

A Wrong View of God’s Judgement on Sin and the Wicked

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Zophar’s Second Speech (Job 20)

- A. *Zophar rebukes Job for his insolence—20:1-3*
- B. *Zophar reminds Job of the woes of the wicked—20:4-29*

Zophar uses vivid imagery in vv. 12-14 to make his point. His argument is that “a wicked person savors his evil-doing just as a child holds a sweet morsel under the tongue, refusing to swallow it until he squeezes out every bit of flavor” (Hartley, 305). But eventually it will dissolve, ... it will turn bitter in his stomach. It may taste good now but one day you’ll need some moral Tums!

Job’s Sixth Speech (Job 21)

- A. *He calls for their silence—21:1-6*
- B. *He claims that the wicked do indeed prosper—21:7-21*
- C. *He counters the law of retribution—21:22-34¹*

20:1-29 Although Zophar’s second speech reflects many biblical truths concerning the wicked, it does not guarantee that his words were given in true biblical spirit. Zophar painted pictures of the certain failure and disastrous end of the wicked but left Job to make the application to himself. Words have the power to wound or heal (Pr 11:9, 11; 15:4) and need to be used in a positive manner (Pr 15:23). Believers are to be ready to give a defense of their faith, but their apologetic needs to be spoken with all due propriety and truth, bathed in love (Eph 4:15; Col 4:6; 1 Pt 3:15).

21:7-15 Skeptics point out that Job’s characterization of the success of the wicked, despite their godless lives, contradicts biblical teaching (cp. 21:10 with Ps 49:12-15). But Job’s issue here was given voice elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Ps 73:1-14). Biblical writers did not gloss over the seeming contradiction between the prosperity of the wicked and God’s promise of blessing for those who obey Him; but their answer came from a change of perspective in which they realized the ultimate destiny of those who disregard God (Ps

¹ Storms, S. (2016). *Biblical Studies: Job* (Job 20-21:34). Edmond, OK: Sam Storms.

73:17–20). The book of Job is a dialogue in which the speakers, including Job, encircled the main issue—God’s righteousness—approaching it from a variety of angles. Along the way some negative (Job) and superficial (the friends) ideas came out, but they should never be taken as the author’s final teaching. Although seemingly reminiscent of the innocent sufferer’s lament in other ancient documents, including one known as the *Babylonian Theodicy*, Job’s remarks were a true report of his feelings at this stage of the discussion, not the book’s final position.²

5. zophar’s second speech (chap. 20)

This sixth speech by Job’s companions is the most stinging of all the diatribes. Infuriated and insulted, Zophar blasted Job, seeking to convince him that his wealth had vanished because that is what happens to those who deprive the poor.

a. *The anger of Zophar (20:1–3)*

20:1–3. Like his two partners before him, **Zophar** could not remain silent; he too had to speak another time. **Troubled** and **disturbed** at Job’s rude words, Zophar felt he must respond. Job had said the three had insulted him numerous times (19:3), but now Zophar volleyed the notion that Job had insulted *him*. Some comforter he turned out to be!

Job had said God “closed their minds to understanding” (17:4), but Zophar retorted that his **understanding** forced him to **reply**. He had to share his insights!

b. *The brief prosperity of the wicked (20:4–11)*

20:4–11. Since Job claimed to **know** so much (a false accusation, for Job did not claim that), he should be aware, Zophar argued, that from the beginning of human history any **joy** experienced by a sinner **is brief** and for **a moment**. Job may be arrogant, Zophar arrogantly affirmed (!), but he will be brought low and die. Though high as **the heavens** he will, in contrast, be brought low like **dung**. People will not know where he is, for he will have vanished **like a dream** (four men in the Book of Job spoke of dreams: Eliphaz, 4:13; Job, 7:14; Zophar, 20:8; Elihu, 33:15). He will be unseen (20:9, a retort to Job’s words in 7:8), **his children** will have to pay his obligations **to the poor** (since he had oppressed them, 20:19), and he will lose all his ill-gotten **wealth**. Repeatedly in this oration, Zophar mentioned wealth (vv. 10, 15, 18, 20–22, 26) and its transience, an expansion of Eliphaz’s earlier statement along that line (15:29). All this suggested that Job acquired his riches dishonestly. A wealthy man, if wicked, will find that his energy will be buried with him.

² Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (pp. 757–758). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

Zophar here may have been responding to Job's mention of **vigor** in 18:7 (cf. 21:23 and "dust" in 10:9).

c. The impoverishment of the wicked (20:12–19)

20:12–16. A sinner may enjoy sin-gained wealth like some **sweet** delicacy that he relishes **in his mouth**, but like **sour** food he will lose it. Wealth becomes like poisonous snake **venom** (cf. v. 16) with its bitter consequences.

Riches gained by godless means are not retained, Zophar argued. In fact they are vomited **up** and they **kill** the wicked like the deadly **poison of serpents** (cf. v. 14) or the venom of an adder's **fangs**.

20:17–19. **Streams** with their drinking water, and **honey and cream**, symbols of prosperity, cannot be enjoyed by sinners. "Cream" may be curdled milk or a kind of yogurt, a delicacy in the Middle East. As a transgressor dies, he must **give back** (cf. v. 10) the results of his toil and profits from his business without having enjoyed them. The reason for all this is that he took advantage of **the poor**, even taking their **houses**, in order to enrich himself. Of course Zophar had Job in mind, but later the suffering saint, here badgered again by verbal blows, denied such accusations (29:12, 15; 31:16–22).

d. The anger of God against the wicked (20:20–29)

20:20–23. Though always **craving** for more wealth (another unfair charge by Zophar), a wicked person will find that it **cannot save** him for it **will not endure**. Troubles will come **upon him** (**misery**, *'āmāl*, was a response to the same Heb. word used by Job in 3:10, 20; 7:3; 16:2; see comments on 3:10), and just when he is enjoying his prosperity (with **his belly**; cf. 20:14, full), **God will** lash out at him in His **anger** (cf. v. 28). The one who was angry, it seemed, was Zophar, not God! Zophar's vinegar-mouthed diatribe falsely and viciously incriminated Job as a selfish profiteer, heartlessly tyrannizing the poor. Such an arraignment was totally unfounded.

20:24–29. If Job tried to escape from God's anger, one **weapon** would down him if another did not. Pulling out the **arrow** (cf. 6:4) to try to save himself would do no good (cf. 16:13). He would experience **terrors** and **darkness** (cf. 15:30; 18:18), and **fire** (cf. 18:15; 22:20) would enshroud and **devour** his wealth.

God will not let a wicked person escape, Zophar averred. **The heavens** and **the earth** would witness **against him**, an obvious rejoinder to Job's desire that the earth not hide God's injustice to him (16:18) and his longing that his witness and intercessor in heaven act on his behalf (16:19–21).

His theft of the houses of the poor (20:19) will be requited by **his own house** being carried off by a **flood** (cf. 22:16) in **God's wrath** (cf. 20:23). **Such is the fate**, Zophar

summarized, of **the wicked**. This is what **God** has **appointed for them** as their **heritage** (cf. 27:13). How then, as Zophar saw it, could Job think that his situation was any different? Since he had lost his wealth so suddenly, how else could such a calamity be explained except that he was wicked?

Zophar, of course, in his philosophical shortsightedness, made no allowance for a person being afflicted for any reason other than retribution for sin. In his stubborn invective, he flared at Job with venomous words, like the poisonous snake he spoke about.³

ZOPHAR'S SECOND SPEECH

Job 20:1-29

Zophar was angry with Job's threats against the three friends. After venting his anger against his host, Zophar developed his main point, *viz.*, the brevity of the wicked person's prosperity. Like Bildad before him, he stressed that the wicked person is suddenly brought to destruction and destitution in the midst of his days. This speech is the most stinging speech of the friends thus far.

A. Reaction to Job's Reproach (20:1-11)

The Naamathite began his speech with "therefore," perhaps to indicate that what he had to say came in response to what had just been said. Zophar gives two reasons for his second speech. First, he was inwardly agitated by the reproaches and windy warnings of Job. Second, he had heard the insulting reproof of Job, and his "spirit of understanding" had formulated a rebuttal to what the patriarch had set forth. Perhaps Zophar put it this way to answer Job's earlier question, "What plagues you that you answer?" (20:1-3; cf. 16:3).

Zophar asserts that a principle of life had been observed since man was placed on earth, *viz.*, "the triumphing of the wicked is short." The "joy" of the godless person is momentary. For a time he may rise to the heights of earthly glory where his head "touches the clouds." Yet he perishes like his own dung (20:4-7a). Zophar is not the most refined of the three friends.

³ Zuck, R. B. (1985). Job. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 742-743). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Associates will be amazed at the sinner’s quick demise. His moment of power and glory is as ephemeral as a dream or vision. Then those who knew him would see him no more. He will forever be missing from his place in society (20:7b–9).

In the midst of his years, when his bones are full of his youthful strength, the wicked man shall be cut off. His youth shall go down to the grave with him. The ill-gotten gain of the wicked person will be given away by the children of the deceased (20:10–11).

B. Divine Retribution of Sinners (20:12–22)

Zophar compares sin to a dainty morsel which tickles the palate. He will not swallow it hastily, but instead will turn it in his mouth with delight. Eventually he must swallow it, and in his bowels it will become deadly poison akin to the venom of cobras. A specific example of this principle is the ill-gotten gain which he amassed. That wealth does not abide with him. It must be disgorged. The figure is perhaps that of a food which the stomach cannot retain. “God shall cast them out of his belly” (20:12–15).

Whatever the sinner “sucks,” i.e., indulges in, turns to the venom of cobras. He shall not look on “rivers of honey and curds,” i.e., he would never enjoy life more abundant. He would be compelled to restore that for which he had labored. He shall not “swallow it down,” i.e., enjoy it. However great the substance be which he has acquired, he shall not have the joy of it which he had promised himself. Why? Because he had oppressed and then abandoned the poor. He seized houses which he had not built (20:16–19).

The divine retribution upon the sinner is appropriate to his sin. He had felt and displayed a restless, insatiable greediness. “Nothing remains for him to devour.” The greed of this person is recompensed by utter loss and want. In the moment of his greatest abundance his distress comes suddenly upon him. All those in destitution, and those he has oppressed shall rise up against him and make him their prey.

C. The Fullness of Judgment (20:23–29)

The belly of the sinner shall indeed be filled, but only by the judgments of the Almighty. The wrath of God comes upon him like rain. Seeking to escape from one death, he will flee into another. He faces an enemy, as it were, armed with a brass bow. That powerful weapon would send forth an arrow to pierce right through his body. Zophar depicts the sinner drawing out of his body the shaft of glittering steel, hoping to save himself. Soon, however, the terrors of death fall upon him (20:23–25).

Zophar piles up other figures for the judgment on the sinner. Complete darkness—a symbol for calamity—is reserved for the treasures of the sinner. An “unfanned fire,” i.e., a supernatural fire, shall consume all that is left in his tent (20:26).

Heaven and earth conspire together against the sinner. There may be allusion here to Job's appeal to the earth (16:18) and his pretended assurance of having a witness in heaven (16:19; 19:25). The heavens "reveal" his iniquity in the chastisements which fall upon him. Earth rises up against him in the form of the hostility of his fellow man. In the day of God's wrath the possessions of the sinner shall be swept away with a flood (20:27–28).

Zophar concludes his speech by underscoring the picture he has drawn. Job should see himself in the picture. The insistence that such sudden reversal of fortunes as Job has experienced comes as judgment from God forces Job again to reply to his friend (20:29).

JOB'S SECOND RESPONSE TO ZOPHAR

Job 21:1–34

In the first round of the debate Job was overwhelmed with the thought that God had become his enemy; in the second with the thought that men had turned against him. In both rounds it took the caustic words of Zophar to focus his keen mind on the arguments of his friends. In his first response to Zophar, Job employed bitter sarcasm (ch. 12). Now the patriarch unleashes a barrage of facts which directly bear on the argument of the friends.

A. An Appeal for Attention (21:1–6)

To introduce his speech, Job offers four reasons why the friends should listen to him. First, the friends believed they were offering Job the consolations of God (15:11); the consolation he seeks from them is that they listen to him. Second, after he has spoken, Zophar (the verb is singular) may mock him if he wishes. Third, Job's complaint did not concern the friends, nor men in general for that matter. His complaint pertained to God. Because God was silent, Job felt he had reason to be impatient. Fourth, just a glance at the sufferer should astonish the friends into silence. Yet they gazed at him and just kept gabbing. Job himself was certainly horrified when he looked at himself.

B. The Prosperity of the Wicked (21:7–16)

Job now addresses the question, Why do the wicked prosper? Why under the moral government of God does he permit them to live? They not only live, they live to a ripe old age, and become mighty in the earth. Unlike Job, the wicked have the blessing of seeing their children grow up beside them. Not merely themselves and their children, but their homes and all in them are full of peace—another allusion to the rod of God which had fallen on all which belonged to Job. Their children dance and sing and play musical instruments (21:6–12).

The wicked spend their days in prosperity. Then in a moment, without the miseries of a prolonged illness, they die and go down to Sheol, the abode of dead spirits. Thus Job draws

the picture of the peaceful end to a prosperous life (21:13). This is exactly opposite the picture presented by the friends. According to them, the wicked experience the pangs of conscience (15:20), an early death (20:11), a childless old age (18:19), and a disastrous end (20:24).

The wicked experienced all this joy and prosperity in spite of the fact that they had consciously excluded God from their lives. Their godlessness was not momentary and rash, but formal and reasoned. They did not wish to know his ways. They openly scoffed at the value of serving the Almighty or praying to him (21:14–15).

Finally, Job articulates the mystery. The prosperity of wicked “is not in their hand,” i.e., it does not depend upon them. It comes rather from God. Why does God so bless the faithless? Whatever the answer to that question—and Job certainly had no answer to offer—this suffering patriarch wanted no part of the counsel of the wicked. He repudiates the principles by which they live. His glowing description of the life of the wicked should not be interpreted to mean that he endorsed their lifestyle. Even though he does not understand the ways of God, he will not abandon God (21:16).

C. The Peace of the Wicked (21:17–21)

Job next argues that the wicked experience peace as well as prosperity. Sudden and disastrous visitations by God do not come upon them as the friends had repeatedly suggested. What examples can his opponents offer to support their assertion that the light of the wicked is put out (cf. 18:5–6), or that they experience calamity (cf. 18:12). What examples can his friends produce of the wicked being swept away like stubble of chaff before the wind? (21:17–18).

Perhaps his opponents will argue that though the wicked man personally may not suffer, his children certainly will. A dead man, however, does not know nor care what his children are experiencing. In a moral universe the wicked man personally should experience retribution. He should “drink of the wrath of the Almighty” (21:19–21).

D. The Audacity of the Friends (21:22–26)

The doctrine of providence articulated by the friends did not correspond to reality. By clinging to such a doctrine the friends were making themselves wiser than God. Will they then presume to teach God how to run the universe? The Almighty judges “those on high,” i.e., heavenly beings. What man, then, can instruct him with regard to the affairs of earth? (21:22).

Job observed that death is the great leveler. Of those who die suddenly, one person is at the height of prosperity; another dies in bitterness, never having experienced the blessings of life. Though vastly different in life, both persons are together in the dust where the worm

consumes their flesh. Job is arguing that one's character cannot be determined by his lot in life. Thus, the three friends should not presume to tell God to judge a person's life by his wealth or his health. All people die, and only God can be the accurate judge of their lives, regardless of the circumstances which they experienced in life (21:23–26).

E. The Ignorance of the Friends (21:27–34)

Job finally addresses the insinuations of his friends about himself. In describing the fate of the wicked they had Job in mind. When they asked in astonishment, "Where is the house of the prince?" they were speaking of him. The implication is that the dwelling of the wicked prince had been swept away (21:27–28).

Such insinuations reveal the gross ignorance of these antagonists. Have the three of them never asked for the witness of caravaneers who travel throughout the world? Such travelers tell a story quite different from that of the friends. What have these travelers observed? (21:29).

First, they observed that the wicked person was preserved in the day of destruction. Second, they testified that the wicked man was allowed to continue in his evil ways without censure from any quarter. Third, they witness that the wicked man is buried in honor. He would be carried to his grave in solemn procession. His tomb would be guarded against desecration. Fourth, they observe that, far from being shunned by his fellow man, the wicked person is idolized. "All men shall draw after him," i.e., he shall have innumerable successors and imitators, just as he was preceded by countless others whom he resembled (21:30–33).

Job feels that he has refuted the theories of his friends in regard to the supposed calamities and misery of the wicked man, whether in life or death. Hence their attempts to comfort him by this line of thinking are vain. The suffering patriarch regards all their answers as falsehood. In spite of all their talk, the three friends had been of no help to him (21:34).⁴

⁴ Smith, J. E. (1996). *The wisdom literature and Psalms* (Job 20:1–21:34). Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co.