

Job 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 11. Then Zophar the Nehemiahite answered and said, Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and a man full of talk be judged right? Should your babble silence men, and when you mark shall no one shame you? For you say, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes.

But oh, that God would speak, and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom, for he is manifold in understanding. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves. Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven. What can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea. If he passes through and imprisons and summons the court, who can turn him back? For he knows worthless men. When he sees iniquity, will he not consider it?

But a stupid man will get understanding, when a wild donkey's colt is born a man. If you prepare your heart, you will stretch out your hands toward him. If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and let not injustice dwell in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish.

You will be secure and will not fear. You will forget your misery. You will remember it as waters that have passed away, and your life will be brighter than the noonday. Its darkness will be like the morning, and you will feel secure because there is hope. You will look around and take your rest and security. You will lie down, and none will make you afraid. Many will court your favor, but the eyes of the wicked will fail. All way of escape will be lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last. In Job chapter 11, we arrive at the third of the speeches of Job's friends, the final one in the first cycle. Eliphaz had appealed to a vision in his speech. Bildad had appealed to tradition. Now Zophar, the Naamathite, appeals to the mysteries of the divine wisdom.

[2 : 0 2] On the surface of things, this might seem promising. Indeed, in many respects, one might characterise the Lord's own response to Job as based upon such a principle. However, under closer examination, Zophar's approach, appealing to the divine wisdom, largely boils down to the fact that God presumably has reasons for punishing Job that are not understood simply because, unlike God, we do not have all of the information. If our knowledge of things were as full as God's, why God was punishing Job would be entirely obvious. For Zophar, it doesn't seem to be in question at all that God is in fact punishing Job. That is entirely taken for granted. He begins his speech by challenging and rebuking Job, disputing the account that he gives of the situation. After he has finished doing this, he turns in verse 13 to counsel Job about what he ought to do instead. Zophar's approach to Job is far more aggressive than either of the other friends. Eliphaz had appealed to the surpassing righteousness of God and had recognised that Job, for the most part, was a blameless man. Bildad had claimed that Job's sons were guilty, but had still pulled his punches in his treatment of Job himself. Zophar is a lot more aggressive. Eliphaz had begun his speech in chapter 4 verse 2, If one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? Yet who can keep from speaking? Bildad had begun in chapter 8 verse 2, How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Like the other friends, Zophar adopts the typical language of a disputation. However, he is noticeably more confrontational with Job than the other two, especially than Eliphaz. Zophar seems to be aggravated that Job has not been silenced by this point. The fact that Job is still expressing his opinion and has not closed his mouth in response to the speech of the other two friends, angers Zophar, who sees it as his duty to shame Job, effectively to shut him up. The principle of verse 2 might be similar to that expressed in Proverbs chapter 10 verse 19, When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. Zophar characterises Job's position in verse 4, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes. The characterisation of Job as one who sees himself to be clean in God's eyes might

be drawing upon Job's statements in places like chapter 9 verses 20 to 21. Though I am in the right, my own mouth would condemn me. Though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse. I am blameless,

I regard not myself, I loathe my life. While this part of Zophar's characterisation of Job may seem to be justified, the other part, my doctrine is pure, might be rather unfair. Job is not acting as a teacher in a school. He is speaking about his own suffering and giving voice to his anguish, not delivering some abstract disquisition on the subject. Zophar expresses his wish in verses 5 and following that God would disabuse Job of his ignorance. If God actually revealed the truth of the matter to Job, Job would in fact perceive the mercy of God. God is not punishing him as he deserves.

While Zophar talks about the mysteries of God's wisdom, his fundamental system of thought is entirely one of sin and retribution. He does not seem to be able to conceive the possibility that God might have some other purpose in Job's suffering, entirely unrelated to sin and punishment, as the reader in fact knows that he does. Zophar is here likely picking up on some of the themes that Job himself brought out in chapter 9 verses 11 to 12 and chapter 10 verses 13 to 14.

Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not. He moves on, but I do not perceive him. Behold, he snatches away. Who can turn him back? Who will say to him, What are you doing? Yet these things you hid in your heart. I know that this was your purpose. If I sin, you watch me, and do not acquit me of my iniquity. God is not a mortal. He can see human hearts. He can discern the true intents and character that they have. If he is determined to make a case against Job, who is Job to stop him? The Lord in his wisdom knows guilty and worthless people, and he will bring them to judgment. In chapter 6 verse 5, to explain his protest at his condition, Job had said, Does the wild donkey bray when he has grass, or the ox low over his fodder? Implicitly comparing himself to a wild donkey in that situation.

In verse 12, Zophar uses a proverb that refers to a wild donkey. But a stupid man will get understanding when a wild donkey's calf is born a man. The exact translation and meaning of this proverb is debated, although the ESV's translation I've just read is most likely correct. The wild donkey giving birth to a man is clearly impossible, and by implication so is a stupid man gaining wisdom and understanding. It is likely that this is not a characterization of Job himself, as Zophar goes on to hold out hope for Job if he will only repent. He needs to seek the Lord, put away sin from himself, and then he will be able to lift up his face in innocence, look to the Lord, and receive blessing.

[7 : 11] This, of course, contrasts with Job's protest of the preceding chapter in verses 15 to 16. If I am guilty, woe to me. If I am in the right, I cannot lift up my head, for I am filled with disgrace and look on my affliction. And were my head lifted up, you would hunt me like a lion, and again work wonders against me. As Norman Harbell notes, within these verses from verse 13 to 20, Zophar picks up a number of allusions and idioms from Job's own speeches, carefully integrating these into his counterpoint to Job's perspective. He offers a number of images of restored fortunes, floodwaters that have passed away, the darkness that has given way to the dawn, the person who can sleep and enjoy rest and security, and restoration to social standing so that others seek his favour.

However, if Job rejects the counsel of Zophar and continues in the way that he has been going, his fate will be that of the wicked described in verse 20. Job's hope for death is much the same as theirs. It should be noted, however, that despite the strength of his challenge to Job, Zophar still expresses the thought of verse 20 in the third person, whereas verses 13 to 19 are in the second person. He presents Job's repentance as the most natural and expected course of action. A question to consider. The mystery of God's providence is a recurring and prominent theme in the book of Job. What are some of the ways that this theme has directly been engaged with in the text to this point?