

Job 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 21. 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. 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. Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? Their offspring are established in their presence, and their descendants before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them. Their bull breeds without fail. Their cow calves, and does not miscarry. 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. They spend their days in prosperity, and in peace they go down to Sheol. 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? Behold, is not their prosperity in their hand? The counsel of the wicked is far from me.

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? 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? One dies in his full vigour, being wholly at ease and secure, his pails full of milk, and the marrow of his bones moist? Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted of prosperity. They lie down alike in the dust, and the worms cover them. 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?

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, what 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. How then will you comfort me with empty nothings? There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood. Job chapter 21 is the final speech in the second cycle of speeches. Within it, Job responds to all of his friends. To this point in this cycle of discourses, Job and the friends have both been speaking largely past each other. The friends have been presenting their portraits of the fate of the wicked, and Job has been declaring his case before God and lamenting his situation.

[3 : 1 0] Now, however, he deals with them quite directly, and he is responding to their presentation of the wicked, maintaining that their retributionist account does not actually hold true in reality.

To this point, the friends, whose duty it was to provide comfort to Job, had done nothing of the kind. They had merely exacerbated his suffering. Job, likely sarcastically, makes one request of them, that they be silent and listen to his words, granting him that one thing would be more comfort than they had provided to that point. After they had heard him out, they could return to their mocking.

Job is likely referring particularly to Zophar there. Job's main complaint, his chief case is against the Lord. His issue isn't with man. Rather than presumptuously taking up the case of the Lord for him, the friends should hold their peace, listen to Job, and take account of his situation. Each of the friends, in this second cycle of speeches, had presented a portrait of the wicked and their fate.

Within this speech, Job will challenge their accounts head on. Eliphaz had said in chapter 15, verses 29 to 30, In chapter 18, verses 16 to 19, Bildad had said, Finally, in chapter 20, verse 11, Zophar has spoken about the premature demise of the wicked person. His bones are full of his youthful vigour, but it will lie down with him in the dust.

All of these bold and dogmatic claims, however, Job argues, fail the empirical test. Job would have them pay attention to their own society. There are a great many people who, though wicked, enjoy considerable power and wealth. Far from dying prematurely, they are living to old age and seeing their posterity after them. They know peace and security in their situation, and their flocks and herds flourish. Their houses are places of joy, ease and happiness, of song, mirth and dancing. When they die, it is not violently and prematurely, but in old age and in peace. All of this directly contradicts statements like those of Zophar in chapter 20, verses 10 and 26 to 28. His children will seek the favour of the poor, and his hands will give back his wealth. Utter darkness is laid up for his treasures. A fire not fanned will devour him. What is left in his tent will be consumed.

[5 : 52] 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. And yet these are people who openly incite God's wrath, who dismiss his counsel, and do so, seemingly, with impunity. However good the retributionist doctrine might seem in theory, he does not seem to hold in practice. Bildad, in chapter 18, verses 5 to 6, had confidently declared, Indeed the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of his fire does not shine. The light is dark in his tent, and his lamp above him is put out. To which Job responds doubtfully, How often does that actually happen? Poetic justice may be wonderful, but it seldom seems to appear. Job alludes to statements like those of Psalm 1, verses 4 to 6.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Job anticipates the response at this point. The retributionist can come back to him and say, Ah, but the judgment will come upon their children. Yet a judgment that is not inflicted upon the wrongdoers themselves does not seem to be satisfactory. While the proposal that there might be a lengthy delay in the Lord's visiting of his judgment upon the wicked might be designed to uphold his justice, it raises as many problems as it settles. While the piety of the retributionist doctrine may be well-intentioned, it is in fact presumptuous. It arrogates to itself the task of vindicating God's justice and explaining the basis of God's judgment, and yet it is readily undermined by experience. The disparities of life, especially when considered in the light of the levelling effect of death, do not seem to sustain the retributionist teaching. Job sees in all of the speeches of his friend a deeper, more sinister intention. Perhaps we get a sense of this in verse 28. For you say, where is the house of the prince?

Where is the tent in which the wicked lived? Their scheme and plan, perhaps, is to discredit Job as the chief of the men of the east. Job occupies the position of a king, and when we consider what has befallen him, it should be clear that it is a disaster for the entire people. And as such, it doesn't just single Job out as guilty as an individual, it discredits him as a leader of his people. Or at least, that's how the friends seem to see things, and perhaps their speeches are designed to get Job to submit to their claims. If he did so, it would likely be to their great strengthening.

They would likely take to themselves much of the power and authority that Job himself had lost. The claims to which Job is responding here are perhaps ones like those of Bildad in chapter 18, verses 14 to 21.

He is torn from the tent in which he trusted, and is brought to the king of terrors. In his tent dwells that which is none of his. Sulphur is scattered over his habitation. His roots dry up beneath, and his branches wither above. His memory perishes from the earth, and he has no name in the street.

[8 : 58] He is thrust from light into darkness, and driven out of the world. He has no posterity or progeny among his people, and no survivor where he used to live. They of the west are appalled at his day, and horror seizes them of the east. Surely such are the dwellings of the unrighteous.

Such is the place of him who knows not God. And yet, Job insists, talk to some of the people who have travelled around a lot. They can recount many stories of evil princes and rulers, who have nonetheless retained their power, wealth, and authority. Again, the retributionist doctrine fails the empirical test. And while you can claim that death is the great leveller, such evil men can be brought to their tombs in honour. They die in peace at an old age, they are followed by a large crowd of mourners, and whole societies lament their passing. Many such cases like these show that the words of the friends are empty. They have nothing of substance to give. Such words afford no comfort at all.

A question to consider. Verse 22 speaks of a situation where people, eager for the justice and the honour of God, can end up presenting themselves as wiser than God, teaching things that clearly go against God's reality or his word, in order theologically to airbrush some troubling details out. What are some of the ways that we might fall into the same trap as the friends do in this regard?