

September 13

Job 18, 19, 20 and 21

Today we read Job 18-21 and finished the second cycle of speeches and responses from Job and his friends. There will be one more such cycle before 2 more voices are heard.

Deeply rooted assumptions are very difficult to deal with and that is why nothing Job can say or do will shake the belief of his 3 friends that he is suffering because he has sinned greatly against the Lord. To them there can be no other possible explanation for the devastation they see. God is completely just. He punishes evil and rewards good. Job is being punished - how else could you describe what they saw? Therefore Job must be a very evil man. It is just that simple. It's a no-brainer and the one thing that Eliphaz and company can think to do is to try to get Job admit it so that he can be forgiven. These guys really do want to help, but when you start with a wrong assumption, that can sometimes keep you from ever seeing what is really going on.

Bildad says, 'Job, when are you going to stop these endless speeches and deal with the facts that are as obvious as the nose on your face?' Job says, 'Bildad, will you please stop talking long enough to just listen to what I am saying?' It is a 4-way nonsense conversation. It's going nowhere and they are operating on completely different channels!

When people are hurting as badly as Job is hurting here, they do not need answers - sometimes they don't even want answers - they need (and really do want) reassurance. They need to know that somebody - especially God - really cares. That is what Job did not feel. His comforters had become his accusers. As far as he could tell, God had become his attacker. His brothers were alienated - they stayed away; his relatives left him, his friends were gone. His guests (the people he had frequently entertained) forgot about him. His servants didn't want to know him - they wouldn't even respond if he begged them to. Even his own wife was disgusted by him. "My breath is offensive to my own wife," he said. Even children mocked and laughed at him. No one - no one tried to comfort him. That is all Job wanted - a comforter - but no one would fill the position.

So Job turns back to his faith and though appearances are all to the contrary, he decides to trust in God and he utters the words which, have become the most famous words of the book: "I know that my redeemer lives and that in the end He will stand upon the earth and after my skin has been destroyed yet in my flesh shall I see God. I myself will see Him with my own eye, I - and not another. How my heart yearns within me."

This is the most blatant affirmation in the entire Book of Job of his belief in life after death and the immortality of the soul, and it is a brilliant example of faith in action. All evidence to the contrary, Job chooses to believe and to place his faith in God despite the apparent injustice of his position.

Zophar's second speech sounds nauseatingly familiar to Job. 'God will punish the wicked. Though they prosper for a season, their end is always bad, as God vents his burning anger against them. Job, this is what is happening to you.'

Once again, if you and I were to read Zophar's speech as a literary unit standing by itself, we would find very little to quarrel with, as long as it was understood that while the wrath of God is sometimes delayed with reference to the wicked even until after they have died - there are rich, wicked men who die peacefully in their beds - Job is right in observing that in Chapter 2 - but even they are under the wrath of God and they will also feel the white

hot heat of his anger. Zophar's theology is fine - it is his application that is flawed and he uses truth as a battering ram to further demoralize his afflicted companion.

In some of his previous responses Job was speaking to God as much as to his would-be comforters. But now Job is very angry. His tone is sharp and he responds very pointedly to Zophar - so sharply, in fact, that Zophar will take no part at all in the third set of dialogues. Zophar has suggested that all of Job's troubles were his own fault because he had earned God's wrath through a whole series of hidden, secret sins.

He begs again for a fair hearing, which Zophar has heretofore been unwilling to give him. Job's observations from the ash heap are pretty well diametrically opposed to those of Bildad and Zophar. They see wicked people who have been brought low by the judgment of the Lord, but for every case that they can put forward Job says he can think of several in which the wicked came out smelling like a rose: "Their children are established around them while they grow old and increase in power. Their homes are safe and free from fear and the rod of God is not on them. Their bulls never fail to breed. Their cows do not miscarry. They send their children forth as a flock, their little ones to dance about. They sing to the music of tambourine and harp. They make merry to the sound of the flute. They spend their years in prosperity and go down to the grave in peace..." Bildad had said that the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out, but in truth, asks Job, how often does that really happen?

Without the clear teaching of the New Testament, that is perhaps best summarized by the words of the writer of the Book of Hebrews in Chapter 9 verse 27, "It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment" (King James Version), it is hard to prove that God always punishes the wicked and always blesses the righteous. From the perspective of this life only, the "justice" of God may legitimately be questioned and the pious arguments of Bildad and Zophar can sound pretty hollow.

In closing, let me share the following...

1. Unlike Job and his friends, we have that clear, explicit teaching. What he could only see dimly and grasp by faith, we see much more clearly. Though we too must exercise faith to believe the New Testament teaching about a great day of judgment when those who have rejected the revelation of God and stored up for themselves a 'treasure' of wrath will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and be cast into the lake of everlasting fire, we have a great deal more revelation and teaching upon which to rely.
2. When we are confronted with the apparent "free pass" that some evil people seem to enjoy, we can be very certain that whether in this life or the next, justice will be done. Just remember, apart from the grace of God in providing the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, we would also share their fate!