

Sermon – 15/11/2009 pm

Get Wisdom and Repent – Zophar Speaks

Study Text: Job 11

Some time ago a friend told me that his mother was suffering from HIV-AIDS. I was shocked. AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease. It is a disease that afflicts sexually immoral people. What sort of person was this fellow's mother I thought? I imagined her to be suffering this incurable wasting disease because of her sinful life. But then he told me she had contracted this disease through a blood transfusion. My judgment of this woman had been premature and wrong. She deserved my compassion, not my condemnation.

As human beings we are quick to condemn one another. We do not stop to listen to what the other person is saying. We do not bother to gather all the facts. Of course we can never know everything about a situation. Only God is omniscient. But to simply listen would go a long way to our being more wise in our counsel.

Job's friends were not really listening to him. They heard some words and they were reacting. Why was Job maintaining his innocence? Could it be that he was innocent? Their rigid theological system did not allow this possibility. They persisted in condemning their friend and in so doing were opening themselves to the judgment of God.

Zophar was the third of Job's friends to speak. He was probably the youngest. He offered no words of comfort to this sick man. To listen to his speech in isolation you would not even realize that Job was in great pain and close to death. Eliphaz at least acknowledged Job as a man of wisdom (4:3). Bildad had no kind words to say to Job. He accused him of being a windbag. He pointed out to Job that his sons had all died because of their sin.

Zophar's words are even more cutting as he resorts to personal ridicule and name calling (11:12). He accused Job of babbling and of mocking God. 'Zophar is furious with Job. He can hardly contain himself. He spares nothing and goes on the attack with real venom' (Thomas).

We often hear today of someone claiming the moral high ground. Why is this phrase becoming so popular? Well everything is relative as they say. As the level of morality in our society declines high moral standards are becoming hard to find. What was accepted morality some years ago, when the Bible was taught and the commands were known, has now become 'high ground'. It is becoming unusual to find people acting with honesty and integrity. To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God is what God requires of his people.

In these chapters of the book of Job where God remains silent we find personal integrity under challenge. Job is clinging to his integrity with difficulty, while his friends seem to be abandoning theirs. Zophar thought he had a monopoly on wisdom. He wished that God would speak (11:5) – to Job of course, not to him. He was confident that God would agree with everything he said. Zophar was in for a shock when God did eventually speak (42:7).

Guilty

Job was not suffering in silence. He had much to say, although most of what he said was directed towards God. He was not complaining to his friends – for obvious reasons. They had been of no help to him in his suffering since they opened their mouths. Job was complaining bitterly (10:1). He was claiming to be innocent of specific sin, of sin that provoked God to anger and retribution. He knew that God knew he was not guilty. He was frustrated that God was not answering him and vindicating his claim.

Zophar considered Job's word blasphemous. He was guilty without a doubt. His claim to innocence had to be answered and condemned. 'You claim your beliefs are pure and you are clean in the sight of God' said Zophar (11:4). He thought Job was claiming to be without sin because he was refusing to repent. But he misunderstood Job. Job was claiming to be blameless in the context of his present suffering. From the prologue we know that God supported his claim.

O, that God would speak ... that he would show you the secrets of wisdom (11:5, 6). Zophar did not say that God would show 'me' or show 'us' the secrets of wisdom. He arrogantly believed that he already knew the wisdom of God. He prayed that God would *open his lips against you*, that is against Job. When God speaks however, he does so without partiality. We know that the judgment of God is according to truth. Who are you to judge another? In whatever you judge another you condemn yourself (Romans 2:1, 2).

It is ironic that both Job and Zophar wanted God to speak. They did not want him to speak the same thing of course. Job wanted God to vindicate him and declare him innocent. Zophar wanted God to show Job the error of his ways and show him that he was guilty. We must be careful not to presume upon God in this way. We must not put words into the mouth of God, especially when we have his revealed word in the Bible. Self proclaimed prophets do just this today, as do some others in the church.

With itching sores covering his body Job was in great pain. Eliphaz urged him to repent and then he would get better. Bildad similarly urged Job to repent or else he would end up dead like his sons. Zophar, the third of Job's comforters told Job he was actually suffering less than he deserved (11:6).

There is some theological truth in what Zophar said. God is merciful and does not punish us according to our sin (Psalm 105:10). But Zophar was not speaking this truth out of love. He was not giving thanks for God's great mercy but threatening Job with God's judgment. Zophar had knowledge but lacked love. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 8:1 fit Zophar like a glove – *knowledge puffs up but love builds up*.

God Is Great

Zophar went on to poetically describe the omniscience of God. His knowledge is boundless, higher than the heavens and deeper than Sheol or the place of the dead. It is longer than the earth and broader than the sea. He described the incomprehensibility of God in much the same way as Job had already done – *He does great things past finding out (9:10)*. Paul used similar language – height, depth, length and width – to describe the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3:19). The love of God was far from the thinking of Zophar.

God sees all things, especially deceitful and wicked men like Job (11:11). Job cannot escape God's all seeing eyes. He cannot escape God's hand of judgment. God sees and knows Job's wickedness

and he will shut him up in prison. Only a fool would think he can stop God doing this, according to Zophar.

Zophar concluded his condemnation of Job with some personal abuse as we have already noted. It is all too common for theological differences to spill over into personal abuse. Most divisions in churches are attributed to theological differences, but behind many you will find personal differences also. Zophar called Job empty headed or brainless. He likened him to a wild donkey's colt that cannot be tamed. It would take a miracle to change a man so devoid of knowledge and wisdom as Job was. If Job was frustrated with God's silence, Zophar was even more frustrated with Job's torrent of words.

Godly Sorrow

'In an unremarkable and traditional manner Zophar made his appeal for this 'wild donkey' of a man to change his ways'. Job needed to get understanding and comprehend his own situation, which was apparently obvious to everyone but Job.

Zophar's theology was the same as the others, namely that God punishes sinners so all suffering must be directly linked to sin. Zophar could no more pin point Job's sin than the others. He insinuated that it was some secret sin. He seems to suggest that Job's wealth had been gained by corruption and so adds, *allow no evil to dwell in your tent* (11:14).

Although Zophar was being critical and judgmental there was a positive side to his theology. He had a simplistic understanding of how God deals with his people. The positive side of this theology is that when you repent God immediately blesses you with health, wealth and happiness. God wants you to enjoy an abundant life here on earth. The only reason for not having such a life is your sin. Repent and God will bless you. Your life will be brighter than the noonday (11:17). Repent and all your suffering will be over. It will be as water under the bridge (11:16). Zophar concluded with a reminder that if Job did not repent he could expect to go on suffering, even unto death (11:20).

Was Zophar right? Job will answer him maintaining his innocence. Job did not know why he was suffering. Zophar was sure he knew why. But he was wrong according to what we read in the prologue. Zophar's acknowledgment that God's ways are higher than ours ways, indeed that his ways are past finding out, should have led him to caution in declaring just what God's ways are. We must beware of inconsistencies in our own theology. Zeal is not always related to truth. Sometimes the greater the zeal, the less the truth.

While Zophar claimed immediate divine retribution for every sin, God says that he is long suffering and slow to anger. The wicked can prosper in this world because God's judgment is not always immediate. Sometimes it is immediate but all we can say for certain is that God's judgment is inescapable – and of course just.

A second fault in Zophar's theology was that God's blessings are always material. This was often the case in the Old Testament, but clearly his blessings upon his own Son, in whom he was well pleased, were not those of material prosperity. The theology that claims all sickness and suffering is the direct outcome of sin or a lack of faith is not true. Tragically there are those in churches today who are being counselled just like Zophar counselled Job.

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