

Job 20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 22 April 2021

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[0 : 00] Job chapter 20. Then Zophar the Nehemiathite answered and said, Therefore my thoughts answer me, because of my haste within me. I hear censure that insults me, and out of my understanding a spirit answers me. 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? 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. His children will seek the favour of the poor, and his hands will give back his wealth. His bones are full of his youthful vigour, but it will lie down with him in the dust. Though evil is sweet in his mouth, though he hides it under his tongue, though he is low 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. 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. To fill his belly to the full, God will send his burning anger against him, and rain it upon him into his body. 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. 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. Job chapter 20 is Zophar the Naamathite's second speech, the final speech of the second cycle of discourses. This is also Zophar's final speech in the book.

Zophar is not a named speaker in the third and final cycle. Like the other friends, Zophar gives an extended discourse on the character and fate of the wicked. While he does not speak directly concerning Job's situation, it is clear that he is directing his comments to Job, and he wants Job, as someone who, in his mind, fits the category of the wicked, to draw the logical conclusions. Zophar is clearly troubled by Job's position. Zophar treats Job not as a friend in need of comfort and support, but as someone teaching a rival doctrine. To counter the false teaching of Job, Zophar doesn't so much engage with him or seek to persuade him, as he more forcefully expresses the retributionist dogma back at him. This, Zophar insists, is teaching that has been around from the very beginning, from the first man, from Adam himself. Job should know this. This teaching is fundamental to understanding the moral structure of the universe. Anyone challenging this is rejecting something absolutely fundamental. The wicked, for a time, may seem to prosper, but they will finally get their comeuppance. Their downfall is fated, and it is only a matter of time until it will happen.

[3 : 50] It may seem, for a period, that they are getting away with their sins, that they are prospering, they will rise up even to the heavens. But from this great height, they will be brought down, and they will perish forever, in the most dishonourable way, being compared to dung.

They will leave no trace behind them. They will be wiped clean from the face of the earth. From the disgust and dishonour of bodily waste, Zophar turns to the image of a dream. A dream is forgotten in the morning. It's insubstantial. The dream vanishes, and soon after, its memory withered.

The image of downfall here is clearly intended to speak to Job's situation. Job was once the richest and greatest man of the east, and Zophar is suggesting that these great heights of prosperity were only reached through oppression and wickedness, and now Job is being reduced to his proper estate.

Once the great honoured man, Job is now being treated as what he really is, the excrement of the society. The children of the wicked man will be reduced to begging from the poor. All the wealth that the wicked man took, presumably by oppression, has now been stripped from him. While his body is still young, he suffers an untimely death. He is brought down to the grave in the prime of his life. From verse 12, Zophar develops the image of the wicked man as one who savours evil, as one who devours, as one who consumes. And finally, as one from whose distended belly God will disgorge all that he has devoured through his oppression. The evil that they are delighting in and consuming is ultimately poison. It actually serves as a nemetic. Everything that these unrighteous men have devoured will end up being vomited back out. Norman Harville remarks upon some of the poetic features of the poetry here. At several points in his speech, Zophar uses the same term twice, but with a different shade of meaning or connotations. He writes, This technique of repeating key terms with subtle variations in meaning is employed by the poet to develop an intricate web of thematic interrelationships in the design of the poem.

[5 : 47] The wicked man that Zophar portrays here is a gourmand who savours the taste of evil. It is delightful to him, but the very thing that he delights in will finally be his downfall. The evil he savours is like a serpent's poison, perhaps the poison of that serpent of old himself, the devil. This poison kills him, preventing him from enjoying all the things that he would enjoy. And the cause for his demise is his oppression of the poor. Eliphaz will make a similar claim in chapter 22 verses 5 to 9.

Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities, for you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The man with power possessed the land, and the favoured man lived in it. You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed.

This, of course, is an unmerited charge against Job. Indeed, it is exceptionally unjust. In chapter 29 verses 11 to 17, Job describes his former conduct as one who was the deliverer of the poor. When the ear heard, it called me blessed, and when the eyes saw, it approved, because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me. My justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame.

I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made him drop his prey from his teeth. In Zophar's understanding, God is the one who brings about the downfall of this wicked man.

[7 : 29] In verse 15, God is the one who casts the riches out of the belly of the man who has devoured them in his unrighteousness. In verse 23, God sends a rain to the person who is the devourer, and fills his stomach to the full, but with his fury and anger in judgment. In chapter 6 verse 4, Job had said, For the arrows of the Almighty are in me. My spirit drinks their poison. The terrors of God are arrayed against me. In verses 24 and 25 of this chapter, the wicked man is pierced by the arrows of God. All that he has laid up for himself is doomed to oblivion. He will be devoured by the fire of God. This is an especially cruel thing for Zophar to say, knowing that Job had lost his sheep and the servants with them to such a fire. In chapter 16 verses 18 and 19, Job had appealed both to the heavens and the earth to bear witness on his behalf.

O earth, cover not my blood, and let my cry find no resting place. Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven, and he who testifies for me is on high. In verse 27, Zophar claims that both the heavens and the earth will speak in Job's case, but as witnesses for the prosecution. In Deuteronomy, the heavens and the earth were witnesses of the covenant, who would testify against the people if they had been unfaithful.

