

Sunday April 24th, 2022

Job 31:1-8
“Job’s Last Words”

What would you want to be the last words you say in this life? You might be tempted to speak about others or about God, but what would you say about yourself? It is actually a rare thing when people have the strength, and clarity of mind, to utter something profound just before they die. There are more than a few examples of famous last words that maybe leave us scratching our heads.

Joan Crawford of the movies, reportedly said just before she died, *“Don’t you dare ask God to help me!”* P. T. Barnam the circus promoter said as he was dying, *“How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?”* Albert Einstein said, *“It is tasteless to prolong life artificially. I have done my share; it is time to go. I will do it elegantly.”* Harvey Korman from the Carol Burnett show supposedly said, *“Tape Seinfeld for me”*.

Sometimes people try to leave a lasting impact by having things written on their tombstones. These are actual tombstone I was able to look up. Engraved in stone over a grave is the words, “I was hoping for a pyramid”. On another it reads, “Raised four beautiful daughters with only one bathroom and still there was love.” Another marker reads, interestingly enough, “Now I know something you don’t”

Mel Blanc the voice of many cartoon characters for Looney Tunes has on his stone, “That’s all folks”. Merv Griffin the talk show host has on his marker, “I will not be right back after this message”. There is an actual stone which reads, “Here lies John Yeast, pardon me for not rising”. And finally, these very honest words are found on a stone, “I came here without being consulted and I leave without my consent.”

So, again I ask; what words sum you up as a person? What would be, your first words to your maker when you stand before him? This is a challenging question. The Apostle Paul tried to answer it in Acts 24:16. “So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward God and man”. Meaning that Paul wants his conscience clear so that he has no unforgiven sin in his life as he meets God.

The passage before us today, in our journey through Job, is a significant one because these are Job’s last words; except for brief reactions to the things God says later on. When this chapter ends, we read, “The words of Job are ended”. You can almost use that same description for anyone who dies. It is critical then that we pay close attention to Job, as he describes himself and his heartfelt needs before his creator.

Our first impression of this passage may not be very positive. It reads like the words are dripping with self-righteousness. Kind of like the parable Jesus told of the Pharisee who prayed that he thanked God he was not like the tax-collector who also came to pray. To sum up Job’s words we might say something like, “If I had done anything wrong, I would have deserved all the suffering I have experienced. I would deserve to be punished by God. But I have not done anything wrong”.

In our modern understanding of our own spiritual health, we may be inclined to dismiss Job's words as hypocrisy, just as his friends did. Yet, if we are to make any sense of God's words to Job, and God's rebuke of Job's friends at the end of the book, we cannot dismiss this passage as extreme self-righteousness. In this chapter, Job is reflecting on what he believes to be his standing before God, and what little glimmers of meaning he has so far gleaned from all this.

The key to getting a handle on this passage, comes down to one of the most important concepts in all of scripture. It was a lesson I had to learn the hard way, way back in seminary. To be honest, I am not the best biblical scholar around by any measure, but in my Old Testament classes I really struggled. I took an Old Testament theology course in which we were to write weekly little papers on the concepts we were covering.

I was barely passing, mostly due to my poor spelling and grammar, but I was missing the boat in trying to understand the heart of the theology of the Old Testament. That is until I finally grasp the most important concept in trying to understand the Old Testament and also, the New Testament. That concept is "covenant". You cannot understand scripture without a good grasp of the significance of covenants.

The bible is oozing with references to covenants, and Job is really no different. Covenants are sacred contracts between people, or kingdoms, or with God. Job 31 is built on Job's reflection on the covenant he has made. Job says of himself that he "has made a covenant with his eyes". It is an admission that he had made a covenant with himself. Kind of like a resolution, but with more weight to it.

The reference to the eyes refers to his desires, his affections, and the longings of his heart. Job has vowed to himself to keep a clear conscience. This would help explain his commitment to all the sacrifices he made for himself and his children. The first thing he promised himself was that he would not "gaze at a virgin". In other words, to lust after a young maiden. He means more than appreciating someone's beauty. Rather he refers to fantasizing about carnal activities with her.

Why did he center in on this particular issue? Later on, in his list of sins, he mentions adultery, so why start off with this issue? The best explanation is that this particular sin is a real challenge for men, maybe Job personally. James 3:2 reads that any man who can control sexual desires controls his whole body. The other part of this is that throughout the bible, there is a strong connection between sexual faithfulness and religious faithfulness.

Many religions throughout the middle east, actually instituted prostitution as a religious activity. Therefore, sexual sin is directly connected to idolatry. Job knows though, that his own conscience is not the sole authority in governing his morality. He knows God is watching, and that is enough motivation for him to keep his covenant. Job believes he is a man of integrity and God knows this.

Many cultures have this sense of weighing a person after death, to see if they are worthy to enter paradise. In the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, there is an image of a deceased person's heart being weighed against a feather.

The feather represents truth or justice, and a heart that is not free of hypocrisy will tip the scales against the person.

But you can claim whatever you want, but is their actual evidence that what you are espousing is true. Job gives a list of sin and virtues, similar to ones in the New Testament, but the list is not to be seen as exhaustive. Job uses a kind of formula to wade through his list. He first describes the sin, then the judgement, then the reason the judgment is valid, and finally Job pronounces he is innocent of the transgression.

Job begins with the sin of falsehood, or as he calls it, “a turning aside to the right”. Then he again points to his eyes, meaning that the eyes lead the heart to sinful desires. He talks about spots or stains on his hands as a way of describing actions that are impure. The key here is the heart, which guides all things. In John 2:16 we read about, “the desire of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life.”

Job then switches to the punishments or judgements, because in all covenants there is a list of curses should one break the covenant. A wicked person, for example will not enjoy the bounty of their land. Their crops will fail, be stolen or destroyed. For the one who commits adultery, Job states that his wife shall lust after another man. The punishment for adultery is another man taking away the transgressor’s intimacy with his wife.

Then Job reflects on his treatment of his servants. Job acknowledges there is a power imbalance between the master and his servants. The relationship between master and servants is ripe for exploitation. Interestingly Job connects his relationship to God in the same vein. If Job had treated his servants like God treated him, he would deserve punishment. Mistreating one’s underlings is wrong because in the end all people are created by God.

Proverbs 22:2 reads, “whoever mocks the poor insults his maker.” This leads to Job’s reflection on generosity to the poor. We see here reference to groups mentioned in later covenants between God and Israel. Name the widows and orphans and needy people in general. The “eyes of the widow” here means the needs of that person for the necessities of life. Unlike Job’s eyes wandering to lustful matter, here the eyes express a right and natural desire.

Such things as food. But more than that Job talks about the fact that the fatherless have dined with him and what he had he shared. Then job mentions the sin of violence against the defenceless. The idiom “raise the hand” means to publicly condemn or judge someone. It may be that Job was so revered that he sat at the city gates and mediating disputes and conducting business. But Job reiterates that he has done no wrong.

He has not abused his position and power. If he had done so, his “raised hand” would have been lowered by his shoulder being dislocated. So that his “arm” or symbol of power and influence would have been useless. Job then reflects on his dealings with his servants and the defenceless. Yes, Job was a rich man but he assets that he did not trust in his riches. Throughout his time of prosperity, he continued to trust God.

And just in case anyone wondered if Job was guilty of idolatry, he lets his friends know that he has not worshipped the sun or moon. It maybe that this was the common religion of Job's Day but he does not succumb to its enticements. "My mouth has kissed my hand" suggests something like blowing a kiss at the moon or sun.

In 1 Kings 19:18 we read about "every mouth that has not kissed" as a reference to worshipping Baal. Then Job insists that he has not been vindictive against his enemies. Job has not cheered when his enemies have suffered. Nor has he cursed them. This is in alignment with the Psalms and Proverbs that there is not place in the life of the righteous to indulge delightful thoughts at the calamity falling on one's enemies.

Job also insists that he has shown hospitality by inviting the stranger who is traveling by him to enter his tent and sup with him and rest. The showing of hospitality in the middle east was of great importance in the moral obligations of the culture, and still is in many parts of the middle east and elsewhere. Job insists that his doors were always open. Job concludes his list by stating that he does not act with hypocrisy as others do.

Job presents his list of things he hasn't done to defend himself to his friends but also to question if God has seen his behavior. He wants God to weigh his heart, to see if he is living a life of integrity. Job longs for vindication and to regain his dignity before God. "Here is my signature" Job says. It refers to a legal act of declaring what he said is true. This is his final words on the matter. "I am innocent" Job insists and, "I challenge God to prove otherwise".

In the language of a modern courtroom, Job is asking for an accounting of his indictment. When a defendant appears before the court reads the indictment, or list of charges being brought and against the one charged. Then a plea is entered. Job, is demanding his indictment. He is convinced that should such a reading be undertaken; he will be found innocent. Job concludes his words by stating again that he has kept his covenant to himself.

What then do we make of Job's final words? Sure, they are fine words, but are they true? How can they be true, given that "all of us have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God". The only way to bring some understanding to this passage is to reflect on the redeeming work of Christ as our justification. Job's innocence only stands up, as does ours, in light of what Christ has done for us. But how does a man born before the cross say he is innocent and God take him seriously?

Job isn't the only one in this dilemma. How can King David claim he is innocent in the Psalms when he was an adulterer, who schemed to kill Uriah? Psalm 17:3 reads, "You have tried my heart, you have visited me by night, you have tested me, and you will find nothing". The only way these insistences of righteousness work is by what Paul writes in Romans 4:6. Both Job and David and many others have appropriated "the blessing of the one whom God counts righteousness apart from works."

Any righteousness Job or you and I can ever claim has to come from God himself. Our righteousness can not come from our own efforts but by the grace of God in Christ. It is not his sacrifices that allow Job to walk around with a clear conscience but because of the righteousness of God, later embodied in Jesus.

Sunday April 24th, 2022

Job's insistence on his innocence is because he is a child of grace. All of his blessings, he enjoyed before all this happened, was by God's grace.

The same is true for all of us. All the goodness we experience, is a gift of God. Despite all the horrors Job is walking through and all our struggles, we are as 1 John 1:7 reads, people "walking in the light."

Now this maybe the end of Job's words, but it is not the end of the book. Job is about to be rebuked by a new character to the story, named Elihu, and then after that God will speak himself.