

Why Do the Wicked Prosper? Job 20-24

We have dealt at great length with the question, “Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?” in our study of Job. Tonight, we look at the other side of that coin. “Why does God allow good things to happen to bad people?” Why is life not fair? Why, if God is good and all-powerful, is the world the way it is?

Job’s friends have chosen the rather naïve and overly simplistic solution to this difficult problem by denying that God allows evil to flourish in this world at all. Remember that we have been going back and forth between Job and his three friends for several weeks now as they argue over the cause of Job’s sufferings. They believe Job has brought these sufferings on himself by sinning. Job continues to push back against their overly simplistic way of thinking. He has held fast to his faith in God, and God has met him with the consolations of heaven. As we come to chapter 20, we are drawing near to the end of this tiresome conversation. We are going to cover five chapters tonight, so we will take a helicopter trip over these passages. At the end of chapter 19, Job warned that his friends might be bringing fiercer punishment upon themselves because of their strong judgments of Job. Let’s begin by observing Zophar’s response.

Then Zophar the Naamathite answered and said:

²“Therefore my thoughts answer me,
because of my haste within me.

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

⁴Do you not know this from of old,
since man was placed on earth,

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

Verse 5 really sums up the whole of Zophar’s lengthy speech here. He brings nothing new to the conversation so we won’t spend much time going through his words. In short, he believes that God will not allow the wicked to prosper in this world. He goes on for 24 more verses describing the miserable fate of all the wicked. There is much truth in what he says, but as we’ve seen time and again in this book, he is wrong to assume that what Job is experiencing is the punishment of the wicked.

Job, with his wisdom, answers Zophar’s overly simplistic account of the life of the wicked with these hard and fast facts. Let’s read the first 16 verses of Job’s response.

²¹ Then Job answered and said:

²“Keep listening to my words,
and let this be your comfort.

³Bear with me, and I will speak,
and after I have spoken, mock on.

⁴ As for me, is my complaint against man?
Why should I not be impatient?

⁵ Look at me and be appalled,
and lay your hand over your mouth.

⁶ When I remember, I am dismayed,
and shuddering seizes my flesh.

⁷ Why do the wicked live,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?

⁸ Their offspring are established in their presence,
and their descendants before their eyes.

⁹ Their houses are safe from fear,
and no rod of God is upon them.

¹⁰ Their bull breeds without fail;
their cow calves and does not miscarry.

¹¹ They send out their little boys like a flock,
and their children dance.

¹² They sing to the tambourine and the lyre
and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.

¹³ They spend their days in prosperity,
and in peace they go down to Sheol.

¹⁴ They say to God, 'Depart from us!
We do not desire the knowledge of your ways.

¹⁵ What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?
And what profit do we get if we pray to him?'

¹⁶ Behold, is not their prosperity in their hand?
The counsel of the wicked is far from me.

(Job 21:1-16)

This is the realism of the Word of God. It is brutally honest about the world. Christianity does not shy away from the hard facts of life. Many reject Christianity today because they think it is too optimistic. They think that it does not face the facts. It looks at the world through rose-colored glasses, they say. They think we just put a fake smile on and pretend that we are happy, but that we don't face the realities of life in this world honestly. But if you examine the Word of God honestly, you must see that it does not hide from the hard truths. It faces them head-on, and examines the facts with brutal honesty.

Job, not Zophar, has an accurate view of life in this fallen world. He candidly asks the hardest questions. He tells these three friends that his complaint is not ultimately against them, though they are quite a thorn in his flesh at this moment. His greatest burden is that the God in whom He trusts has allowed him to suffer so tremendously while the wicked actually live the good life. The condition of the world dismays him and causes him to shudder. Why? Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power, while Job sits on an ash heap?

Verses 14-15 are very important. The very people who turn their backs on God and have no interest in the knowledge of His ways have prosperity in their hands. Job asserts that the very fact that they have no interest in God, that they do not even believe in divine judgment, gives them a peace in this world that is difficult to shake. Their sense of security arises out of their lack of faith. They sit in their palaces in comfort and ease while their subjects suffer terribly. Their riches give them security. Their power and position give them security. They often even die in peace because they have convinced themselves that this world is all that there is. This should throw the worldview of Job's friends into complete confusion. They should lay their hands on their mouths in light of these facts. They are just plain wrong about how God deals out judgment in time. So, Job concludes his response to Zophar with these words.

³⁴ How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?
There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood."
(Job 21:34)

That concludes round 2. It should be the knockout blow to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, but they are quite resilient. Prejudices tend to be that way; they don't die easily. We hold to our views and opinions quite fervently. What Job said at the end of round 2 clearly offended Eliphaz quite deeply. He steps into the ring in round 3 with a new sense of ferocity. Whatever sense of diplomacy and thoughtfulness that he had in rounds 1 and 2 are now thrown out the window. He now takes on the role of prosecuting attorney, and unleashes a full assault on Job's character.

22 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said:

² "Can a man be profitable to God?

Surely he who is wise is profitable to himself.

³ Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are in the right,
or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless?

⁴ Is it for your fear of him that he reproves you
and enters into judgment with you?

⁵ Is not your evil abundant?

There is no end to your iniquities.

⁶ For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing
and stripped the naked of their clothing.

⁷ You have given no water to the weary to drink,
and you have withheld bread from the hungry.

⁸ The man with power possessed the land,
and the favored man lived in it.

⁹ You have sent widows away empty,
and the arms of the fatherless were crushed.

¹⁰ Therefore snares are all around you,
and sudden terror overwhelms you,

¹¹ or darkness, so that you cannot see,
and a flood of water covers you.

(Job 22:1-11)

Eliphaz has become the accuser. This is a classic case of a straw man argument. Eliphaz now sees Job as someone he is not. He has turned Job into the enemy. False theology, false views of God, lead us to take false views of one another. We can often turn a friend into an enemy in our mind when we lose hold of the truth about God. These are baseless accusations. Eliphaz has no evidence for any of these crimes because Job didn't actually commit any of them. Where are his witnesses? If Job had wronged so many people, why can't Eliphaz find them and bring them before Job so he can face his accusers. They don't actually exist. Eliphaz is simply speaking falsehood out of his own wounded pride, and his words are just plain ugly. No kindness, no compassion, no honesty. He is right; Job is wrong. Case closed.

Eliphaz even twists Job's words.

¹² "Is not God high in the heavens?

See the highest stars, how lofty they are!

¹³ But you say, 'What does God know?

Can he judge through the deep darkness?

¹⁴ Thick clouds veil him, so that he does not see,
and he walks on the vault of heaven.'

(Job 22:12-14)

Job had not said that. He never questioned the knowledge and judgments of God. He simply asked why things are as they are in the light of the knowledge and judgments of God. Job knows that God knows all things and is a righteous judge, which is why he is struggling to make sense of the world. Eliphaz accuses Job of disrespecting God, but he never did. It is actually Eliphaz who is disrespecting God by not honestly looking at the world, and more importantly, by accusing a man God had declared blameless and upright of being guilty of the worst crimes imaginable.

These three friends ought to be such a sobering warning to us. They are God-fearing men. They believe in the justice and righteousness of God. They hold firmly to faith in God. Yet, they are tragically deceived. It is not enough to have high and lofty opinions about God. It is not enough to know many facts about God's justice. There is only one path to a true and accurate knowledge of God, and at this point, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have not found it. Their theology is very akin to the modern prosperity gospel. Do good and good will come to you. Look at verses 21-25.

²¹ "Agree with God, and be at peace;
thereby good will come to you.

²² Receive instruction from his mouth,
and lay up his words in your heart.

²³ If you return to the Almighty you will be built up;
if you remove injustice far from your tents,

²⁴ if you lay gold in the dust,
and gold of Ophir among the stones of the torrent-bed,
²⁵ then the Almighty will be your gold
and your precious silver.
(Job 22:21-25)

Eliphaz is really saying, “Agree with me, and be at peace,” and yet, he says, “Agree with God, and be at peace.” That is a dangerous place to be. He has put himself in the place of God, feeling confident he has all the answers. How proud do you have to be to think that someone’s agreement with you equals their agreement with God? May we all be on guard against that kind of theological pride. Our knowledge of God must never make us proud. True knowledge of God can only humble a man. So, if what you know of God makes you think more highly of yourself, it might be good to reevaluate what you think you know about God. True knowledge of God makes us think more highly of others, and less highly of ourselves. For this is the mind of Christ.

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:3-5)

Now, imagine being Job after this last speech of Eliphaz. How would you feel? Can you imagine the inner turmoil of his soul as he sat there and received these severe rebukes for crimes he had not committed? How would you respond? I think it would be understandable for Job at this point to unleash on these friends. He could very easily lose his temper and let loose. Watch and observe the patience of Job that emulates the patience of the God who is refining him.

23 Then Job answered and said:

² “Today also my complaint is bitter;
my hand is heavy on account of my groaning.
³ Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his seat!
⁴ I would lay my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.
⁵ I would know what he would answer me
and understand what he would say to me.
⁶ Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; he would pay attention to me.
⁷ There an upright man could argue with him,
and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.
(Job 23:1-7)

Job does not return evil for evil. He overcomes evil with good. He takes his case to a higher authority than Eliphaz, rather than stooping to their level. In essence, he shows that he cares very little for the opinions of his friends. He is not ultimately concerned what they think of him.

He only cares what God will say of him. This is a faithful response to slander. It hurts deeply to be slandered. But when we are slandered, we don't return the favor. We simply rise above it by going to God our justifier, who will ultimately vindicate us. Watch, though, as Job struggles to know how to find God in the midst of this assault.

⁸“Behold, I go forward, but he is not there,
and backward, but I do not perceive him;
⁹on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him;
he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him.
(Job 22:8-9)

In essence, Job says, “I’m surrounded by enemies. Everywhere I turn I only find trouble, darkness, and accusations.” He knows that is not God. He knows God is not speaking in his friends. He is reaching out to God from the deepest depths of darkness and despair. From that place, he begins to grab hold of the answers to the deepest questions of his soul. God meets his faith with an assurance that what is happening is ultimately going to be for his good.

¹⁰But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.
¹¹My foot has held fast to his steps;
I have kept his way and have not turned aside.
¹²I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.
(Job 23:10-12)

God knows the way the righteous take, even when that way is dark and gloomy. Even when that way leads us through suffering and slander. Even when it is through the valley of the shadow of death. Even when our enemy unleashes every fiery dart against us. God knows our way, and when he has tried us, we shall come out as gold. That is faith refined. It is as Peter described,

⁶In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

Eliphaz had accused Job of not treasuring God, but Job's words prove otherwise. He has treasured God. His sufferings are not the proof that he does not treasure God, they are just the opposite. His sufferings prove that God is worth more than anything in this world to him. He didn't choose to suffer. Satan simply brought it upon him under the good, loving, and sovereign hand of his God. But when it came, God's worth was proved to him. He knew, even if his friends doubted it, that God was the one He desired above all else. He knew, also, that God was the one who ultimately would bring to completion what he had already begun in him.

¹³ But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back?
What he desires, that he does.

¹⁴ For he will complete what he appoints for me,
and many such things are in his mind.

(Job 23:13-14)

The word unchangeable here really means one. The KJV translated this, I think quite correctly, "He is in one mind." It speaks to the unity and infallibility of the eternal purpose of God. He has one fixed purpose for this world that He has made, and who can turn Him back? God knew it all before He even made the world. It was all planned and foreordained in His mind before the world was made. What is this purpose? What is it that Job is so sure God has appointed for him, and that He will surely bring to completion? There are many statements in the New Testament that clarify this unchangeable purpose of God. Here is one that I believe encapsulates it well:

¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:17)

What God desires, and what He has done, is to give us the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness so that we would reign in life through one man, Jesus Christ. This is much more than any mind could have ever imagined!

His fixed purpose is the only thing in this world that can offer us stability and peace. Job was able to remain grounded, anchored in His trust in the Lord because He knew God was in one mind, and nothing could change Him. Even as he wrestled with life's deepest, darkest mysteries, he did not waver in trusting God's plans. He didn't have the full picture, and he knew it. He knew there were things in the mind of God that he just couldn't understand. In fact, that's what set him apart from his three friends who thought they had all the answers. In light of God's unchanging purpose, Job declares,

¹⁵ Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
when I consider, I am in dread of him.

¹⁶ God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;

¹⁷ yet I am not silenced because of the darkness,
nor because thick darkness covers my face.

(Job 23:15-17)

Job fears the Lord. Job has been accused of doing away with the fear of God. His friends think he has denied God because he is suffering so terribly. He believes that God, though terrifying, permits him to come near with his questions and petitions. Why? Because he knew that God is good. As C.S. Lewis famously described Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, "Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King." It is faith that gives us courage to approach the Lion and the

Lamb. He isn't safe, and we know it. He is a consuming fire. But He is good. So, Job continues to appeal to his the one who has terrified him in confidence that, because of God's goodness, He will be heard.

The question he asks at the start of Chapter 24 sets the tone for the whole chapter. It is his honest confession that he doesn't understand why God allows certain things to pass unpunished.

**“Why are not times of judgment kept by the Almighty,
and why do those who know him never see his days?
(Job 24:1)**

The why indicates that Job can't figure this out. He doesn't claim to understand the mind of the Lord, as his friends do. For the rest of the chapter, Job provides an honest account of the wicked's lot in this world. More often than not, they live at ease. They do not encounter God's fierce judgments. God doesn't terrify them as they go about their affairs and wrong others. They think they are getting away with it. They think no one sees them, so they keep on going on the path of destruction. Not only does God not intervene, He seems to let them succeed.

**22 Yet God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power;
they rise up when they despair of life.
23 He gives them security, and they are supported,
and his eyes are upon their ways.
24 They are exalted a little while, and then are gone;
they are brought low and gathered up like all others;
they are cut off like the heads of grain.
25 If it is not so, who will prove me a liar
and show that there is nothing in what I say?”
(Job 24:22-25)**

The answer to this problem lies in that phrase, “a little while.” That is the sum of their days on earth. It is “a little while.” God gives us freedom to go our way for a little while. He has given all of us a little while to try to figure out life without Him. He has not forced Himself upon us. He has offered us the way of salvation, and He allows us to go our way if we want. He doesn't intervene because that is one of the ways that His wrath is actually revealed against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

How else can you make any sense of the 20th Century but as God having permitted mankind to get on without Him. He gave security to the wicked, and allowed them to be exalted for a little while, and then they were gone. Is that not a perfect description of what happened in the two World Wars? Hitler had security, and he was supported. In a strange way, it could be said that God prolonged his life. He escaped near and almost certain death many times over. The more he evaded death, the more confident Hitler became that Fate had chosen him. Even as he unleashed horrendous evils upon this world, he felt secure. As Christians, we have no choice

but to say that God remained sovereign through it all. We can't understand it all, but we can discern their end. We can and do wrestle with the question why, just as Job did. We won't have the full picture until we are on the other side of the grave. Here and now, we can take consolation from the fact that we know how this thing ends.

¹⁶ But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I discerned their end.
(Psalm 73:16-17)

The Christian worldview is always immediately pessimistic, but ultimately optimistic. We don't hide from the hard facts of life. We face them head on, and we trust that God has a plan and purpose for all of it. It is as we go into the sanctuary of God that we can discern their end. Though they can't discern their end, we can. Their confidence during this little while is founded upon a lie of the devil. They think no one sees them. But God does see them, and He will repay. Just not today. In His patience, He waits. He will repay at His appointed time. So, we wait. We endure the hardships and persecutions, and for many, even the sword of the wicked's anger.

In America, we have been blessed not to have to fear such a fate for many generations. However, the day may come, and come soon, when that blessing is removed from us. If we do not stand today with courage, that day may come sooner than later. Regardless, we have no need to fear what is to come during this little while of our life on earth. We can have the confidence of men like Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who endured the hatred and hostility of the Nazis for the sake of Christ. Niemöller said this from his pulpit in 1933 as Hitler and the Nazi party rose to power:

It is now springtime for the hopeful and expectant Christian Church—it is testing time, and God is giving Satan a free hand, so he may shake us up and so that it may be seen what manner of men we are!...

Satan swings his sieve and Christianity is thrown hither and thither; and he who is not ready to suffer, he who called himself a Christian only because he thereby hoped to gain something good for his race and his nation is blown away like chaff by the wind of his time.
-Martin Niemöller

Just over three years after saying those words from his pulpit in Dahlem, Germany, he would be arrested for treason because he refused to toe the Nazi party line. He would spend seven years in prison for failing to voice his support of the Nazi regime. It could be that a similar time of sifting is coming upon us in America today. We don't know what the future holds, but we must be prepared for the worst of Satan's assaults upon us. Now is not the time to hide in fear or to be silent. We must lovingly and confidently voice our opposition to the antichristian movements of our day such as the redefinition of marriage, critical race theory, gender fluidity, the sexual revolution.

What kind of Christians will we be? Will we be like Job, who knew that his God was unchangeable? Will we stand firm in the persecution because we know that God will complete what He has appointed for us? Let's be brave today, for God has given us a rock on which to stand. Our confession of faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, is the rock upon which we, the church, are built, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. So be strong and courageous. Do not fear when the wicked prosper, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you may go.

¹³ But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back?

What he desires, that he does.

¹⁴ For he will complete what he appoints for me,
and many such things are in his mind.

(Job 23:13-14)