The Righteousness of Job (Job 1.1-5)
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There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

Introduction

Last week on how to approach Job, we considered the book as a whole noting that it has an introduction, body, and conclusion. The introduction is the prologue (the speech that goes before) of chapters 1-2. The body is composed of dialogues of chapters 3-42.6 (these are speeches in which people try to get through to each other). The conclusion is the epilogue of 42.6-17 (the final, additional speech). The primary speaker throughout is the writer-narrator who guides the reader’s interpretation of all the speeches within the narrative. He guides by the impulse of the Spirit who inspired the writing of the book making it the product of the creative breath of Almighty God (2 Tim 3.16-17; Ps 33.6-9). The Holy Spirit is the ultimate speaker. Therefore, when we face difficulties of interpretation, we begin with the sound starting point that our study will not be in vain because the Book of Job is the word of God. In it, the Holy Spirit shows us the way to wisdom. So, we can be assured that He will bless our prayerful effort to understand Job’s experience and from there to understand our own experience with the hard things of life.

Thus, as we turn to the opening words of the narrative (1.1-5) and to the subject of Job’s righteous character, it should be no surprise to find ourselves already beginning to wrestle with the great questions of the book. That said, let’s now consider the righteousness of Job in three ways: its meaning, its fruits, and its depth.

I. The meaning of Job’s righteousness

We can begin this section a with focus question: what is the significance of the strong language “blameless” (along with its parallels, upright, fearing God, and avoiding evil)? For an answer, we will wrestle with the notion of perfection and the challenge of ambiguity regarding the patriarch’s righteousness.

A. Wrestling with the notion of perfection

Clines, a Job scholar and commentator, defends the view that the text presents us with a sinless Job. “Blameless” means perfect and with the parallel terms, it indicates that Job is a perfectly innocent person (Job in WBC I, lv). He notes that in the thinking of many Christians Job must be blameworthy for his misfortunes, at least in some ultimate way, but Clines goes on to say that this runs contrary to the problem that the book presents, namely that great suffering comes to a blameless man, “...a perfectly innocent person, who deserves nothing of what happens to him” (iv). His perfection relates to being upright (straight, right, just, lawful); so, he was complete in his uprightness; he was perfectly righteous. So, Clines does not find any way to qualify Job’s righteousness. He argues that the issue of the book is whether Job is a sinner or not, whether he is righteous or wicked (I, 12). There are no grades of his sin; no serious versus slight options; no degrees; we cannot think of Job as a sinner saint. This writer then states that it may
seem pretentious to assert Job’s sinlessness, but that is what the narrator does as well as Job himself. Dramatically, God asserts the same (in 1.8; 2.3) both before and after Job enters his deep trial. So, says Clines, the problem of the book is presented “in the simple terms of innocence and guilt, suffering deserved and undeserved” (12). If we listen to the book, we will not “become entangled in niceties about gradations of sinfulness or righteousness” (12).

In reply to Clines, it is part of the quest for wisdom to have such black and white statements as “he is a sinner or not.” This kind of language stirs up the mind to weigh the truly complex nature of sin, suffering, and the relationship they sustain to each other. It appears that Clines over simplifies because he misses this simple fact that in wisdom literature the truth will not be an either/or; it will be a middle position with intended ambiguity. Moreover, his view ultimately entails (to use his own words) an unhistorical Job and a fictive and unrealistic character whose experiences lie outside the realm of normal human experience. The normal here is of a sinner blessed by grace. The notion of sinlessness does not work. We have to face the fact of ambiguity.

B. Wrestling with the challenge of ambiguity

Although it may be easy for us to reject the notion that Job is sinless, his righteousness is described in bold terms. What else could a person be other than sinless if he has perfect righteousness coupled with the fear of God and the disposition to avoid evil constantly (1.1, 5)? However, some examples will show that we need to think of Job’s righteousness as complex and ambiguous.

1. First, Deuteronomy 10

The language of Deuteronomy about covenant obedience has an either/or quality about it like that of Job: either you are walking with God or you are walking away from Him, but those who walk with God have the command to be no longer stubborn (10.16). In other words, the blameless and upright in this context are people who have stubbornly sinful hearts, but who turn away from evil in fear of God to serve, love, and praise God (Deut 10.20-21). Put another way, they are sinners redeemed from bondage in Egypt, and thus from bondage to sin. It is the same with the blameless God-fearing righteousness of Job. Although it is stated in absolute, black, white, and simple terms, Job is righteous as a sinner. He is a sinner that walks with God doing what is right instead of what is evil.

2. Second, in the comparison of Job with Noah and Daniel (in Ezek 14.14, 20) as righteous men, Noah is clearly a justified sinner who lived a righteous life that was tainted by drunkenness, and Daniel confesses his sinfulness in solidarity with the sinfulness of the nation that brought him and others captive to Babylon. The comparison suggests that we think of Job in a way that we think of Christians, ambiguously, as sinner saints.

3. Third, Abraham was a man of great faith in his walk with God, and the Lord said to him: I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless (Gen 17.1). His blameless walk as a great man of faith included sins that ran counter to his character. As we may often say of people we love: what he did was out of character; that is not the tendency of his life before God and men.

Once we have the big picture before us, then the conclusion is inevitable: Job is blameless as a sinful man. So, the fog of ambiguity increases for now we have to wrestle with the difficulty of how a man can be perfectly righteous as a sinner. We will return to this point later. For now, we will have to absorb the whole truth, odd as it may sound to speak of a perfectly upright sinful man. I think you already know the answer to this difficulty; I am sure that you can anticipate the fuller clarification that is still to come in this text when we get to the depth of Job’s righteousness, but first things first, which brings us to the fruits of his righteousness in verse 2.
II. The fruits of his righteousness

The move from verse 1 to 2 subtly bonds the righteousness of Job with his abundance of family, possessions, authority, and status by the simple use of the word “and” that is left untranslated. If translated we have this: **and [or and so] there were born to him seven sons and three daughters.** 3 He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east (1.2-3). There is a close association of this abundance with his fear of God (v. 1). Thus, in a soft and slightly ambiguous way, we are told that his wealth of family (having ten children), of possessions (having thousands of animals of various types), of authority (having many, many servants under his direction) and of status (being the greatest man of all the people in the East)...we are told that all of these things flow like a stream from his piety.

It is worthy of note that with all we know about the deceitfulness of riches, the opening verses about Job and his prosperity tell us that his riches are God’s blessing because he is a man of godly character. Without question, the book does not trumpet an attack on material prosperity and domestic joy. Righteousness and riches are not oil and water. They exist together (coexist) in the man whose name was Job, the greatest of the East in wealth and holiness. Thus, the assessment here of Job is not an attack on wealth of family or status.

Then we ask, is the book a polemic for wealth? We cannot put a great gulf between wealth and righteousness, nor can we merely assume that a wealthy person is a righteous person entitled to his wealth. The notable point here is that the text opens the door to the idea that righteous people walk on a solid path of rich blessing. In a fundamental sense, God promises the good things of life to those who are blameless, upright, God-fearing, and resistant to evil. He promises these things and grants them. That He did regarding Job, a man richly blessed because he was a man of exemplary righteousness.

III. The depth of Job’s righteousness

After developing the ideas of Job’s character, family, and wealth, the narrator returns to Job’s character in verses 4-5 by giving more information about his family. He focuses on two regular practices, one by the children and one by the patriarch (feasting and worshipping).

A. First, consider the festive practice of the children

In verse 4, we read, **His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them.** Although this custom activates Job’s priestly role, there is nothing sinful here; the family is not guilty of riotous living. Eating and drinking do not refer to gluttony and drunkenness. What we have is just a reference to reoccurring times of feasting at one son’s home and then another in some orderly way (each one on his day), which means that each had his turn, say, on his birthday (so Job spoke of “his day,” 3.1). The invitation of the sisters indicates family unity in the joy of regular festivities, which is icing on the cake of Job’s blessed life. It is a great blessing to a father to have unity, love and joy among his children. The festive practice is hardly sinful; instead, it is a testimony to family righteousness. That is the context for Job’s worship.

B. Now let’s consider the worshipping practice of Job

If what we have said about Job’s children is true, then how do we explain Job’s scrupulous priestly practice that is only required because of sin? What do we learn about Job from these words of 1.5: **And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, “It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.”** Thus Job did continually? It seems to me that the clue to discover the real depth of Job’s righteousness is not just that he offered sacrifices, but that he did so for “possible” sins: **It may be that my children have**
sinned. There is an odd ring to this practice. What does this mean? For emphasis, it can be said that Job is scrupulous, excessive, and even obsessive in his mediation for his children. So what gives? We have worship by a ritual with no particular sins in view. It is a burnt offering so it a symbol of thankfulness, but how are we to think of being thankful for possible sins? Possibility here shifts our attention to the ritual as a gospel sign, to what the sign says regarding sin generally. Sin is against God and it has its roots in the heart. Hence, the concern about cursing God in their hearts. The depth of Job’s character is such that he recognized the potential of sin in the human heart. Surely this recognition pertains to his own heart along with the hearts of his children; if not, then he would hardly be upright but hypocritical. So, Job is not being excessive; he is being diligent. He instructs his family by the regular use of God’s appointed means for worship. The ritual calls for a recognition that sin requires sacrifice for protection from the wrath of God; those who miss the mark of God’s holiness need this protection. Furthermore, that which requires the shedding of blood (namely sin and evil) is something to avoid. Thus, the ritual also leads the way to resist sin and to repent of sin when what is possible happens, and importantly, Job embraced the sign with diligence and constancy; he therefore embraced all it meant.

To put the emphasis where it belongs, this means that consistently Job’s life was characterized by righteous conduct that flowed from the heart in accord with his concern regarding sins of the heart and mouth. Therefore, his consistency in this kind of worship shows that he acknowledged his sinfulness and turned away from it. The implication of his righteous (and thus honest ritual practice) is that he is well aware of potential sins of the heart and the call of the sign to acknowledgment and repentance. As sacrifice for sin, the ritual calls for acknowledgment of sin where applicable and to turning away from it in repentance where necessary. What the ritual sign of the gospel is for his children, it is objectively, and therefore, it is that for himself as well. This objectivity derives from sin as a potentiality and it expresses the promise of forgiveness to all who hear it. The fact that Job is so earnest, to what some take to be excessive or obsessive use of the gospel sign, shows how fully he valued the gospel call in the ritual and thus it shows that the deepest depth of Job’s righteousness is his repentant heart.

Conclusion

We have a lesson in this text about true wisdom. Since the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and because Job’s exemplary life combines the fear of God with blamelessness, uprightness, and turning away from evil, then the example of Job tells us how to be wise. We are wise and not foolish when we live, like Job, blamelessly.

That seems plain enough, but is this realistic? We want wisdom and surely it is obtainable, but when we come to blamelessness we enter a thick fog regarding our own lives. Day by day we have to pray for forgiveness because we sin and that is difficult to square with being righteous like Job: blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil. Wisdom seems to be something black or white, period, However, that is not where the truth lies. We have to pursue the wisdom of Job, which means that we must be blameless and (can I say it) perfectly righteous. How can we say this, let alone think it?

I may feel off the hook when I read the qualifications of deacons (1 Tim 3.10) and note that they are to be tested and found blameless...off the hook because it does not say that of pastors! Of course, I am not really off the hook because blamelessness applies to pastors by implication mutatis mutandis (with the necessary adjustments). Notably, you are not off the hook either as Philippians 2 states, you are to be blameless in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation where you are to shine as lights (Phil 2.15). The context is practical and earthly: in the midst [of wickedness and darkness] shine as lights.
Therefore, Job’s exemplary life calls us to be like him in wisdom. We are to be like our Lord who went everywhere doing good. This is how we glorify God by the shining light of righteousness that arises from the heart in reverential fear of God (not just outward forms of goodness and religion).

What is most important is that the righteous act of repentance be the core of our righteousness at its deepest depth for hidden beneath the righteous act of repentance is the acknowledgement of sin daily embracing the gospel call in the sacrifice required because of sin. The perfectly righteous, the blameless and upright are people who acknowledge their sin and turn away from it with the constant prayer:

Teach me, O Lord, thy holy way
And give me an obedient mind;
That in thy service I may find
My soul's delight from day to day.

(Trinity, 456).

To be sure, the power is in the work of Christ and His work alone because the emphasis here in Job’s priestly sacrifice inseparably connects righteousness with the remission of sin by the shedding of blood. Naturally then, we cannot trust in the work of our hands: it is not what my hands have done; it is thy work alone O Christ that saves my guilty soul. The power is in the blessing of God already present for He chose us in Christ to be blameless (Eph 1.4). Job approaches the Lord by sacrifice with thankfulness for that is a basic meaning of a burnt offering. Likewise, we take up the pursuit of a consistent and constant life of righteousness by faith and with thanksgiving because it all begins with the gracious blessing of God in our lives.

This is wisdom indeed; challenging and even ambiguous at times. We need to cultivate this wisdom for daily life by praying for one another as Philippians 1 teaches: this I pray that your love may abound...that you may be blameless until the day of Christ (Phil 1.9-11).

Blameless perfect righteousness in the fear of God is a work in progress; it is to be your life in practice and reality; it is perfect-repentant-righteousness by the grace of God.

Let us fall down before the majesty of God from whom Christ has become wisdom to us, and righteousness, sanctification and redemption; may the Holy Spirit enable us to live blamelessly in the fear of God with a righteousness of life that has its deepest depth in repentance of heart; to the glory of the triune God, amen.

Read and sing the prayer of Ps 86.11, Trinity, 456