

Job 12 — No Doubt Ye Are the People — Job Answers His Friends, Points to the Beasts, and Sings the Terrible Wisdom of God

Job 12: Job replies to Zophar and closes the friends' first cycle of speeches. He mocks their claim to a monopoly on wisdom, protests the righteous man laughed to scorn, sends them to school under the beasts and birds, and then unfurls a great hymn to the sovereign wisdom and power of God who looses kings, spoils counsellors, and pours contempt upon princes. Setting is the patriarchal age of Job, land of Uz (traditionally reckoned near the time of the fathers); the debate unfolds on the ash-heap outside the city.

Three friends came to sit with Job in his ruin, and for seven days they said nothing — which was the wisest thing they ever did. Then they opened their mouths, and one by one the comfort curdled into a lecture. Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar: each in turn has pressed the same tidy machine on the broken man in the ashes. God is just; God punishes sin; you are suffering; therefore you have sinned, and if you would only repent, the pain would lift. It is airtight. It is also a lie, and the whole book of Job exists to say so — God himself will declare at the end that these three "have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath" (Job 42:7).

Hebrew Word Studies

naphal (H5307) (נָפַל) — to fall, be cast down, be inferior v. 3. "I am not *inferior* to you." The word Job chooses is *naphal*, the ordinary Hebrew verb for *falling* — to drop, to be cast down, to lie fallen. Used of a wall that collapses, a warrior slain in battle, lots that fall out of the hand. So when Job says "I am not inferior to you," the picture underneath is spatial and physical: *I have not fallen below you; I do not lie lower than you do.* And that is precisely the cruelty he is answering. His friends look at a man literally sitting in ashes, scraping his sores with a potsherd, and read his low estate as low worth — as though the man who has fallen in fortune has fallen in wisdom and standing before God. Job seizes their own metaphor and refuses it. The body may be in the dust; the understanding is not. Scripture keeps insisting on this gap between a man's circumstance and a man's soul — "the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7), not on the ash-heap. It is the same protest the Psalmist raises when the wicked prosper and the faithful are struck all day long (Ps. 73). Where you have fallen is not the measure of who you are, and a friend who reads the one as the other is no comfort at all.

tsaddiq (H6662) / tamim (H8549) (צַדִּיק / תָּמִים) — righteous, just / complete, upright, blameless v. 4. "The *just upright* man is laughed to scorn." Two of the great covenant words for a good life stand side by side here, and Job stacks them deliberately over his own head. *Tsaddiq* is the *righteous* one — the person in right relation, straight with God and neighbour, the word Habakkuk will build a gospel on ("the just shall live by his faith," Hab. 2:4). *Tamim* is the *upright*, the *whole*, the *sound* — the same word God speaks over Abraham, "walk before me, and be thou perfect" (Gen. 17:1), and the word that describes an unblemished sacrifice fit for the altar (Ex. 12:5). Together they are as high a verdict as the Hebrew Bible pays a human being. And Job lays them down precisely to expose the obscenity of his situation: it is not a sinner being corrected who is laughed to scorn — it is the *tsaddiq*, the *tamim*, the man the narrator himself called "perfect and upright" in verse one of chapter one. The friends' machine has no slot for this. A theology that reads every sufferer as a sinner cannot see the righteous sufferer at all, and so it mocks him. The book of Job is written to force the slot open — and it runs straight to a Man of Sorrows who was *tsaddiq* and *tamim* beyond Job, and was laughed to scorn on a cross while the comfortable "wagging their heads" (Matt. 27:39) proved his innocence by their scorn.

yad (H3027) (יָד) — hand, power, agency vv. 6, 9, 10. Trace the word *hand* through this passage and you find Job's whole argument compressed into three verses. In verse 6 the wicked prosper "into whose *hand* God bringeth abundantly" — even the thief's full hand is filled by God. In verse 9, creation testifies that "the *hand* of the LORD hath wrought" all this. And in verse 10, the climax: "In whose *hand* is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind." *Yad* is the ordinary Hebrew word for the hand, but it is also the word for *power*, for *agency*, for the reach by which one acts — "the LORD's hand is not shortened" (Isa. 59:1). What Job does is gather every living thing, righteous and wicked, comforter and sufferer, into that one open palm. The friends want a God whose hand is a scale, weighing out reward and ruin by desert. Job answers with a God whose hand is a *cradle* — holding the very breath of all mankind, the *neshamah* God first breathed into Adam (Gen. 2:7). It is the same hand into which the Psalmist commits his spirit — "into thine hand I commit my spirit" (Ps. 31:5) — the words the Savior himself would breathe out on the cross (Lk. 23:46). To know that your life sits in that hand is not a tidy answer to suffering. It is something better and harder: a place to rest while the answer is withheld. Job cannot explain the pain. But he can name whose hand he is in, and it is not the accuser's and not the friends' — it is the LORD's.

chokmah (H2451) / gevurah (H1369) / etsah (H6098) (חָכְמָה / גְּבוּרָה / עֵצָה) — wisdom / might, strength / counsel, purpose vv. 13, 16. Job piles up the great abstractions of divine competence and hands every one of them to God. *Chokmah* is *wisdom* — the practical, world-ordering skill by which God "founded the earth" (Prov. 3:19), the very faculty the friends claim and Job here relocates to heaven. *Gevurah* is *might*, raw strength, the power to do what wisdom sees. *Etsah* is *counsel* — the settled purpose, the plan, the deliberation behind the deed. Wisdom to know, strength to do, counsel to intend: Job attributes the complete architecture of sovereign action to God alone. And notice where this vocabulary reappears at the summit of Israel's hope. Isaiah lays these same words on the shoulders of the coming Child: "his name shall be called Wonderful, *Counsellor* [*etsah*'s root], The mighty God [*gibbor*, *gevurah*'s kin]... The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of *wisdom* [*chokmah*] and understanding, the spirit of *counsel* and might" (Isa. 9:6; 11:2). What Job hymns in the abstract, Isaiah sees gathered into a person — the Messiah in whom the wisdom, strength, and counsel of God take flesh. Paul finishes the arc: Christ is "the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24). Job cannot yet see the face; but he is worshipping, in the dark, the very attributes that will one day answer him out of the whirlwind and, later still, walk out of a tomb.

From the Chapter's Architecture

I will not pretend a chiasm where there is only this cleaner shape — a straight movement from the horizontal (Job versus his friends) to the vertical (Job before God). The genius is the pivot: a man defends his own understanding against three accusers, and in the very act of defending it, dissolves all human understanding into the incomprehensible wisdom of the Almighty. By the last verse, the great and the wise of the earth are staggering in the dark like drunk men — and the point has been made. If God can do that to kings and counsellors, then the friends' confidence that they have Job's case correctly filed is itself a kind of staggering in the dark.