

## Job Chapter 21

Last Sunday, we studied Zophar's second and apparently final response to Job. In chapter 21, we will see Job refute Zophar's arguments about how the wicked only prosper for a short time. In Job's refutation, it will become even more apparent that Zophar's argument was incoherent.

We also talked about how Zophar was guilty of using a logical fallacy known as "argument from analogy." An argument from analogy is when an argument employs an analogy as its premise. The validity of such an argument depends on truths that are established within the analogy. This is a problem because just because something may be true in the context of the analogy does not mean the argument employing the analogy is true. In Zophar's case, ingesting cobra venom could plausibly cause someone to vomit. However, that situation is not proven to be analogous to God's treatment of the wicked – Zophar has not demonstrated how or if God actually takes back the possessions of the wicked man before he is able to "digest them" (i.e., possess them for his own sustenance).

When it comes to making analogies, can we also sometimes be too clever for our own good? Shawn brought up a great example in class of how fishing has been taken too far as an analogy for evangelism; far beyond what would have been intended by Jesus and even incorporating modern fishing components and techniques. The danger is that our understanding of the spiritual principle can become filtered through the analogy, thus making the principle depend on the analogy rather than the other way around.

One other example of an argument from analogy I mentioned in class was the idea that false teaching is like poison administered by mistake by a doctor. As the saying goes, whether the doctor intended to poison the patient is irrelevant in view of the tragic outcome. However, should our understanding of false teaching depend on this analogy, or on what the Bible teaches? Though it is plausible that the person who ingests poison will die, that does not prove that something taught incorrectly will produce the same results. The Bible clearly warns us that we should take accurate teaching seriously, and that stricter judgment will be upon teachers. But I also believe God has made provisions for those who hear and teach something incorrectly, and that the damage can be undone if all parties approach the matter with humility. How Priscilla and Aquila handled the teaching of Apollos in Acts 18 is a great example. The practical problem with the analogy of the doctor administering poison by mistake is that burdens teachers with a standard of being perfect in their teaching. This burden can be met with pride and fear, leading to a resistance to correction. Accepting correction would mean admitting to potentially years of teaching something wrong, and eternal accountability for having "poisoned many patients."

I have argued in the past that the arguments employed by Job's friends do in fact demonstrate a fear of being wrong. Being wrong in their case would destabilize what they had concluded about who God is and how he operates, as well as shake their confidence in their own righteousness. As reaffirming their own understanding of God had quickly become more important to Job's friends than comforting Job – which was their original intention for assembling – Job sarcastically offers up in chapter 21:1-2 for his friends to "keep listening to my words, and let this be your comfort." In other words, Job is saying "you have failed to comfort me, so here is something you can do instead: keep listening to me. Let that be the comfort you give me, by opening your ears and closing your mouths, even if only for a moment (verse 3)." In verse 4, Job continues by responding to the urgency Zophar felt to speak (see chapter 20:2-3), asking rhetorically: "and should I also not feel impatient to respond? Look at me," Job continues in verse 5, "and be appalled so that you would stop speaking." As Job considers all that had happened to him up

to this point in verse 6, it is enough to cause him to pause due to the fear of what God had done to him. The implication is: why would his friends also not approach this situation with more caution before proclaiming the cause?

Verses 7-13 begin Job's refutation to Zophar's claim that God swiftly punishes the wicked. Based on what Job has seen, the wicked:

- Reach old age
- Have offspring that are established
- Have houses that are safe from fear
- Are blessed with economic success
- Have joy in their house with their children
- Go down to Sheol in peace

All of this even though in verses 14-16, they say to God: "depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of your ways. What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what profit do we get if we pray to him?" Job summarizes his observations on the wicked who prosper by asking rhetorically "is not their prosperity in their hand?" Job then somewhat humorously (as I read it) states "the counsel of the wicked is far from me," meaning that if his friends were to compare how he is faring to how the wicked fare, it should be obvious that he is not wicked.

Job continues in verses 17-20 by challenging Zophar and his friends to prove that God actually "puts out the lamp of the wicked" and causes their calamity to come upon them and their children. Then in verse 21, Job calls out the incoherence of one of Zophar's arguments; specifically, that a wicked man's children will suffer because of his actions. Job cleverly observes that if someone is wicked, what do they care happens to their children after they die? If Job is wicked, as his friends have so labeled him, then their arguments about how his actions affect his loved ones are pointless. Not to mention the fact that his children had died already!

In verse 22, Job rebukes his friends for attempting to teach God how he should treat the wicked, when as Job sees it, what do they know? From what Job has observed, death comes to both the wicked and the innocent (verses 23-26). As I speculate a little on how Job is processing his trauma, I believe he has established that although he does not agree that this should be the case, he accepts that it is the case. Although he would prefer to agree with his friends that God swiftly punishes the wicked person, it is not consistent with what he has observed. Rather than blinding himself with comforting thoughts and speaking something that isn't true about how God judges the wicked, Job was choosing to grapple with an unpleasant reality. His vindication depended on it.

In verses 27-33, Job reminds his friends that this observation is not his alone. He rebukes them for not doing their own research, for they could "ask those who travel the roads" (i.e., anyone who passes by) and learn that "the evil man is spared in the day of calamity." Even in death, his tomb is guarded and he retains honor among the living.

In verse 34, Job again points out that their words are no comfort. Perhaps his friends believe they are offering a path to comfort for Job by requiring him to repent, but Job sees their accusations for what they are: "empty nothings" and "falsehood."

Does Job chapter 21 make you feel a little uncomfortable? I find that it challenges me and what I tend to value about being a Christian. Although I think Job was incorrect pertaining to God's motives for allowing his suffering to happen, as well as how Job presents the idea of Sheol as equalizing the fate of the righteous and wicked, I think he is closer to the truth than his friends pertaining to the fate of the wicked in this life. There is no guarantee that the wicked will be repaid for their evil in this life.

Perhaps one implication to us is the emphasis that is perhaps placed on our evangelism. Do we teach as of foremost importance the topics of salvation and being in heaven, or can we sometimes get caught up in emphasizing rewards that are not guaranteed, such as the idea that peace and comfort in this life can only truly be realized in Christ? What do you think? Are the "wicked" only putting on masks of contentment, or can they really lead fulfilling lives without God? I lean to the latter, as I believe Job did. We should not underestimate the powers of compartmentalizing and blinding one's self to the eternal consequences of one's actions to produce a sense of happiness and fulfillment in this life. We can fool ourselves, and our self-deception can be powerful. We should be reminded that being in Christ is not foremost a cure for depression or obtaining an enduring sense of fulfillment. These benefits should come from trusting God and having our hope invested in heaven, but they are not the basis of our hope. I thought about 2 Peter 3:1-13 in view of these topics, which reads:

*This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*

Notice at the end of this passage, a "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" implies that unrighteousness dwells in this current one. Dare we say: it thrives under the oversight of the "god of this world" as he is called in 2 Corinthians 4:4. However, the time apportioned for evil to fulfil all its desires is limited, as Peter reminds his readers. Sheol is not merely an equalizer as it seems Job views it. Rather, death became necessary to purge us from this fallen realm (Genesis 3:22). Though we may sleep for a while (who knows exactly how that will work?), our hope is to awaken as children of the Almighty God, having been rescued from the grave and purified completely from sin, to be forever in his presence.