

Perceived Safety Job's Second Response to Zophar Job 21

Challenging the established ways of thinking or acting is never easy. Consider Wycliffe, Tyndale and Luther, all who translated the Bible from an old language into the modern vernacular of their people. Or, you might think about Copernicus who placed the sun instead of the earth at the center of the universe. People like Galileo were not always welcome in the “establishment.”

Job finds himself introducing innovative ideas in theology while he reshapes his frame of reference in the middle of his suffering. The ancient idea of retributive theology does not apply to his circumstances. He is not guilty of some horrific sin against God or mankind. Thus, his circumstances of severe loss of family, wealth, status and health leave him questioning what he has known about God all his life. The righteous receive blessings. The unrighteous receive curses. His questions to Zophar in Job 21 challenge the bedrock of their culture.

Now, not only must he endure the physical and psychological sufferings brought on by Satan, he must also endure the constant accusations of his friends, friends that came to comfort him but are giving him no comfort. Knowing that they are not listening to him, he unhesitatingly speaks and challenges them to mock his words (21:2-3).

“Keep listening to my words,
and let this be your comfort.
³ Bear with me, and I will speak,
and after I have spoken, mock on.

Then, like a man with an axe in front of a stately old tree in the forest, he continues to chip away at the age-old approach that defines man's relationship with God. Each question sends chips flying into the air as he strikes at the base of the tree with his axe.

Why Do the Wicked Live a Long Prosperous Life? – 21:7-13

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

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and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.
 13 They spend their days in prosperity,
 and in peace they go down to Sheol.

What is behind Job's nagging question? He asks, "Why do the wicked have it so good, live to a ripe old age and get rich?" (*The Message*). Job finds himself questioning the teachings of his parents, teachers and respected elders. His experiences are leading him to construct a new frame of reference, a new paradigm for living, a new way to make sense of reality. His new frame allows for the fact that evil is not always challenged, that the wicked may live long and prosper.

Remember, his current frame of reference. If you are a good person then God will reward you. If you are a bad person, then you will get what you deserve. Reward and punishment are the flip sides of divine retribution and natural consequences of this present life. They are the basis of retributive theology.

Did the recent circumstances in Job's life bring him face to face with an opportunity to look outside his frame of reference, to look outside his box that provided him with the easy answers to life's puzzling questions?

If God punishes evil in this life, why do the wicked live a long prosperous and powerful life? The friends that came to comfort him keep repeating their standard unchallenged answers. While the inconsistencies of their arguments fill the windshield of his life like on-coming glaring head lights, Job tries to make sense of events in the only way familiar to him. He continues to call for God to answer his questions.

And how does God respond? Silence, utter silence, the kind of silence that frustrates and angers you, the kind of silence that brings nothing but hopelessness. It is the kind of a silence that you feel when your spouse shuts you out, or your boss does not return your desperate phone calls. It is the kind of silence that causes your mind to entertain questions about the security of your relationships with others. If God created us in His image, and part of that image is to be relational, why isn't He talking? Things did not make sense to Job. Job's friends miserably failed to help him deal with the inconsistencies that existed between his paradigm and his new experiences, inconsistencies which exist between our paradigms and reality.

Why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't God say something? Why am I living righteously only to receive harshness from God? Can anyone help me to make sense of this apparent nonsense?

Why Does God Tolerate Their Disrespect? – 21:14-15

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?'

Look how the wicked treat God with disrespect? As Eugene Peterson paraphrases 21:14a in *The Message*, "They say to God, 'Get lost.' We've no interest in you or your ways." That is exactly what we are hearing from secular man in the early days of the 21st century. Throwing off the shackles of God and His word, the world shouts loudly,

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vigorously and sometimes, violently, “FREEDOM!”

Why doesn't God retaliate, NOW? Why do I continue to live righteously only to be treated with contempt by those that live around me? Where is God's justice? Like a little league baseball player who slides into home plate and hears the ump call, “You're OUT,” we shout, “Life isn't fair. I'm safe.”

To illustrate this unfairness, Job wildly paints a real picture with real colors in real time of what is really happening in life in his day.

- ¹⁶Behold, is not their prosperity in their hand?
The counsel of the wicked is far from me.
- ¹⁷“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?
- ¹⁸That they are like straw before the wind,
and like chaff that the storm carries away?
- ¹⁹You say, ‘God stores up their iniquity for their children.’
Let him pay it out to them, that they may know it.
- ²⁰Let their own eyes see their destruction,
and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty.
- ²¹For what do they care for their houses after them,
when the number of their months is cut off?

Are his friends so blind? Can they not see what is going on around them? Where is God in this mess? Indeed, where is God?

Will Any Teach God Knowledge? – 21:22-26

- Will any teach God knowledge,
seeing that he judges those who are on high?
- ²³One dies in his full vigor,
being wholly at ease and secure,
- ²⁴his pails full of milk
and the marrow of his bones moist.
- ²⁵Another dies in bitterness of soul,
never having tasted of prosperity.
- ²⁶They lie down alike in the dust,
and the worms cover them.

Surely the omniscient God is aware of what is happening on earth. His omnipresence should make Him aware that the wicked die in the comfort of their bed fearing no coming judgment. Having lived a full and prosperous life, the wicked rich man worries not about eternal fire and damnation. With a final breath he lapses into oblivion sleeping forever knowing that he “beat the system.”

Life just isn't fair. If you don't believe that statement, then ask the homeless man that wanders the streets day after day with a blank look in his eyes. A good man, a religious man, fired from his job, lapsing into depression and alcoholism, losing his home, wife and children, having nothing but the filthy and tattered clothes he wears, limply

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carrying around a garbage bag of meager possessions. Ask him if life is fair. Ask him if there is any justice for those who were good but now find themselves discarded as trash.

How often are our minds taunted with the nagging question, “Why doesn’t the loving and omnipotent God do something to fix these outrageous injustices?”

Are You Isolated? – 2:27-34

“Behold, I know your thoughts
 and your schemes to wrong me.
 28 For you say, ‘Where is the house of the prince?
 Where is the tent in which the wicked lived?’
 29 Have you not asked those who travel the roads,
 and do you not accept their testimony
 30 that the evil man is spared in the day of calamity,
 that he is rescued in the day of wrath?
 31 Who declares his way to his face,
 and who repays him for what he has done?
 32 When he is carried to the grave,
 watch is kept over his tomb.
 33 The clods of the valley are sweet to him;
 all mankind follows after him,
 and those who go before him are innumerable.
 34 How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?
 There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood.”

Job knows his audience, those comforting friends. He knows that their demanding work, their righteous living and their continual sacrifices made to God have made them what they are. Safe. Uninformed about what is happening in the world outside their world. He knows this because this was his life before tragedy struck him and his rehearsed answers could not satisfy his innumerable questions.

Tucked away in northeast Wyoming is a little ingrown community. As a minister, I spent eleven years living and ministering among people that saw life through one frame of reference. With the introduction of expanded travel and sudden over-exposure to the world through the Internet and technology, the community’s paradigm changed imperceptibly.

I, like others, found myself locked into one way of thinking using one frame of reference. I had not traveled “the roads.” Like Job’s friends, I was content to live safely in isolation.

With one decision to try something new, my single frame began to grow three dimensionally. Moving from a safe tight-knit community to a city of 8 million in the land of my nation’s perceived “enemy,” I started to see and experience things I had never known before. Each day, my standard answers to life’s problems met obstacles and opposition. Challenged to rethink the why and way I lived met me at every turn. My mind was like a GPS trying to help its owner find a new path. “Recalculating...Recalculating...Recalculating.”

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Job faced similar obstacles and opposition to his frame of reference. His friends, people safely isolated from reality, tried to force him back into his old frame, a hard wineskin, a cracked wineskin that leaked profusely spilling its contents into a new frame looking for new meaning. All that Job's friends could offer him was nothing. Nothing.

Allow me to close abruptly with these questions? What are we offering to a world that cut loose its anchors and is floating adrift on a tumultuous sea of confusion today, a sea where absolute standards are impossible because of the ever-shifting winds of thought and experience? Are we answering the world's questions with the same pat answers that we received? Are those answers still true but in need of reshaping to meet diverse ways of thinking? Are those answers relevant to the problems encountered by a "brave new world?" Are we listening to their questions, trying to reframe our answers in terms they will understand and apply to their newfound "freedom"?

Or, will we remain safely behind the walls of our cloistered church buildings carrying on as though the world was just as we found it years ago?

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