

## Sermon – 31/01/2010 pm

### Do the Wicked Prosper and Why?

Study Text: Job 20, 21

‘Job is not really about why suffering happens. It is about how we should act towards God when suffering happens’. This is what one writer emphasizes in his teaching on this book. Calvin makes the same point, namely that the purpose of the book of Job is not to provide explanations for suffering but to show that submission to God is the way of wisdom.

The question in our title is the corollary of the underlying question of this book – why do good people suffer in this world? We expect a just God to punish the wicked and bless those who are good. But is this what we see? How did Job see things and how did his friends see things? There are lessons for us learn as we examine what they say.

It was Zophar's turn to answer Job as he continued to pour out his complaints against God. ‘God has wronged me’ said Job, ‘and you fellows have wronged me also’. ‘You should be ashamed of yourselves’ he said (19:3). As Job ended his speech he warned these friends that God would punish them for the way they were treating him, and for their arrogant claim to be speaking God's words (19:29).

Zophar did not take kindly to such criticism. He got a bit stirred up (20:2). Who did Job think he was to criticise them. They were not the ones being punished by God. They thought they were the righteous ones. Whatever love and compassion they once felt towards Job was gone. They were speaking out of pride; they were speaking to defend themselves, not to help Job. It is not uncommon for theological debate to go down this track. A letter I once wrote to an editor disagreeing with a point he made drew the reply ‘what would you know, you are only a student’.

While these men were not really listening to each other, Zophar did hear some of what Job said. He heard what he considered an insult at the end of Job's speech (19:29). Job in turn heard what Zophar had to say and even listened. In his reply to Zophar, Job makes direct reference to what Zophar said (compare 21:17 with 20:22, 28; see 21:19). So we will look at these two chapters together.

### Zophar on the Wicked

Zophar would not budge from the traditions. He claimed that what he was saying was what the ancients said. It was wisdom made authentic by virtue of age. This wisdom went back to the dawn of human history (20:4). What could be older than that! While we benefit from wisdom that is handed down from generation to generation that does not in itself make wisdom true. Job took this wisdom and tested it against reality. We should do the same.

We should also test wisdom or traditions against revealed truth in God's word. Job's friends acknowledged God but presumed to speak for God. There is no lack of men and women today who claim to be speaking from God's word but twist this word and unashamedly add their own personal revelations to it – as Eliphaz did (4:12). With such people there is a tendency to speak loudly and with great authority. They do not like to be questioned.

What did Zophar say about the wicked? He said that the wicked do not prosper in this world. They will have a miserable life that will be cut short because God will attack and destroy them. They will

get what they deserve. Zophar was pointing to Job as an example of how God invariably punishes the wicked. This punishment was here and now in this world according to Zophar. He believed in immediate divine punishment upon the wicked.

*The wicked will perish forever like his own dung (20:7).* Dung in those days, as in Asia today, was used as fuel for the fire. It literally went up in smoke. The wicked boast of greatness but will soon perish and be forgotten. We have a saying ‘the higher they rise, the harder they fall’. Zophar would have agreed – without applying this to himself of course! The wicked will come crashing down and be remembered no more in this world. His children will be left begging from the poor (20:10).

Zophar depicted the rich as proud, and also guilty of oppression. Their wealth is gathered by oppression of the poor (20:19). This is often the case. James, the brother of our Lord, condemned the rich who failed to pay proper wages (James 5:4). The wicked have an insatiable appetite for treasure and pleasure. Food is one of those pleasures. Their belly becomes their god (Philippians 3:19). And so Zophar turned to the metaphor of eating to describe the life of the wicked (20:12f).

*Bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be filled with gravel (Proverbs 20:17).* ‘Evil is sweet to the mouth ... but in the stomach it turns sour and becomes poison’ said Zophar. The wicked *swallows down riches and vomits them up again; God casts them out of his belly (20:15).* We might picture a drunkard enjoying drinks at a party until he ends up in the gutter vomiting. The riches of the wicked will make them drunk and blind to the truth about life and death. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (I Timothy 6:10). The love of money leaves no place for the love of God.

This picture of the wicked is one that fits life in our society, our consumer society. Your primary value to society is that of a consumer. If you stop consuming you could ruin the economy. To make sure you keep consuming you are given a ‘stimulus package’. From infancy we teach our children to worship this god. We teach them to love money and spend money. If the shops are closed for a day people suffer withdrawal symptoms because of this addiction. If they are closed for two or three days who knows what would happen in our society! Does society have to be like this? No! There are many societies that operate without such consumerism.

## **Job on the Wicked**

Before Job considered Zophar’s traditional wisdom about the wicked he made a plea to his friend to bear with him as he speaks, and not disregard out of hand everything he says (21:3). He asked them to look at him and be astonished; look at his gaunt body covered with boils. Maybe they had turned away in horror from the sight of this bag of bones. ‘Put your hand over your mouth and sit silently while this poor wretch speaks’ (21:5).

The wicked get rich and powerful. They live to a ripe old age. They live to see their children and grandchildren grow up before them (21:7, 8). This was what Job observed, in contrast to Zophar who said the wicked prosper for a short time only, that they die young and leave their children in poverty (20:5, 10). Job saw no evidence of the wicked living a miserable life – apart from himself if they considered him wicked – as they did.

The wicked seemed to live without fear and without God punishing them (21:9). Their animals were fine and breeding well. They enjoyed parties and fun till they end up in Sheol or the grave, like everybody else. Zophar and the others said all the wicked live miserable lives. They said that they their children also suffer (20:10). Job found such ‘wisdom’ inherently unjust (21:19-20). God does not punish children for the sins of their fathers (Ezekiel 18).

Zophar did not refer to the wicked speaking against God, but Job said the wicked even insult and ridicule God and get away with it. They say to God 'we do not want to know about your ways'. They say *who is the Almighty that we should serve him* (21:14, 15). The Psalmist said much the same thing when he was looking at the wicked (Psalm 73). He saw the prosperity of the wicked and that they had no worries. They said 'God does not know' (Psalm 73:11). The Psalmist started to envy the wicked. His feet started to slip. Job was in similar danger as he endured this time of suffering.

Job could not agree with the simplistic wisdom of Zophar and his friends. What they said made sense, and Job might have agreed with them once. But their wisdom did not accord with reality. They were living in denial. They believed that God is just – as Job did. But Job was not prepared to deny reality in order to do so. He was ready to leave questions with God rather than give answers for God; certainly not answers that denied reality.

There were two aspects to the reality that Job saw. Firstly, like the Psalmist, he looked at the wicked. He saw that not all the wicked were punished. *How often does calamity or destruction come upon the wicked he asked? Have you asked those who travel the road* (21:17, 29). If his friends did so they would be told that the wicked are spared in the day of calamity and escape disaster. They live to old age and get buried with honour (21:32, 33). We might glance at what Jesus said on this matter. He said that God sends sunshine and rain on the evil and the good (Matthew 5:45).

The second reality was that of Job's experience. He did not bring this up in this speech – he would have been condemned for doing so! But his experience was a valid part of his knowledge and understanding. Job was in the middle of terrible suffering. He was suffering at the hand of God but he was not a wicked man. The simple equation blindly asserted by his friends, namely that the wicked suffer and only the wicked, did not fit reality. Job pointed out the flaw in the theology of his friends. It was a theology that denied reality. What they were saying was just empty clichés and lies (21:34). Will they accept what he said? Probably not.

The theology of some Christians does not fit with reality. They preach a theology that leads people to have false hopes and expectations. The so-called prosperity gospel is a case in point. We must be careful that our own theology does not deny reality observed in God's creation. Other religions can do this but not Christianity because it is based in truth.

There is no reference to revealed truth in these speeches because God was silent during this time. But God did eventually speak telling Job to be silent and condemning his friends. God offered no explanation for Job's suffering except to restore all that he lost. Our understanding of his suffering is greater because of what is revealed to us in the prologue. This revealed truth does not deny observed truth.

We must not deny observable reality in this world. Nor must we deny revealed truth, the truth that we find in God's word. We must remember that God is sovereign and does what pleases him. His ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:8). Yet God has revealed himself as loving and just. Even when we go through the valley of the shadow of death, God will be with us.

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*