

October 18, 2020
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Job
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2020 David J. Whitcomb

WHEN DO THE WICKED SUFFER?

Job 20-21

Many of us prefer that the circumstances, issues, and events of life be predictable. We are certainly creatures of habit. That may not be more obvious than when we rearrange the chairs in the auditorium to accommodate something like social distancing because of a pandemic. Many of our people walk into the rearranged auditorium with a certain amount of anxiety. “Where did they put my seat?” they probably wonder. How is that **your** seat? We don’t rent pews here like they did in the old time Congregational churches. Well, it only takes us a couple of weeks before we become comfortable with our “new” seat, and we feel more secure – until someone dares to sit in “my” seat.

That desire for predictability can be observed in many areas of life. It even affects our opinion of God. If God acted in a particular way at a particular time, we conclude that the unchanging, immutable God must respond the same way in every similar situation. But what if He chooses not to? Do we also believe that God is sovereign and, therefore, able and willing to do whatever He wants whenever He wants? Would we argue that God must always act in accordance with our finite and limited understanding of who and what He is?

Job’s friends struggled with this very issue. Though the events recorded in this story probably occurred quite early in Middle Eastern history, already people had established pretty solid ideas about who God is, what sin is, and how God punishes sin. We need to remember that before Job and his friends were born, God had already demonstrated the principle that He punishes sin.

For example, Adam and Eve disobeyed God. God responded by putting them on the downward path to the grave, cursing various

aspects of their lives, and by throwing them out of Eden. That was punishment for their sin. Cain sinned by killing Abel. God responded by driving him into exile and putting some kind of mark on him that identified him as Cain the murderer. The whole world sank into sin and God punished everyone with the worldwide flood except Noah and his family. The proud descendants of Noah’s sons gathered in the plains of Shinar to build a monument to themselves. God punished that sin of pride by confounding the languages – a judgment we still live with today. All of that happened before Job was born.

Job and his friends were obviously aware of these events through the passing down of oral tradition. They understood much about God and understood that, because He is holy, God hates sin. They understood that because He is almighty He punishes sin. They understood that punishment for sin might take many different forms, but it was always unfavorable to the sinner.

Therefore, we keep running into the same syllogism in each of the arguments presented by Job’s counselors (Eliphaz -3; Bildad -3; Zophar - 2). Their basic argument was: Major Premise – God punishes sin by bringing catastrophe into the sinner’s life. Minor Premise – Job was definitely experiencing God-sent catastrophe. Conclusion – Therefore Job was a sinner. And they pressed this syllogism over and over ad nauseam.

We the readers have the advantage of seeing behind the scenes what none of the characters in the story saw or knew. We know that Job was innocent and still righteous. We know that Job’s argument was exactly right. We know that God was using Job to refute Satan’s argument. We know that Job’s experience was not typical. But in spite of what we know, we tend to respond in life just like Job’s friends did. We try to put God in a box and force Him to punish the wicked when and how we think He should. There is no doubt that God will punish the wicked people. When and how is not always clear. This is another one of those areas that gives us great opportunity to truly trust God to do what brings glory to Him according to His timing. His timing is part of what glorifies Him.

God Punishes the Wicked (20:1-29).

Zophar must speak. He claimed that his thoughts were boiling over. *Then Zophar the Naamathite answered and said: "Therefore my thoughts answer me, because of my haste within me" (20:1-2).* This was Zophar's last argument. For the most part the story breaks down into three cycles of Job affirming his innocence and each of the three friends doing their best to correct Job's "error." The exception is that in the third cycle, Zophar had given up. After this response, he apparently concluded that there was no point in beating a dead horse. Therefore, this is the last time in the process that we hear from him.

He was quite sure that in his great wisdom he must answer Job's insults. *I hear censure that insults me, and out of my understanding a spirit answers me (20:3).* That simply means that Zophar felt compelled to respond this one last time because Job made him feel bad. Sounds quite human, doesn't it? "When the first few verses of each speech in the book of Job are examined, it appears that all the speakers have a thin skin. They find it easy enough to dish out insults, but they complain about being dishonored when someone says the same kind of things to them. Their elevated sense of honor and shame does not allow them to accept a rebuke silently or graciously." (Daniel Estes, *Teach the Text Commentary*, "Job," Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013, 123.)

There is something about our proud human nature that drives us to defend ourselves. As I perceive it, there has been a pretty good example of not responding in kind to evil speech presented by Justice Amy Barrett this week. She exercised the kind of wisdom Solomon taught when he wrote, *A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Proverbs 15:1).* Jesus also illustrated how that works when He did not argue while being slandered and falsely accused. Zophar did not respond in the same line as Jesus, Solomon, or Justice Barrett. Rather he illustrated the normal human response, which is to accuse the opponent of being unkind, then arrogantly appealing to your own wisdom and experience, and finally to assassinate the opponent's character.

In his humble opinion, Zophar must speak on the authority of his much experience. Through the experiences of life, he had learned that everyone knows that the wicked perish. The experience of human

history indicates that wickedness is short-lived. *Do you not know this from of old, since man was placed on earth, that the exulting of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless but for a moment (20:4-5)?*

More than that, observation throughout life reveals that the higher a wicked man climbs, the further he falls in judgment. *Though his height mount up to the heavens, and his head reach to the clouds, he will perish forever like his own dung; those who have seen him will say, "Where is he?" He will fly away like a dream and not be found; he will be chased away like a vision of the night. The eye that saw him will see him no more, nor will his place any more behold him (20:6-9).* And three useless counselors were convinced that Job fit that scenario perfectly.

And again, Zophar would submit that everyone knows that the wicked loses all he gained. Even the wicked man's children will suffer his judgment. *His children will seek the favor of the poor, and his hands will give back his wealth. His bones are full of his youthful vigor, but it will lie down with him in the dust (20:10-11).* In the process of God's judgment against sinners, even the things the wicked person enjoyed will become disgusting to him. *Though evil is sweet in his mouth, though he hides it under his tongue, though he is loath to let it go and holds it in his mouth, yet his food is turned in his stomach; it is the venom of cobras within him. He swallows down riches and vomits them up again; God casts them out of his belly. He will suck the poison of cobras; the tongue of a viper will kill him. He will not look upon the rivers, the streams flowing with honey and curds (20:12-17).*

As a result, the wicked person will not be able to enjoy or find contentment in all his possessions because of God's judgment. *He will give back the fruit of his toil and will not swallow it down; from the profit of his trading he will get no enjoyment. For he has crushed and abandoned the poor; he has seized a house that he did not build. Because he knew no contentment in his belly, he will not let anything in which he delights escape him. There was nothing left after he had eaten; therefore his prosperity will not endure. In the fullness of his sufficiency he will be in distress; the hand of everyone in misery will come against him (20:18-22).* According to Zophar, human experience teaches these stark realities to everyone, or at least to everyone who is wise like Zophar.

Experience also reveals that God recompenses the wicked. Misery in life is not a coincidence for the wicked. *He swallows down riches and vomits them up again; God casts them out of his belly (20:15)*. When God recompenses, He sends demonstrations of His burning anger against the wicked. *To fill his belly to the full God will send his burning anger against him and rain it upon him into his body (20:23)*. And when God punishes the sinner it will be obvious that God has become the sinner's enemy. *He will flee from an iron weapon; a bronze arrow will strike him through. It is drawn forth and comes out of his body; the glittering point comes out of his gallbladder; terrors come upon him (20:24-25)*.

Experience shows us that God's punishment of the wicked is thorough and exhaustive. *Utter darkness is laid up for his treasures; a fire not fanned will devour him; what is left in his tent will be consumed. The heavens will reveal his iniquity, and the earth will rise up against him. The possessions of his house will be carried away, dragged off in the day of God's wrath. This is the wicked man's portion from God, the heritage decreed for him by God (20:26-29)*.

Zophar didn't point out these obvious conclusions of life's experience just to show how smart he was. He was building a case against Job. He was trying to make the connection with the fact that Job suffered such astonishing losses. Who fit the foregoing description better than Job? Surely if we sat among the miserable counselors, we would have arrived at the same conclusion. Zophar's implication was that because Job was obviously suffering like a sinner, it was also obvious that God was punishing Job. The multiple tragedies that befell Job in such quick succession were too abnormal to be coincidental. Even a person who did not believe in God would have to assess Job's circumstances as some kind of supernatural punishment, some kind of bad Karma.

There is only one problem with that perfectly air-tight, irrefutable conclusion – it really is not consistent with human experience. Human experience actually reveals that God doesn't always punish the wicked in this life. It also teaches us that a saint can suffer when it is not God's judgment against sin. We do well to pay attention honestly. Job did, and he arrived at a conclusion that contradicted Zophar's wisdom.

Often the Wicked Appear to be Well Off (21:1-34).

Job appealed to his counselors to try to understand what he was saying (21:1-6). He pled with them to listen patiently and try to get it. *Then Job answered and said: "Keep listening to my words, and let this be your comfort. Bear with me, and I will speak, and after I have spoken, mock on" (21:1-3)*. The wording almost looks like Job requested a "time out." He understood that his counselors were not interested in listening to him but only in dumping their opinions (wrong opinions) on him. Therefore, he pleads for a short span when they would listen to this part of his argument and then they can "**mock on.**"

Job pointed out that, contrary to their conclusions (expressed most recently by Zophar), he really did not intend to make them look foolish. His complaint was toward God. *As for me, is my complaint against man? Why should I not be impatient? Look at me and be appalled, and lay your hand over your mouth. When I remember I am dismayed, and shuddering seizes my flesh (21:4-6)*. God's actions toward, against, His favored saint didn't make sense. In light of God allowing Satan a free hand against Job and then to be silent with no explanation, it is no small wonder that Job was impatient. Therefore, the request that the miserable counselors would listen because God's actions toward the wicked are not always predictable in life. Job's circumstances proved that point.

Therefore, Job argued that, actually, experience indicates that the wicked prosper (21:7-16). He concluded that it appears the wicked people in life live fine and end fine. Would we not agree from our experience that so often the wicked do prosper and live long? With Job we might ask, *Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power (21:7)*? One of the most irritating examples to me is Hugh Hefner founder of the "Playboy" empire. Sure, he is suffering the pangs of punishment right now. But why did God allow him to live the good life for so many years and to ruin so many men and women during that long life?

After their fine and comfortable life is over, the wicked leave a sizeable inheritance to their children. *Their offspring are established in their presence, and their descendants before their eyes (21:8)*. Their estates are protected and even free from God's judgment. *Their*

houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them (21:9). Their business ventures are profitable. Their bull breeds without fail; their cow calves and does not miscarry (21:10). Their families enjoy of life of levity (like Job's family did once). They send out their little boys like a flock, and their children dance. They sing to the tambourine and the lyre and rejoice to the sound of the pipe (21:11-12). It does seem like much of the time life is great for the wicked all the way to the grave. They spend their days in prosperity, and in peace they go down to Sheol (21:13).

Such is the easy path for those who seem to have no concern for God. They dismiss God from life, as is evident everywhere we look. *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?" (21:14-15).* It really does appear that they have achieved success apart from God. *Behold, is not their prosperity in their hand? (21:14-16a).* So the fair and accurate observations of the wicked people who have rejected God.

Job was not one of them. He testified that *The counsel of the wicked is far from me (21:16b).* Yes, he too had enjoyed much success. But he attributed all his success to God.

Therefore, we might be prone to agree with Job that God's judgment does not appear to be consistent (21:17-26). It truly does not seem like God judges the wicked. *How often is it that the lamp of the wicked is put out? That their calamity comes upon them? That God distributes pains in his anger? That they are like straw before the wind, and like chaff that the storm carries away? (21:17-18)*

At best it seems more likely that fate comes to all. God does what God does and no one can do anything about it. *You say, "God stores up their iniquity for their children." Let him pay it out to them, that they may know it. Let their own eyes see their destruction, and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty. For what do they care for their houses after them, when the number of their months is cut off? Will any teach God knowledge, seeing that he judges those who are on high (21:19-22)?*

Life and death seem a bit random. One wicked person dies at ease. *One dies in his full vigor, being wholly at ease and secure, his pails full of milk and the marrow of his bones moist (21:23-24).* Another wicked person *dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted*

of prosperity (21:25). And ultimately everyone dies the same. *They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them (21:26).* That is exactly what the wise man Solomon concluded after observing life. *It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath (Ecclesiastes 9:2).*

Therefore, we must agree with Job that human experience doesn't explain everything (21:27-34). Job knew the counselors' thoughts. He knew that they manipulated the data of observation to make him look bad. *Behold, I know your thoughts and your schemes to wrong me. For you say, "Where is the house of the prince? Where is the tent in which the wicked lived?" (vv.27-28).* He anticipated that his defense will not convince those who were determined to hurt him. He anticipated their appeal to give evidence of the wicked leader's house of peace. Maybe this was even an appeal that Job's house was useless to him at this point.

But the counselors were not accurate. Job pressed them on the thoroughness of their investigation. *Have you not asked those who travel the roads, and do you not accept their testimony that the evil man is spared in the day of calamity, that he is rescued in the day of wrath? Who declares his way to his face, and who repays him for what he has done? When he is carried to the grave, watch is kept over his tomb. The clods of the valley are sweet to him; all mankind follows after him, and those who go before him are innumerable" (21:29-33).*

All they needed to do was to get outside themselves and their own little circle of influence. There is plenty of evidence in the world that God does not always judge the wicked in this life. Therefore, Job counted their observations to be worthless. He concluded that there is no hope in empty nothings. *How then will you comfort me with empty nothings? There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood (21:34).*

That leaves us with the important question for our own circumstances as we observe God's action or non-action regarding the wicked.

What Do We Do With the Wicked? (Psalm 37:7-13)

If God is opposed to sin, why do the wicked prosper? Often they prosper much more than God's own people do. Often they are the ones who cause the most trouble for people who love Christ and have forsaken all the world's pleasure to follow Him. Too often the question from James weighs heavy in our circumstances. *Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called (James 2:6b-7)?*

How do we respond to that which looks patently unfair and doesn't fit our preconceived idea that God punishes sin and blesses obedience? In particular, how can we not help but apply this principle to politicians who are clearly, painfully, obviously wicked to the core but who are exalted? And more particularly, "Why does God allow the men and women who favor the abortion of innocent babies to prosper?"

Be still (vv.7-8). That is our best response. Does that mean never say anything or never defend the defenseless? No. It means what David wrote. *Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices! Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself (7-8a).* These two verses contain five different commands that we need to obey in order not to get out of God's will for us regarding the prosperity of the wicked.

First, we must be still before the Lord (v.7a). The command actually requires that we grow silent or stop acting like we can fix the problem. The word speaks of someone who is "dumb," unable to speak. Put your hand over your mouth. We do not need to have a response to everything. React like Job did when he finally figured out who God is and what God does. He concluded, *"Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth" (Job 40:4).*

Second, we must wait patiently for Him (v.7b). Who does not hate to be told to wait? And worse, the command requires us to exercise patience while we wait. But this Hebrew word is far more intense than just waiting. The root of this word speaks of being in travail, to be in anguish, in pain, to writhe. The obvious context is

that we are so concerned about the wicked because they are making life miserable for us. In such situations, learn to endure anguish as you trust Yahweh (self-existing, eternal God) to work out all things according to the counsel of His will.

Third, we must not fret over the one who prospers in his way even when it is evil (v.7c). Literally, the word tells us to stop smoldering, being consumed with a burning desire. A burning desire in your soul to see justice done. It is not wrong to desire justice. But that desire cannot own us. Stop being consumed with this obsession. It is difficult for us to obey this command while it is so obvious that the person is accomplishing or getting away with wickedness.

Fourth, we are required to refrain from anger toward the wicked person or the wickedness he or she is doing (v.8a). This word of anger is very picturesque. It literally means "stop being long of nose." What does that mean? It is the picture of anger that causes the person's nostrils to flare. Some of us respond that way without realizing it. To refrain is to walk away from it.

Fifth, we need to respond to the evil doer by forsaking wrath (v.8b). To forsake is to let it go, quit holding on to it. Wrath is burning like "fret," but not smoldering. This is a bursting forth of anger as in "I lost it." No losing your temper over evildoers.

Why are these five principles so important? Because such responses *tend only to evil (v.8b)*. You and I getting all stirred up about the prosperity of the wicked will only result in evil in our own hearts. If we do not respond correctly, we will be consumed with traits that do not reflect God's character. Yes, He gets angry with sin, but always in perfect righteousness. He plans to deal with wickedness in perfect justice. If we do not wait on God, we just give way to the desires of the flesh which are never right.

But how do I **not** get angry, stirred up, smoldering in my heart? What am I supposed to do when the wickedness is so obvious but it does not appear that God is dealing with it? We need confidence. We need to know that God is in control (vv.9-13). Be assured that God will judge the evildoer. God has promised to deal with the evildoer. *For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land (v.9).* And God always keeps His promises. Believe God. Trust God.

Understanding that God punishing the wicked is a matter of His timing, not our timing. David was quite sure that *In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there (v.10)*. God may choose to show mercy and allow a wicked person to live a long and prosperous, wicked life. But that does not mean that God will never bring retribution.

Remember that God is well aware of the pain the wicked person causes you. *The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him (v.12)*. God knows that. He observes it. But God is also fully aware of when He will deal with the evil. *The Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming (v.13)*.

Ask yourself, “Why is it so important to me that God pour out just punishment on the wicked person who hurts me?” Is it because you deserve better? According to who? Is it possible that we get angry with apparent injustice because we are proud and have high aspirations for self?

Accept God’s promise that the meek shall inherit the land. *But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace (v.11)*. The meek are those who have been afflicted, humbled, and become poor. That really is our condition when we finally die to ourselves and all the honor and fairness that we think we deserve. It is Jesus’ description of the person who has denied himself and taken up his or her identification with Christ. *And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23)*. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:3-5)*.

The land to be inherited was to the Old Testament Jewish mind the Promised Land. For us it is heaven, living with our Savior. An eternal perspective is very helpful as we wait for God to deal with the wicked. The world is full of wicked people who do wicked things that hurt the innocent and not so innocent alike. We know that God is opposed to wickedness and has promised to punish it – at some point. When we are too concerned for ourselves and our own welfare, we will grow angry with God for not punishing the people who hurt us or do that which effects us adversely as soon as we think He should. Stop burning. Rest in complete faith and trust in Him.