

# OpenTheo

## April 30th: Job 29 & James 3

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Job recollects his former estate. The untamable tongue.

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## Transcript

Job chapter 29. I went out to the gate of the city, when I prepared my seat in the square. The young men saw me and withdrew, and the aged rose and stood.

The princes refrained from talking, and laid their hand on their mouth. The voice of the nobles was hushed, and their tongue stuck to the roof of their mouth. When the ear heard it called me blessed, and when the eyes saw it approved, because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him.

The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me. My justice was like a robe in a turban.

I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched

out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made him drop his prey from his teeth.

Then I thought, I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the sand. My roots spread out to the waters, with the dew all night on my branches, my glory fresh with me, and my bow ever new in my hand. Men listened to me and waited, and kept silence for my counsel.

After I spoke they did not speak again, and my word dropped upon them. They waited for me as for the rain, and they opened their mouths as for the spring rain. I smiled on them when they had no confidence, and the light of my face they did not cast down.

I chose their way and sat as chief, and I lived like a king among his troops, like one who comforts mourners. In Job chapter 29, Job recollects his former condition and estate, when he was honoured among the people, when he enjoyed rule and authority among them, when he was blessed with prosperity, the Lord's favour, and surrounded with the joyful life of his household. This chapter should not be abstracted from everything else that surrounds it.

For instance, it looks back to chapter 27 and Job's oath maintaining his righteousness. It looks back to chapter 28, at the end of which we are told wisdom for man is turning away from evil and fear in God. In this chapter, in the actions of Job during the period of his prosperity, we see that he was such a person.

In this portrayal, Job is also presenting himself to God, declaring himself innocent of the great wrongs that would have brought such disaster upon him. It relates to the chapter that immediately follows by contrast. Seen against the backdrop of his former condition, Job's present lamentable estate is set forth in sharpest relief.

Finally, it relates to Job's oath of innocence in chapter 31, with which he concludes his speeches. Job's denial that he is guilty of a series of particular crimes that could be imputed to him, corresponds with his positive description of his former actions within this chapter. Job is not just soliloquising at this point.

This relates to his formal complaint. He is asserting his innocence. The chapter is an important one for other reasons.

It gives us a portrait of what righteousness looks like. Francis Anderson writes, The words of Job's negative confession, chapter 31, indicate the loftiest moral standards. For him, right conduct is almost entirely social.

His private duty to himself as a man is not discussed. His duty to God and the cult is touched on only in the matter of idolatry, chapter 31, verse 26 and following. An important but negative matter.

In Job's conscience, sins are not just wrong things people do, disobeying known laws of God or society, to omit to do good to any fellow human being of whatever rank or class would be a grievous offence to God. Anderson's point is an important one. Job's portrayal of himself here is of a man who is working righteousness and establishing justice within his society, not just someone who is being righteous for his own sake.

Job's righteousness is creative and restorative, not just the pale righteousness of avoidance of sins. In such righteousness, Job is reflecting something of God's own character of righteousness. God is the one who judges and brings justice to his people, something that is integral to a vision of righteous rule more generally.

The idealized just man is a man of strength and substance, a man with the might and authority to frustrate the actions of the oppressors and with the means to raise up the poor. He is a just warrior and a gracious comforter, a man who has power but a man who uses that power for the sake of those who have none. Gerald Janssen remarks upon the similarities between Job's self-portrayal and the description of the ideal king in places like Psalm 72.

In Psalm 72 verse 1-7 Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son. May he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice. Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people and the hills in righteousness.

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor. May they fear you while the sun endures, and as long as the moon throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

In his days may the righteous flourish and peace abound till the moon be no more. And then in verses 11-15 May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him, for he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has 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. Long may he live. May gold of Sheba be given to him, may prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all the day.

As in the case of the righteous Davidic king of Psalm 72, in Job's portrayal here his wealth is not envied by other people, nor is his prosperity resented. Rather they are seen as a blessing for the whole people, because he is using his might and his strength for the sake of the up-building of everyone. Through his strength and authority he can act on behalf of the poor, he can achieve and enact justice for the oppressed.

Looking back on his former estate from his present condition is a painful experience for Job though. As he looks back he perceives how much he has lost. Things that were once

a source of comfort to him, the fact that God watched over him for instance, are now attended with a sense of menace.

In chapter 10 verse 14, If I sin you watch me, and do not acquit me of my iniquity. Much as in the enumeration of Job's blessings and riches in Job chapter 1, the favour of God was held above everything else. The way that he related to God was the most important thing.

Here again we see that it is the friendship of God that really marked out these former days. He enjoyed the friendship of God and consequently enjoyed all these other benefits. Now it seems that has been lost completely.

He describes in hyperbolic language the blessings that he enjoyed of the earth. We might think of the way that the land of promise was described as a land flowing with milk and honey. Here his steps are washed with butter, connected with the milk.

The rock pours out streams of oil. Perhaps this is the olive press. Perhaps we might also, as Norman Harbell suggests, hear something of an allusion to God as the rock in this particular expression.

Job, now cruelly accused by his friends, looks back on the status that he once enjoyed in the society. Although Job was not yet old, Eliphaz back in chapter 15 verse 10 said, Both the grey-haired and the aged are among us, older than your father. He nonetheless enjoyed an honour and a status above his years.

When he went to the gate of the city, the place of judgment, he was honoured above all others and by all others. The assertive young men stood back before him. The wise sages stood up from their seats.

The rulers closed their mouths and the men of substance within the society were hushed. Everyone respected Job and wanted to hear what he had to say. Eliphaz back in chapter 22 verses 6-9 made some serious allegations against Job.

For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The man with power possessed the land, and the favoured man lived in it.

You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed. Job here gives the most contrary testimony. Far from being guilty of the things that Eliphaz has accused him of, he was an exemplar of virtuous rule, and given the public nature of the acts that he is describing, none of this should be hard to substantiate.

If Job were in fact lying, it could easily be exposed. In his character as a righteous ruler, Job reflects the character that God himself is supposed to have, and which has been

called into question by his experience. He delivered the poor who cried for help.

Will God deliver him when he is a poor man crying for help? Job acted on behalf of those in sorest distress. His righteousness was proactive, it took the initiative, it repaired those things that were broken, and lifted up those people who were downcast. Job describes himself as putting on righteousness and it clothing him, his justice being like a robe and a turban.

This is language that might remind us of the way that God's justice is spoken of. In places like Isaiah chapter 59 verse 17, he put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head. He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.

Job's justice, his enacting of justice, and the effectual outworking of his justice in his society is as obvious as the clothes that he is wearing. This virtue and action is something that he becomes so identified with that it is like the clothes on his back. He was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame.

His strength was the strength of those who had no strength of their own. The father was an especially important character. It was not just the emotional relationship that he had with his family, it was the fact that through his might the family was protected, provided for, and justice was enacted for them.

Scripture is particularly concerned for the characters of the widow and the fatherless, those who lack a strong and faithful man to act on their behalf. God himself is a father to those who are fatherless. Those who lack anyone to act on their behalf find that God makes their cause his own.

Job was not a lazy judge either. He sought out causes, they didn't just have to come to him. He diligently applied himself to the activity.

He used his strength to bring down oppressors. He broke the teeth of the unrighteous and delivered their prey from their mouths. In this situation Job had a confidence that the Lord was blessing and smiling upon him.

He was acting as a representative of God, in God's name, and in a way that reflected God's own character. He believed that he would die in his nest, his days would be multiplied. Some have argued that the word translated as sand in the ESV should be translated as phoenix, it being a reference to the myth of that particular bird that could be restored to new life and renewed to its youth.

His roots would spread out to the waters, he would be like a blessed tree. We've had a number of images of trees within the book of Job. Job has already wondered whether, like a tree, he might be revived to new life after what seems like his final end.

In this former period of his life his glory was fresh with him. He was surrounded, as it were, with a halo of honour and blessing. His bow, his physical strength was ever new in his hand.

He returns in the concluding verses of the chapter to the former status of honour and power that he enjoyed in the society. In matters of dispute and debate, he was the final word. His words were longed for as those which would settle a matter and give insight and wisdom.

His benevolence was something that caused the whole society to rejoice in him. Indeed, he was the one that set the course of the society. He sat as a chief, he was the king among the troops, he was the one with the authority and the rule and the might, but he was also the one who comforts mourners.

He was not lifted up in his heart above the people. He was their brother, the one who acted as their great kinsman-redeemer. All of this, however, is far in the past.

Job's condition now seems completely otherwise. Who will act as a redeemer for him? Is God a righteous judge and king, comforter of the oppressed and the weak and the needy, in the way that Job once was? A question to consider. Where else in scripture do we have such portrayals of righteous kings and rulers and ideal visions of the inaction of justice within the ancient world? What might we learn from such portrayals about justice in our own situations? James Chapter 3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

For we all stumble in many ways, and if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at ships also.

Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness.

The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed, and has been tamed by mankind. But no human being can tame the tongue.

It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.

My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grape

vine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Concern for speech and the tongue is pervasive in the wisdom material in scripture, and unsurprisingly for a book that works so much within that tradition, it is discussed by James at length in chapter 3. This concern for the tongue is already present in James chapter 1 verses 19-20.

Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. And again in verse 26 of that chapter, if anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. He begins the chapter with a warning against desiring to become a teacher.

The teacher is charged with a task of judgment, that means that they must open themselves up to a greater judgment. As Jesus teaches in Matthew chapter 7 verse 2 in the Sermon on the Mount, for with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. The person who is the teacher is charged to engage in acts of judgment, and so they must assume this greater responsibility to be judged themselves.

Beyond this, they also have a responsibility for the spiritual well-being of those committed to their charge. The teaching that they give will have an influence upon people's lives. We might here consider the way that Jesus particularly focuses upon the religious teachers of his time.

He challenges them for their unfaithfulness, and the way that they lead others astray, the way that they bind heavy burdens upon people, the way that their pride, love of money, and love of the praise of men leads them to adulterate the word of God, to substitute their traditions for the word of God, and the way that their hypocrisy means that the judgment they mete out to others is not something that they apply to themselves. James is very much thinking along the same lines. The teacher works with his tongue, but the tongue is a treacherous tool.

The person who has mastered their tongue is a perfect and mature person. If you can master your tongue, you can master every single part of your life. We might consider

here the importance that the tongue has for the prophet.

When prophets are called in scripture, often what is particularly focused upon is the preparation of their mouth for speech, the way in which halting mouths are equipped to speak, the way in which unclean lips are purified, the way in which tongues are made glad and kindled with a spiritual fire. The bit in the mouth of the horse and the rudder on the ship both illustrate the power of a little thing to control bodies much greater than themselves. The images here are ones of control.

The person who controls their tongue can control their entire life or an entire body of people. Tongues can be controlled, of course, for good and for evil. Carefully chosen words can be things that move great nations and their outcomes.

We might think about the serpent's temptation of Eve, the way in which he cunningly insinuates that God is one who is withholding. We might also think of Hushai the Archite's counsel, his brilliant and shrewd use of words to get Absalom to reject the counsel of Ahithophel and to buy David a window of time to regroup. The person who masters their words can work wonders.

They can persuade people, they can emotionally move people, they can instruct people in the truth. The tongue can legitimately boast of great things then. It is a most powerful instrument indeed.

However, the tongue is a cause of destruction. Now we turn from images of control to an image of a destructive power that is completely out of control, the small spark that starts a forest fire. Such an image of the tongue as a flame is also found in places such as Proverbs chapter 16 verse 27.

A worthless man plots evil and his speech is like a scorching fire. The tongue is a world of unrighteousness. This is maybe similar to what Jesus teaches in Matthew chapter 15 verses 10 to 11 and 16 to 19.

And he called the people to him and said to them, hear and understand it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but what comes out of the mouth. This defiles a person. And he said, are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart and this defiles a person.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. The tongue is a small piece of flesh and yet it stains the whole body. It inflames all of our existence.

In Ephesians chapter 4 verse 29 Paul speaks of corrupting speech. The tongue is something that can spread a sort of rottenness within us and within our communities. A connection between the tongue and fire is not restricted to the negative imagery of the



tongue that brings destruction and death in the service of Satan.

The tongue might also be set on fire from heaven. The word of the Lord is spoken of as akin to fire in Jeremiah chapter 23 verse 29. In 2 Samuel chapter 22 verse 9 devouring fire is said to come forth from the Lord's mouth.

In Isaiah chapter 30 verse 27 the Lord's tongue is compared to a consuming fire. And the incendiary character of the words of the prophet is a recurring theme in scripture. The word of the Lord is as fire and fire proceeds from the Lord's mouth when he speaks.

As organs of the Lord's speech the prophets also have their mouths empowered and purified by divine fire. The Lord tells the prophet Jeremiah that he has made his words on Jeremiah's mouth fire. In Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 14 in Revelation chapter 11 verse 5 fire proceeds from the mouths of the prophetic witnesses.

The employment of the image of fire in order to describe the relationship between the prophet and the word and the spirit of God is quite appropriate. The prophet is animated by a power that originates outside of himself, exceeds his own strength as we see in Jeremiah chapter 20 verse 9 and is driven by a will to which his own will must be conformed. The prophet must also faithfully fulfill his duty lest his spirit given power be extinguished.

Recognizing this we might see the tongue as something that will either bear the flames of hell bring destruction and death or it will be kindled with the fire of heaven. In Isaiah chapter 6 verses 6 to 7 one of the seraphim touches the lips of the prophet Isaiah with a live coal purifying his lips for future witness. We see a similar thing in Acts chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost as tongues of flame come upon the heads of each of the disciples.

These tongues are connected with the tongues with which they speak. Their tongues are kindled so that they can bear the divine word. However in James the tongues are not set on fire from heaven but set on fire from hell.

Whether cursing, the spreading of rumors, angry outbursts, lies or other falsehoods and deceptions, flattery, boasting, coarse speech, blasphemy or any number of other things the tongue spreads corruption and destruction. Men are unable to tame the tongue. The tongue is something that has a sort of a will of its own.

The fool is defined by his tongue in the book of Proverbs. His tongue and his mouth operate as if by their own accord. He breathes out lies.

He speaks lies not because he has planned or deliberated about them but just because he is ruled by lies. Lies just come forth naturally from him. His tongue is a rod for his own back.

He says things not knowing what he's saying and ends up suffering the consequences.

His tongue brings death. His tongue is a fire that gives off sparks that ignite great conflagrations of conflict within communities and which burn up his own life.

James challenges inconsistency and doubleness throughout his epistle and the tongue is characterized by just this. The same tongues that bear God's name in worship can also bear foul language and hateful speech. The tongue is found at the opening of the mouth and it is at the mouth that that which is within proceeds forth.

It's at the mouth, the spring of the person, that the true character of what lies within is portrayed. Jesus teaches much the same. By their fruit you will know them.

Our mouths display the fruit of our hearts. One of the best ways to understand a person's character is to pay close attention to the way that they speak over a long period of time. In verse 13 James asks, Who is wise and understanding among you? It may seem as if he's turning to a very different subject here but he's continuing many of the same themes and I think the underlying theme is the same.

It relates to the question of discerning and displaying the presence of true wisdom. How can we discern and display this? James began the chapter by warning people against the desire to become teachers and I think this is what marks people out as fitting teachers. Wisdom is manifested, James argues, in good works done in meekness.

What is this meekness? It's a lack of pride. It's placing others ahead of ourselves. It produces good works that are characteristic of faith also.

That's how you know what true wisdom is. James might be speaking to people aspiring to the office of teachers here. Jealousy and selfish ambition can so often drive such a quest.

People want a platform. They want the eyes of the masses to be upon them. They behave with the opposite of the meekness that is characteristic of true wisdom.

Some people like to boast about their wisdom in a way that is false to the truth. True wisdom, however, wisdom that comes from God, comes with humility. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Humility is integral to such fear. By contrast, earthly and demonic wisdom is distinctively marked by jealousy and pride and these things produce social conflict and disorder and all sorts of sin. This is precisely not the sort of person that you want to become a teacher and a leader.

However, true wisdom is utterly different. It is characterised by purity, which is a key term for James' understanding and characterisation of true religion. It is morally unstained.

It will not produce evil. This is its primary trait. It is a fresh water spring as it were that

will not give forth brackish water.

James describes such wisdom in a manner that is reminiscent of Paul's list of the fruit of the spirit in Galatians 5, verses 22-23. It is peaceable. It is not given to conflict.

It is not always spoiling for a fight. It is gentle and kind. It is not harsh in its treatment of others.

It is open to reason. It is tractable to the truth. It is not pridefully bound up in its own opinions.

It is open to being proved wrong. It is full of mercy and good fruits. It is loving to the needy in speech and in act.

It is impartial. It judges according to true judgment and not according to mere prejudice and appearance. It is sincere, genuine and guileless.

Such wisdom is perhaps above all other things, distinguished by its peacefulness. It sows in peace and it makes peace. The result is a harvest of righteousness, the whole range of practices that are pleasing to the Lord.

A question to consider. What are some of the different forms of control of tongue that the wise person can exhibit?