

JOB

(Chapter 20-21)

Wednesday, January 24, 2024



Job 20 records Zophar's final words in the book of Job. His wisdom will not be missed. He beats the same old retribution principal drum: Sin. Leads. To. Suffering. And. Judgement. Sin. Leads. To Suffering. And. Judgment.

The anger of Zophar (20:1–3)

20:1–3. Like his two partners before him, Zophar could not remain silent; he too had to speak another time. Troubled and disturbed at Job's rude words, Zophar felt he must respond. Job had said the three had insulted him numerous times (19:3), but now Zophar volleyed the notion that Job had insulted him. Some comforter he turned out to be!

Job had said God "closed their minds to understanding" (17:4), but Zophar retorted that his understanding forced him to reply. He had to share his insights!

Zophar thinks himself to be a theologian. You see this in how he starts, "Therefore, my thoughts.." Job does not want to hear his thoughts. Job wants to hear from God. Clearly, Zophar is troubled. He is distraught and disturbed by Job's persistence and obvious ignorance. Zophar believes he must teach his troubled friend.

b. The brief prosperity of the wicked (20:4–11)

20:4–11. Since Job claimed to know so much (a false accusation, for Job did not claim that), he should be aware, Zophar argued, that from the beginning of human history any joy experienced by a sinner is brief and for a moment. Job may be arrogant, Zophar arrogantly affirmed (!), but he will be brought low and die. Though high as the heavens he will, in contrast, be brought low like dung. People will not know where he is, for he will have vanished like a dream (four men in the Book of Job spoke of dreams: Eliphaz, 4:13; Job, 7:14; Zophar, 20:8; Elihu, 33:15). He will be unseen (20:9, a retort to Job's words in 7:8), his children will have to pay his obligations to the poor (since he had oppressed them, 20:19), and he will lose all his ill-gotten wealth.

Repeatedly in this oration, Zophar mentioned wealth (vv. 10, 15, 18, 20–22, 26) and its transience, an expansion of Eliphaz's earlier statement along that line (15:29). All this suggested that Job acquired his riches dishonestly. A wealthy man, if wicked, will find that his energy will be buried with him. Zophar here may have been responding to Job's mention of vigor in 18:7 (cf. 21:23 and "dust" in 10:9).

These verses describe the brevity of the wicked man's honor and reputation. Even if a wicked man somehow obtains success in this life, he is eventually like dung sitting on a sulfur sidewalk: he will dissolve into the dirt (v.7). Verses 8-11 further embellish this theme.¹

¹Douglas Sean O'Donnell, Expository Commentary, Vol. IV: Ezra and Job (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 416.

c. The impoverishment of the wicked (20:12–19)

20:12–16. A sinner may enjoy sin-gained wealth like some sweet delicacy that he relishes in his mouth, but like sour food he will lose it. Wealth becomes like poisonous snake venom (cf. v. 16) with its bitter consequences.

Riches gained by godless means are not retained, Zophar argued. In fact they are vomited up and they kill the wicked like the deadly poison of serpents (cf. v. 14) or the venom of an adder's fangs.

20:17–19. Streams with their drinking water, and honey and cream, symbols of prosperity, cannot be enjoyed by sinners. "Cream" may be curdled milk or a kind of yogurt, a delicacy in the Middle East. As a transgressor dies, he must give back (cf. v. 10) the results of his toil and profits from his business without having enjoyed them. The reason for all this is that he took advantage of the poor, even taking their houses, in order to enrich himself. Of course Zophar had Job in mind, but later the suffering saint, here badgered again by verbal blows, denied such accusations (29:12, 15; 31:16–22).

Eating is the main metaphor of Job 20:12–29, with terms such as 'sweet in his mouth' (v.12), "under his tongue" (v.12b), "in his mouth" (v.13b), "food...in his stomach" (v.14a), "swallows" (v.15a), "vomits" (v.15a), "belly" (v.15b), "suck" (v.16a), "tongue" (v.16b), "honey and curds" (v.17b), "fruit" (v.18a) and "swallow" (v.18b). The overall image is disgusting: the wicked man is destroyed by his own appetite for evil.

d. The anger of God against the wicked (20:20–29)

20:20–23. Though always craving for more wealth (another unfair charge by Zophar), a wicked person will find that it cannot save him for it will not endure. Troubles will come upon him (misery, 'āmāl, was a response to the same Heb. word used by Job in 3:10, 20; 7:3; 16:2; see comments on 3:10), and just when he is enjoying his prosperity (with his belly; cf. 20:14, full), God will lash out at him in His anger (cf. v. 28). The one who was angry, it seemed, was Zophar, not God! Zophar's vinegar-mouthed diatribe falsely and viciously incriminated Job as a selfish profiteer, heartlessly tyrannizing the poor. Such an arraignment was totally unfounded.

20:24–29. If Job tried to escape from God's anger, one weapon would down him if another did not. Pulling out the arrow (cf. 6:4) to try to save himself would do no good (cf. 16:13). He would experience terrors and darkness (cf. 15:30; 18:18), and fire (cf. 18:15; 22:20) would enshroud and devour his wealth.

God will not let a wicked person escape, Zophar averred. The heavens and the earth would witness against him, an obvious rejoinder to Job's desire that the earth not hide God's injustice to him (16:18) and his longing that his witness and intercessor in heaven act on his behalf (16:19–21).

His theft of the houses of the poor (20:19) will be requited by his own house being carried off by a flood (cf. 22:16) in God's wrath (cf. 20:23). Such is the fate, Zophar summarized, of the wicked. This is what God has appointed for them as their heritage (cf. 27:13). How then, as Zophar saw it, could Job think that his situation was any different? Since he had lost his wealth so suddenly, how else could such a calamity be explained except that he was wicked?

Zophar, of course, in his philosophical shortsightedness, made no allowance for a person being afflicted for any reason other than retribution for sin. In his stubborn invective, he flared at Job with venomous words, like the poisonous snake he spoke about.

Zophar continues with his disgusting metaphors and adds military ones, three main points are made here. The first two have been made already: first, the joys of the wicked are temporary; second, the prosperity of the wicked will not endure. The first point appears to be made in verse 20. The second point is made in v.21, 28.

Response

Zophar is right that God has ordained such punishment for the wicked. Indeed, Jesus himself, in the parable of the rich fool (Lk. 12:13-21), teaches many of the same lessons as we learn here, such as (a) watch out for wealth and (b) God often judges evildoers unexpectedly. It is good to be reminded of the righteous and potentially sudden, judgement from God. But we also need to learn about God's grace. God has grace for sinners and sufferers.

JOB'S SECOND REPLY TO ZOPHAR (CHAP. 21)

In this speech Job responded to the view of the three arguers ("you" in vv. 2, 27–29, 34 is pl., and the verbs in vv. 2–3a, 5, 29, 34 are pl.) about the destruction of the wicked. Unlike his other talks, here he said nothing directly to God. Many of his remarks in verses 7–33 are direct refutations of Zophar's words in chapter 20.

a. Request for silence (21:1–6)

21:1–3. If his troublesome counselors would only listen to what Job was saying, then they would console him (consolation renders the same Heb. word Eliphaz used in 15:11; in both verses the Heb. is pl.). This is an important reminder that sufferers want a listening ear, not a condemning mouth. Then, he added sarcastically, Zophar could mock on (this verb is sing., whereas as stated earlier, the verbs in 21:2–3a are pl.).

21:4–6. Since Job was complaining to God, not to them, why did he not have the right to be impatient? (cf. 4:2; 6:2–3) They ought to be amazed at his terrible appearance (he wanted them to look at him as well as listen) as they were at first (2:12). According to Bildad, people everywhere were horrified at what happens to a wicked person (18:20), so why could they not show at least a little concern about his situation, since they thought he was such a sinner? In fact, they should be silent, putting their hands on their mouths (cf. 29:9; 40:4). Even Job's thinking about his own deplorable situation disturbed him emotionally (he felt terrified; cf. 4:5, "dismayed"; 22:10; 23:15–16) and physically (his body trembled).

b. The prosperity of the wicked (21:7–16)

21:7–16. How could the contenders' viewpoint, especially Zophar's, be right about the brevity of the wicked's enjoyment of life (15:29, 32–34; 18:5; 20:5, 8, 22) when Job knew that the wicked live on into ripe old age (cf. 20:10), their children with them, their houses secure (cf. 20:28), seemingly with no judgment from God? (cf. 20:23, 28–29) The livestock of many sinners prospers, the wicked enjoy music, and even die easily. Besides, they cynically flaunt God, even wondering what they would ... gain by praying to Him. This is strongly redolent of Satan's accusation that Job was seeking personal gain by worshiping God (1:9–11), but of course Job knew nothing of Satan's affront. Job, however, knew that their prosperity did not come, ultimately, from their own hands; it was provided by God, whom they scorned! Therefore Job was not about to walk in the way of the wicked (cf. comments on 22:16–18).

Justice then is not always meted out in this life. Often the godless prosper and the godly perish. "Stern judgment in the life to come is the only possible corrective for this apparent triumph of wickedness. Postmortem retribution is clearly taught in both Testaments—compare Psalm 9:17; Isaiah 5:14–15; 30:33; Ezekiel 32:22–25; Matthew 7:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:8–9—although more clearly in later times than in the age of Job" (Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *The Book of Job: God's Answer to the Problem of Underserved Suffering*, p. 77).

c. The death of the wicked (21:17–26)

21:17–21. To Bildad's claim that "the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out" (18:5) in death and that calamity and disaster are ready to overtake him (18:12), Job asked, how often (asked three times in 21:17–18) do these things really happen? This so-called fate allotted by God's anger (cf. 20:28; 21:30) to the wicked, as Zophar asserted (20:23, 29), hardly fits the facts. Sinners are seldom blown away suddenly and easily like straw or chaff.

Suppose his associates were to respond to Job that punishment for people he mentioned will come on their children. Job objected to that attempted way out by stating that a wicked person ought to suffer for his own sins under God's wrath for once he is dead, he could not care about any judgment on his family (cf. 20:10).

21:22–26. God's judging of the wicked does not follow the limited theology of Job's friends. God does not, as they suggested, often cut off the wicked (20:5) and judge their children instead. In His inscrutable ways He may allow one man to live on in prosperity and good health (Job's references to vigor, 21:23, and bones, v. 24, respond to Zophar's words in 20:11) and He may allow another man to be deprived and thus bitter. And yet in death they are alike, in the dust consumed by worms (cf. 17:14; 24:20; also cf. Ecc. 9:2–3). Wealth or health are not ways by which to judge a person's character. One may be wicked, and die either young or old; or he may be godly, and die either young or old. These facts obviously conform more to reality than did the rigid view of Job's three prattling prosecutors.

d. The death of the wicked in prosperity (21:27–34)

21:27–33. Job said he was aware of how they might try to answer him. They would ask Job to point out where ... wicked wealthy people were living (cf. 8:22; 18:21; 20:28). Job answered this anticipated question with another question: Had the three contestants never questioned travelers? Many people who travel have money and yet many of them, though evil, do not face calamity or wrath. No one dares denounce or confront wicked, influential people or requite them. Such a popular person lives on, and even has an honorable burial, with people guarding his tomb after a crowd follows his casket in the funeral procession.

21:34. Their consoling (cf. v. 2), Job evaluated, was only nonsense (hebel, "empty, futile, useless"; cf. "no meaning" in 7:16 and comments on Ecc. 1:2) and were evidence of their being faithless (mā'al, "unfaithful, treacherous"). Job simply could not buy their explanation of suffering; in fact their viewpoint meant they were unfaithful to him, their longtime friend. Job, of course, was experiencing all these problems, but not, as presumed by his friends, as consequences of sin.²

²Roy B. Zuck, "Job," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 745.