation of the recipients of the book. It is worth noting the way that such typology serves the task of preaching, by placing Christians into clear analogical relationships with former groups of God's people and enabling words delivered to them to speak directly into our present situations too.

Paul does a similar thing in 1 Corinthians 10, where he employs the cautionary example of the Israelites. Verses 6-11 of that chapter read, Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of

them were, as it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

Psalm 95 emphasises the urgent importance of hearing the word of the Lord. This was also the point stressed in chapter 2 verses 1-4. The term today is one that he returns to on several occasions.

Today stresses the urgency of the message, and the danger of failing to respond to it. Sin hardens us. Those who delay their response will find that their capacity to respond diminishes over time.

Before long, we might have closed our window of opportunity, and become insensitive to the message. If you hear God's truth, respond immediately. Do not delay.

Do not let that slight twinge of conscience that you feel be the last dying embers of a grace that you have long sought to quench, and will soon utterly extinguish. Nothing matters more than this. In the hardening that the author describes, we might also remember the cautionary example of Pharaoh, who progressively hardened his heart to his own utter destruction.

The progressive yet almost imperceptible character of such developments are particularly significant for the author of Hebrews. We must take care for this reason. Our own hearts are treacherous, they can betray us, and sin can outwit us.

We must be vigilant and be on our guard. The danger of falling away from the living God is real. One of the ways that the Lord preserves us as his people is through such serious warnings.

It is imperative that we heed them. In verse 6, the author wrote, He makes a similar statement in verse 14. Both of these are rather surprising statements.

They seem to make one's current status dependent upon future perseverance. However, this may not be all that strange. Future actions can definitely change the past in certain ways.

The meaningfulness of our past sacrifices, for instance, depends largely upon what becomes of them. If we abandon past commitments, the past actions made in service of those commitments are emptied of their meaning, and our past selves can be betrayed and robbed. Our current participation in Christ is a participation in hope.

It is anticipatory. The meaning of my current participation in Christ depends largely upon whether I will persevere in it or not. If I abandon it, my current participation is also robbed of much of its force.

I will have betrayed my current self and deprived myself of the sure hope that I currently found my faith upon. The Israelites, of course, had the promise of entering into the rest of the Promised Land. They ventured out into the wilderness to receive it.

However, by abandoning their faith, they robbed themselves of the promise and emptied their former decision to follow Moses and the Lord out of Egypt of its meaning. By not following through with it, they ended up going out into the wilderness to die. Later events can poison past ones, as anyone who has experienced a bitter divorce or betrayal can testify.

Memories are curdled. Sacrifices are made in vain. Years of our lives devoted to a particular cause can be wasted.

As participants in Christ, we currently have in our hands the most precious treasure of all. We must be careful never to reject it, because our current possession of it depends greatly upon how we persevere in it or not. Chapter 3 ends with the author recapitulating the story of Israel's unfaithfulness in the wilderness as a cautionary tale for Christians.

Their story did not end well. While the author of Hebrews is confident of much better things for his hearers, he wants them, as the people of Christ, to learn from the example of the people of the lesser Moses. He will develop this sermon further in the chapter that follows.

A question to consider. Where else in the New Testament do we see Christ compared and contrasted with Moses?