

Job 20-21 – “The Comfort of Empty Nothings (Zophar 2)”  
Psalm 73  
James 5

April 15, 2012

Remember that there are three questions that drive the book of Job:

The wisdom debate is driven by Job’s question: why is light given to the miserable?

Why is life given to those who are perishing?

But as the wisdom debate continues,

Job is being driven relentlessly towards Satan’s question,

“Does Job fear God for nothing?”

Does Job fear God for no reason?

What does Job *get* for fearing and serving God?

This is a huge question:

“What’s in it for you?”

Job has told us, “though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.” (13:15)

But the reason why Job can say this,

is because he is convinced that God will make it right – *in some way*.

Does Job fear God for no reason?

What’s in it for you?

That is the cynical question that Satan asks.

But as we keep seeing,

there is another question that lies even deeper at the heart of this book.

The real question of the *book of Job*

is God’s question:

“Have you considered my servant Job?”

Most people are obsessed with Job’s question:

they want to know the answer to the problem of evil – the problem of unjust suffering!

But the book of Job seems to end without really answering Job’s question.

Some people have the insight to probe Satan’s question:

“Does Job fear God for nothing?”

But God’s answer at the end of the book almost seems too easy.

And Job lived happily ever after.

The three friends were right – the righteous *do* prosper –

and as it turns out, Job fears God for good reason –

he gets a load of loot at the end!

The only way to answer Job’s question about suffering –

and the only way to arrive at a satisfactory (non-cynical) answer to Satan's question about why Job fears God – is to look seriously at God's question:

Have you considered *my servant* Job?

**Introduction: Zophar's Second Speech (ch. 20)**

20 Then Zophar the Naamathite answered and said:

<sup>2</sup> “Therefore my thoughts answer me,  
because of my haste within me.

<sup>3</sup> I hear censure that insults me,  
and out of my understanding a spirit answers me.

Zophar is beginning to consider the implications of what Job is *saying* – but he is not considering Job as the Servant of the LORD!

And so Zophar is getting rattled.  
He understands full well that if Job is right,  
then *everything* he believes is wrong.

Zophar was the first of the friends to conclude that Job must be a terrible sinner.  
In his first speech, Zophar had said that “God exacts of you less than you deserve.”  
You deserve worse from God!

Zophar would have liked the Shorter Catechism's statement:  
“Every sin deserves God's wrath and curse, both in this life and that which is to come.”  
Well, actually, it is not clear that Zophar has any idea of the “life to come” –  
and so Zophar would wind up teaching that  
“every sin deserves God's wrath and curse *in this life*” –  
which winds up making *this life* the focus of his entire theology.

Now Zophar realizes that Job has set out to destroy the traditional wisdom theology that the three friends base their lives on.

And so as Zophar lays out the portion of the wicked,  
he takes Job's own language and says,  
yes, my friend, you are right that God is going after you –  
he is going after you because you have sinned against him

Zophar starts by saying that the prosperity of the wicked is fleeting.

**a. The Fleeting Prosperity of the Wicked (20:4-11)**

<sup>4</sup> “Do you not know this from of old,  
since man was placed on earth,

<sup>5</sup> that the exulting of the wicked is short,  
and the joy of the godless but for a moment?

<sup>6</sup> *Though his height mount up to the heavens,  
and his head reach to the clouds,  
<sup>7</sup> he will perish forever like his own dung;  
those who have seen him will say, ‘Where is he?’  
<sup>8</sup> He will fly away like a dream and not be found;  
he will be chased away like a vision of the night.  
<sup>9</sup> The eye that saw him will see him no more,  
nor will his place any more behold him.  
<sup>10</sup> His children will seek the favor of the poor,  
and his hands will give back his wealth.  
<sup>11</sup> His bones are full of his youthful vigor,  
but it will lie down with him in the dust.*

In verses 4-11 Zophar insists that  
“The joy of the godless is but for a moment” -  
there is no future for the wicked.

He will perish forever like his own dung!  
Remember that Job and his friends are sitting on the ash heap –  
the place where the dung was burned.  
The image (and the smells) would have been all around them!

And while Zophar uses the image of dung in verse 7,  
he switches over to regurgitation in verses 12-23:

**b. The Regurgitation of the Wicked (20:12-23)**

<sup>12</sup> *“Though evil is sweet in his mouth,  
though he hides it under his tongue,  
<sup>13</sup> though he is loath to let it go  
and holds it in his mouth,  
<sup>14</sup> yet his food is turned in his stomach;  
it is the venom of cobras within him.  
<sup>15</sup> He swallows down riches and vomits them up again;  
God casts them out of his belly.  
<sup>16</sup> He will suck the poison of cobras;  
the tongue of a viper will kill him.  
<sup>17</sup> He will not look upon the rivers,  
the streams flowing with honey and curds.  
<sup>18</sup> 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.  
<sup>19</sup> For he has crushed and abandoned the poor;  
he has seized a house that he did not build.*

You have to admit that the author of Job did not give Job all the best lines.

Zophar's gives a very vivid account  
of the man who is trying desperately to avoid throwing up.  
I have seven children, so I know something about throwing up –  
I will cheerfully change a dozen dirty diapers;  
but only in the last couple years have I reached the point in my sanctification  
where I will help my wife with vomit.

Dung is nasty and stinky –  
but dung is the result of a properly-functioning digestive system.  
Vomit (in humans) is invariably the result of malfunctioning digestive system.

David Clines (490) says it beautifully:  
“Sin disagrees with the human constitution  
as bad food disagrees with the stomach.”

You may think that it is sweet at first (v12),  
but sin is deceitful –  
and if you suck the poison of cobras into your belly –  
it will come back the way it came!

And Zophar contrasts the ill-gotten riches of the wicked  
with the true wealth of the Promised Land –  
because the wicked “*will not look upon the rivers,  
the streams flowing with honey and curds.*”

(it might be better to translate it “honey and yogurt” –  
since the dairy product referred to here is more like yogurt  
than anything else you know!)

<sup>20</sup> “*Because he knew no contentment in his belly,  
he will not let anything in which he delights escape him.*

<sup>21</sup> *There was nothing left after he had eaten;  
therefore his prosperity will not endure.*

<sup>22</sup> *In the fullness of his sufficiency he will be in distress;  
the hand of everyone in misery will come against him.*

<sup>23</sup> *To fill his belly to the full,  
God<sup>al</sup> will send his burning anger against him  
and rain it upon him into his body.*

In verses 20-22, Zophar speaks of the wicked as one who consumes everything in sight,  
with the result that his prosperity cannot endure,  
because he has consumed it all!

Zophar warns against “consumer culture”!

And Zophar says that God will judge consumer culture  
not by taking everything away,  
but by filling his belly with his burning anger.

What is it that you want most?

Well, Zophar says, that God just may give it you –  
more than you can stomach!

**c. Darkness and Death Will Devour Him (20:24-29)**

- <sup>24</sup> *He will flee from an iron weapon;  
a bronze arrow will strike him through.*
- <sup>25</sup> *It is drawn forth and comes out of his body;  
the glittering point comes out of his gallbladder;  
terrors come upon him.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Utter darkness is laid up for his treasures;  
a fire not fanned will devour him;  
what is left in his tent will be consumed.*
- <sup>27</sup> *The heavens will reveal his iniquity,  
and the earth will rise up against him.*
- <sup>28</sup> *The possessions of his house will be carried away,  
dragged off in the day of God's<sup>[b]</sup> wrath.*
- <sup>29</sup> *This is the wicked man's portion from God,  
the heritage decreed for him by God."*

And in verses 24-29 Zophar lays out the end of the wicked:  
darkness and death will devour him.

In verse 29, Zophar refers to the portion of the wicked man –  
Normally, when speaking of the wicked in Hebrew,  
you would simply say “the wicked.”

But in verse 29 Zophar refers to the “wicked *man*” – the wicked “adam.”

There have been enough references in Job to the “first man” and other Adamic imagery  
that I suspect that Zophar here is speaking of the inheritance of the wicked Adam.

Zophar understands that the wages of sin is death.

Wicked Adams will not stand in the day of God's wrath.

David Clines says that “Zophar strikes the readers as the least sympathetic of the friends;  
but it is just because he so determinedly refuses to take other factors into account  
that he actually stands closest to Job.

For Job also rejects out of hand any argument  
that does not address itself to his present situation;  
and though he cannot for a moment assent to Zophar's analysis,  
he must agree with him that sin is the principal –  
or rather, the only – issue.” (259)

But what Job understands – and Zophar does not –  
is that if there is no resurrection,  
then all of Zophar's “comfort” is but “empty nothings.”

Psalm 73 prepares us for Job's answer.

We'll sing the first half now (verses 1-15) –  
which takes a similar course to Job's reply in Job 21.

Sing Psalm 73

James 5

James speaks of the "patience of Job."

I wonder if James remembered the *one* use of the Greek word "patience" in the LXX!

The one time that Job uses the word "patience" (at least in the Greek translation)

is in Job 14:19, where Job is addressing God.

In the ESV it is translated,

"as the waters wear away the stones; the torrents wash away the soil of the earth;  
so you destroy the hope of man."

In the LXX the last line is "so you destroy the patience of man."

The one time Job uses the word "patience"

he says that God is wearing down his patience!

And in our text for today, in Job 21:4,

Job admits that he is *impatient*!

The Hebrew phrase here has the idea of being "short in spirit" –

while the LXX translated it in the direction of anger/wrath.

It's a good reminder – that impatience is closely related to anger.

When things don't go my way, I get *impatient* –

I will not wait.

I want it now.

My way.

Now.

And I'm your father, so you'd better listen to me....

Patience.

Patience is also closely related to hope.

If your hope is Jesus –

if your hope – the thing that you look for – the thing that you are waiting for –

is the One who sits at the right hand of the Father,

then you can endure all things patiently.

But if your hope is that this life will work out your way –

and that you will get what you want in the end,

then indeed, God destroys the patience – the hope – of man.

Job's friends have offered him various "comforts" –

various explanations of how his sufferings fit into the cosmic scope

of God's purposes in history.

Maybe it's just "common wrath" – it's just coincidental that your children all died  
and all your wealth was raided and stolen in a single day!  
Or maybe it's God's discipline – for your good!  
You just need to humble yourself before God and accept this!  
Or maybe you deserve it!  
And now you need to repent!

Now, for most of us – indeed, dare I say, for *all of us* – one of these answers is right!  
Some of you *have* brought disaster upon yourself because of your own foolish actions.  
Others of you are experiencing God's discipline,  
as our Father disciplines those he loves.  
And we all experience God's "common wrath" –  
the difficulties of life that happen because God has cursed the ground.

But Job says that all these explanations fall short for him.  
"How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?  
There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood." (v34)

All their explanations are but "empty nothings."  
The word translated "empty nothings"  
is the Hebrew word "hebel."

This is the word that opens Ecclesiastes:  
"hebel, hebel, everything is hebel"  
It can be translated, "vanity" or "meaningless."

It also happens to be the name of Adam and Eve's firstborn son.  
English translations usually translate his name "Abel" –  
but it is, in fact, simply the Hebrew word "hebel."

All of your explanations of how the universe fits together are "hebel" –  
they are as fleeting and transient as Abel, who was murdered by his brother!

Job, after all, is the one who said in 16:18,  
"O earth, cover not my blood, and let my cry find no resting place."  
Just as Abel's blood cried out from the ground to God,  
so Job's blood will cry out as well.

Because we must consider Job – the innocent suffering servant,  
who points us forward to the blood of Jesus,  
which Hebrews tells us, speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

### **1. Job's Reply: The (im)Patience of Job (21:1-5)**

*21 Then Job answered and said:*

*<sup>2</sup> "Keep listening to my words,  
and let this be your comfort.*

<sup>3</sup> *Bear with me, and I will speak,  
and after I have spoken, mock on.*

<sup>4</sup> *As for me, is my complaint against man?  
Why should I not be impatient?*

<sup>5</sup> *Look at me and be appalled,  
and lay your hand over your mouth.*

If you want comfort, Job says, listen to *my* words.

Job says, my words make sense of the universe –  
at least, my words make better sense than yours do!

In his series of speeches from chapter 3-19,  
Job has gradually come to affirm that his true hope is the resurrection.  
Only rarely has he engaged with his friends' arguments,  
instead rejecting their positions categorically,  
and insisting upon his innocence.

But now, at the end of the second cycle of speeches,  
Job finally decides to answer the specifics of Zophar's claims.  
And he points out that their description does not match reality.

## **2. Job's Argument: In Fact, the Wicked Prosper (21:6-33)**

### **a. The Happiness of the Wicked (v8-16)**

<sup>6</sup> *When I remember, I am dismayed,  
and shuddering seizes my flesh.*

<sup>7</sup> *Why do the wicked live,  
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?*

The wicked do not die in agony –  
rather the wicked *live!*

This is not just a debating point for Job.

The question for Job is whether God “is an absentee landlord of an amoral universe.”  
(Clines, 525)

Job *wishes* that his friends were right –  
that the wicked would perish,  
and the righteous would prosper.

But the wicked “grow mighty in power” –  
again invoking the language of the “gibbor” – the mighty man –  
who defeats his enemies and rules in strength.

And in verses 8-13, he points out that they “spend their days in prosperity” and peace.

<sup>8</sup> *Their offspring are established in their presence,  
and their descendants before their eyes.*



<sup>9</sup> *Their houses are safe from fear,  
and no rod of God is upon them.*  
<sup>10</sup> *Their bull breeds without fail;  
their cow calves and does not miscarry.*  
<sup>11</sup> *They send out their little boys like a flock,  
and their children dance.*  
<sup>12</sup> *They sing to the tambourine and the lyre  
and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.*  
<sup>13</sup> *They spend their days in prosperity,  
and in peace they go down to Sheol.*

Job's friends have said that the wicked tremble in fear,  
their children perish, and they go down to death in terror.

Job says – “who are you kidding?”!  
Just read the newspaper!  
Browse the internet!  
The wicked have a wonderful life!

Just a few weeks before,  
it was Job's children that had been singing and rejoicing,  
and spending their days in prosperity –  
only to be cut short in their youth and brought down to Sheol with violence!

And so perhaps it is with some reason that the wicked say to God (in verses 14-15):

<sup>14</sup> *They say to God, 'Depart from us!  
We do not desire the knowledge of your ways.*  
<sup>15</sup> *What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?  
And what profit do we get if we pray to him?'*

Where have you heard this question before?  
This was Satan's question!  
Satan asked: “does Job fear God for nothing?”

Now Job doesn't know that!  
But in his search for comfort –  
in his search for a wisdom that can make sense of his situation,  
he has recognized that this is indeed the question!

Do I fear God for nothing?  
What profit do I get if I pray to him?

If all you do is look around at who makes the most money?  
Who has the most “fun”?  
Who has the best “stuff”?

Then you might well conclude,  
    “What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?  
    And what profit do we get if we pray to him?”

It's a good question!

God says to Satan, “have you considered my servant Job?”  
Let's consider Job!  
Job fears God and turns away from evil,  
    and the result is that Job's children die, his wealth is destroyed,  
    and he is plagued with sickness and disease.

Do you want to follow that God?!!  
    What is the Almighty that we should serve him?  
    What profit do we get if we pray to him?

Some people have looked at the end of the book of Job  
and said, “Oh, but that all happens before Job dies –  
so, in the end, Job does profit!”

But as we'll see when we get there,  
    the restoration of Job looks a lot like the restoration of Israel –  
    the return from Exile that was promised by the prophets.  
The restoration of Job *is* a picture of the resurrection.

If this life is all there is,  
    then Christianity is bunk.  
If there is no resurrection, Paul says,  
    then we are, of all men, most to be pitied! (1 Cor 15)

And that is why Job, by faith, says in verse 16:

<sup>16</sup> *Behold, is not their prosperity in their hand?  
The counsel of the wicked is far from me.*

Job considers Satan's question –  
    “Does Job fear God for nothing?”

But he says, “I can't go there.”  
    I realize that everything is upside down right now.  
    The most righteous, faithful man on earth is suffering.  
    The wicked are prospering.  
But I cannot walk in the counsel of the wicked –  
    I cannot stand in the way of sinners,  
    or sit in the seat of mockers.  
My delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his word I meditate day and night.

But still, Job says, let's be honest about how this world really works!  
And so in verses 17-21, Job asks:

**b. When Does Judgment Actually Fall on the Wicked? (v17-26)**

- <sup>17</sup> *“How often is it that the lamp of the wicked is put out?  
That their calamity comes upon them?  
That God<sup>[c]</sup> distributes pains in his anger?*  
<sup>18</sup> *That they are like straw before the wind,  
and like chaff that the storm carries away?*  
<sup>19</sup> *You say, ‘God stores up their iniquity for their children.’  
Let him pay it out to them, that they may know it.*  
<sup>20</sup> *Let their own eyes see their destruction,  
and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty.*  
<sup>21</sup> *For what do they care for their houses after them,  
when the number of their months is cut off?*

There are echoes of Psalm 1 in these verses.

Job had said that the “counsel of the wicked” is far from him –  
but then he asks when will the wicked be like the chaff that the wind blows away?  
Psalm 1 says that the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
but when does that actually happen?  
Maybe occasionally – but the pattern of the universe  
is *not* that the wicked perish and the righteous prosper!

Verse 22 is key for understanding Job's answer.

- <sup>22</sup> *Will any teach God knowledge,  
seeing that he judges those who are on high?*

Job is still convinced that God is both powerful and just.  
We have seen before that the idea of the “judge” in the OT  
is one of a king who both has the *knowledge and wisdom* to know what is right,  
*and* the strength and power to *do* what is right.

God knows everything.

You can't “teach” God anything!

And Job does not question God's power either!

God has all wisdom and knowledge.

God has all strength and power.

And yet, verses 23-26 make it clear that the pattern of the universe is *not*  
that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer!

- <sup>23</sup> *One dies in his full vigor,  
being wholly at ease and secure,*  
<sup>24</sup> *his pails<sup>[d]</sup> full of milk  
and the marrow of his bones moist.*

<sup>25</sup> *Another dies in bitterness of soul,  
never having tasted of prosperity.*

<sup>26</sup> *They lie down alike in the dust,  
and the worms cover them.*

The pattern of the universe is that,

“They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them.”

Everyone dies.

Whether you live an upright, godly life,

or a perverse, wicked one –

either way, the worms will get you!

You are going to die – there is no escape – so what’s the point?

And so Job says to his friends in verses 27-33,

**c. The Testimony of Mankind Is that the Evil Man Is “Rescued in the Day of Wrath” (v27-33)**

<sup>27</sup> *“Behold, I know your thoughts  
and your schemes to wrong me.*

(by trying to convince him that he is at fault, Job says, they are scheming against him!)

<sup>28</sup> *For you say, ‘Where is the house of the prince?  
Where is the tent in which the wicked lived?’*

<sup>29</sup> *Have you not asked those who travel the roads,  
and do you not accept their testimony*

<sup>30</sup> *that the evil man is spared in the day of calamity,  
that he is rescued in the day of wrath?*

<sup>31</sup> *Who declares his way to his face,  
and who repays him for what he has done?*

<sup>32</sup> *When he is carried to the grave,  
watch is kept over his tomb.*

<sup>33</sup> *The clods of the valley are sweet to him;  
all mankind follows after him,  
and those who go before him are innumerable.*

Job says, let’s be honest:

your moral behavior has no effect on your well being!

In fact, the common testimony of humanity

is that the ruthless triumph,

the cruel succeed,

the wicked prosper!

As David Clines puts it,

“If Job is correct, there is indeed a right and a wrong,

but no one should imagine that doing the right and eschewing the wrong

is going to yield any benefit;  
if anything, it is wrongdoing that yields the greatest benefit.” (536)

After all,

when the day of calamity came – it did not find the wicked princes of their day –  
it found Job;  
when the day of wrath – the day of judgment and destruction – came  
it did not sweep away the evil man,  
it swept away Job.

Who are the great men of history?

Who are the ones that everyone remembers?

We remember the violent – the scandalous – the traitors!

**Conclusion: Therefore Your Comfort Is “Empty Nothings” (v34)**

<sup>34</sup> *How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?*

*There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood.”*

Job concludes by saying that all his friends have done is provide “hebel” –  
vanity – their “comfort” is meaningless.

Or, what is worse, “falsehood.”

Falsehood is almost too nice a word here!

The word translated “falsehood” is the word used to speak of “breaking faith”  
or “acting treacherously” throughout the OT.

There is nothing left of your answers but treachery!

Your comfort is not just “meaningless” – “empty nothings” –  
your comfort is identical to Satan’s question!

“Does Job fear God for nothing?”

Job is saying to his friends:

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me.

For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man!”  
(Matthew 16:23)

Job is saying, “If I go your route,

if I accept your premise that the wicked suffer, and the righteous prosper,  
then I will enter into the counsel of the wicked.

And once I go down that path,  
there is no return.”

In chapter 21, Job does not give us his answer.

We’ve already heard his answer.

Job is convinced that his only hope lies beyond the grave.

His only hope is that he will pass through death

and that God will vindicate him beyond the grave.

It's what James was saying:

“Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord....

“Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged;  
behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

As an example of suffering and patience, brothers,  
take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast.

You have heard of the steadfastness of Job,

and you have seen the purpose of the Lord,

how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.” (James 5:7-11)

It's where Psalm 73 ends –

so long as I just look at the present state of the wicked,

all I can see is their triumph and prosperity;

but when I look into the sanctuary –

when I see God's purposes for history –

then I realize that in the end, God will make all things right.

As Psalm 73 puts it,

“Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

Can you say that?

It's easy (perhaps) to say “Whom have I in heaven but you?”

But can you really say that “there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you”?

This is what it means to love the Lord your God with *all* your heart.

And this is what the patience of Job refers to:

the *one thing* that I want is God.

If I have *him* then nothing else matters.

If I don't have him – then nothing else matters.