

Ten

ZOPHAR

Finally among the three friends we get to Zophar. Let's remind ourselves again that at the end of the Book of Job (42:7) God has a word to say about the three friends, and says in effect that they have not spoken rightly of Him as Job has. We are using that as a key to examine what each of the friends say. That does not mean that everything they say is false: they are godly men, they know their theology, so we do not condemn them but attend to what they say with discernment. Sometimes not even what they say is wrong, but the way they say it and the reason they have for saying it—the attitude behind it—is deficient.

The two older ones, Eliphaz and Bildad, have spoken first each time. Eliphaz started from the assumption that human beings cannot be righteous or pure before God. We are small, and of no account, so we must knuckle under, and put up with it when suffering comes. Job knew he was not perfect, but even so he believed that he could and would come before God justified—that is his appeal to God. (The Bible understands 'righteousness' as being righteous before God with the righteousness that comes from God—see for example Genesis 15:6, Philippians 3:9—not what we build up from below. So you are righteous before God as a justified sinner, by virtue of God's redeeming action.) Eliphaz eventually 'did his block' and said that Job must be a terrible sinner if God is making him suffer this much. Bildad, as we saw, was the one with the strict doctrinal position from which he would not budge. When Job demolished it, he remained tight-lipped and unmoved. He never comes out and openly condemns Job, as Eliphaz was driven to, but he ends up in much the same position.

Zophar is the youngest of the three friends, and less guarded than either of them. He arrogantly thinks that he is far superior to Job in his understanding of God. Though he speaks third each time, he 'lets Job have it' much earlier than the others do.

JOB IS CONDEMNED

Zophar's first speech is in chapter 11:

11:1 Then Zophar the Naamathite answered:
2 'Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
and should one full of talk be vindicated?
3 Should your babble put others to silence,
and when you mock, shall no one shame you?
4 For you say, "My conduct is pure,
and I am clean in God's sight."

(We have seen already that Job is not saying this—Zophar has completely misconstrued him here.)

5 But oh, that God would speak,
and open his lips to you,
6 and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!
For wisdom is many-sided.
Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.

This is the first time Zophar speaks—he gets stuck straight into Job. He says that Job is full of talk, that everything he is saying is just a babble of words. He says, ‘I know that God could show you a thing or two, Job’. Later God does show Job a thing or two, or three or a million. But not because Zophar tells Him to!

In the second part of verse six, Job is already condemned out of Zophar’s mouth. Consider the dimensions of the suffering of Job. Zophar is saying, ‘That is not half of what you deserve, because of the blasphemies that are coming out of your mouth now’. Sometimes the most dangerous people, and the most insensitive, are the ones who know a few things. Like me, for example! There was a time in my life when I set out to set the world straight, and you wreak havoc as you do it. Zophar goes on to speak of things that God will show Job later on. As we shall see, they come better from God than from Zophar. Perhaps it is best to let God reveal them. If you do have some inkling about the greatness and the wonder of God, just think back to how you were before you knew it, and remember how it was God Himself who revealed it to you. We can witness to what we know, but God must bring the point home. Often it is best to stand back and let Him do it.

I AM TELLING YOU

Zophar says to Job:

- 11:7 Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?
8 I t is higher than heaven—what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?
9 Its measure is longer than the earth,
and broader than the sea.
10 If he passes through, and imprisons,
and assembles for judgment, who can hinder him?
11 For he knows those who are worthless;
when he sees iniquity, will he not consider it?
12 But a stupid person will get understanding,
when a wild ass is born human.

Zophar condemns Job out of hand very rudely. There is no hope for Job here. He is saying, ‘Job, you are past redemption. You are a stupid man, you will never understand. Come on, here’s my wisdom, and I’ll tell you what God’s like! When an ass’s colt is born to a human being, then maybe you will get some understanding!’

That is the mistake we can make: we may be sprouting our new-found wisdom to someone who has known it better than we have. This is the case with Zophar and Job. Job knows exactly what Zophar is telling him. Zophar, maybe because he is young and has just discovered it, thinks that nobody else knows all this, and he has to tell them and get it across to them—set them all straight. In the time I am referring to in my life, when these great and wonderful things that I discovered about God came through to me, I wanted set all the older clergy right—the bishops didn’t have a clue! These godly men had been praying for fifty years—they needed to be told a few things they hadn’t yet realised, by someone who knew it!
That is what Zophar is doing here, I think.

MORAL COUNSEL

Zophar then gives Job some strong moral counsel:

- 3 If you direct your heart rightly,
you will stretch out your hands toward him.
14 If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away,
and do not let wickedness reside in your tents.
15 Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;
you will be secure, and will not fear.
16 You will forget your misery;
you will remember it as waters that have passed away.
17 And your life will be brighter than the noonday;
its darkness will be like the morning.
18 And you will have confidence, because there is hope;
you will be protected and take your rest in safety.
19 You will lie down, and no one will make you afraid;
many will entreat your favour.
20 But the eyes of the wicked will fail;
all way of escape will be lost to them,
and their hope is to breathe their last.'

This last verse is very much like what Bildad was saying. Or even harking back to what Eliphaz said, when he said there is no hope for the wicked, there is no mercy, no forgiveness. The possibility of that does not even occur to him.

‘I HAVE UNDERSTANDING AS WELL AS YOU’

Job has already had a belly-full from the other two in this first round, so we can understand if, under the circumstances, he is a little short with young Zophar:

- 12:1 Then Job answered:
2 ‘No doubt you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you.

When you die, all the wisdom will have gone from the world!

- 12:3 But I have understanding as well as you;
I am not inferior to you.
Who does not know such things as these?

That rather sums up Zophar’s approach. If Job was not suffering so much, he might have just kept silent, and made allowances for him, and prayed for him—as no doubt some have done with me, as I have gone away thinking, ‘Well, I really put them right!’ Job does later pray for Zophar, and Zophar comes to a change of heart. But sometimes we ‘young fellows’ need to be told—it doesn’t do us any harm—and here Zophar is told by Job. ‘Who does not know such things as these?’—this is theological commonplace, what you are saying.

PUT YOURSELF IN MY POSITION

Job then goes on to talk about his suffering, and tries to get Zophar to realise what it means to him:

- 12:4 I am a laughingstock to my friends;
I, who called upon God and he answered me,
a just and blameless man, I am a laughingstock.
5 Those at ease have contempt for misfortune,

but it is ready for those whose feet are unstable.
6 The tents of robbers are at peace,
and those who provoke God are secure,
who bring their god in their hands.

Job is saying that robbers and idolaters are better off than one who has called upon God and known that close fellowship with God, but is now a laughingstock. He says, 'It is easy for one who is not going through this suffering to say all the things you are saying'.

12:7 But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
8 ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
9 Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
10 In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.

Job is saying, Everyone knows this—this is kindergarten stuff! I can say this as well as you. In fact, I think Job says it a bit better.

12:11 Does not the ear test words
as the palate tastes food?
12 Is wisdom with the aged,
and understanding in length of days?

The *RSV* translates verse 12: 'Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days.' Job is saying to young Zophar, 'When you grow up, and have heard as many words as I have, then maybe you'll know a bit more what you are talking about'.

OUT-ZOPHARING ZOPHAR

Job then shows that he has a much better grasp of who God is and what He does than young Zophar does. What follows reads quite magnificently. Job, suffering as he is under the hand of God, is in a much better position than Zophar is to know it for real. In this passage, he 'out-Zophars' Zophar!

12:13 With God are wisdom and strength;
he has counsel and understanding.
14 If he tears down, no one can rebuild;
if he shuts someone in, no one can open up.
15 If he withholds the waters, they dry up;
if he sends them out, they overwhelm the land.
16 With him are strength and wisdom;
the deceived and the deceiver are his.
17 He leads counsellors away stripped,
and makes fools of judges.
18 He looses the sash of kings,
and binds a waistcloth on their loins.
19 He leads priests away stripped,
and overthrows the mighty.
20 He deprives of speech those who are trusted,
and takes away the discernment of the elders.
21 He pours contempt on princes,

- and looses the belt of the strong.
22 He uncovers the deeps out of darkness,
and brings deep darkness to light.
23 He makes nations great, then destroys them;
he enlarges nations, then leads them away.
24 He strips understanding from the leaders of the earth,
and makes them wander in a pathless waste.
25 They grope in the dark without light;
he makes them stagger like a drunkard.

That is a quite magnificent passage, about God's ruling over the nations. It has echoes of Isaiah 40: the nations are like a drop from a bucket, like dust on the scales before Him. It is more poignant even than that, because Job in his suffering can feel something of the suffering of the nations: where they are raised up, and then they are cast down—as he himself had been—and the leaders, who were great men and great counsellors, are reduced to nothing, to be made captives and slaves, and the strong meet their match. And it is God who does all this: 'the deceived and the deceiver are his'.

'I WOULD SPEAK TO THE ALMIGHTY'

Job continues in chapter 13:

- 13:1 Look, my eye has seen all this,
my ear has heard and understood it.
2 What you know, I also know;
I am not inferior to you.
3 But I would speak to the Almighty,
and I desire to argue my case with God.

That is something that none of the friends is prepared to do. Only Job himself ever does that, in the whole book.

- 13:4 As for you, you whitewash with lies;
all of you are worthless physicians.

'You are not making me better—you are making me worse!'

- 13:5 If you would only keep silent,
that would be your wisdom!

There is a verse in the Book of Proverbs that says, 'Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent' (Proverbs 17:28). Good advice!

LET GOD SPEAK FOR HIMSELF

Job continues:

- 13:6 Hear now my reasoning,
and listen to the pleadings of my lips.
7 Will you speak falsely for God,
and speak deceitfully for him?
8 Will you show partiality toward him,
will you plead the case for God?

- 9 Will it be well with you when he searches you out?
Or can you deceive him, as one person deceives another?
- 10 He will surely rebuke you
if in secret you show partiality.
- 11 Will not his majesty terrify you,
and the dread of him fall upon you?
- 12 Your maxims are proverbs of ashes,
your defences are defences of clay.

Note verse 8: 'will you plead the case for God?' God really needs no one to speak for Him. He is very capable of speaking for Himself. Job at least knows that. Sometimes we feel constrained to plead the case for God. Often that comes out of our own insecurity, or the insecurity of our own faith. Whom are we really trying to convince? Our efforts to apologise for God, or to put Him in the right, often come out of our own lack of sureness ourselves. That will be shown up, as such, by God. God will not say, 'Oh, thanks very much for putting up a good case for Me! I really appreciated that!' No: He will say, 'Just be sure that what you say is utterly true. And even if you can't get to the bottom of it yet, don't try and sort it all out in an attempt to justify Me'.

So it is good for Christians who can say, 'I don't understand what God is doing now'. Even if you are talking to a non-Christian person who is accusing God to you. We can say that.

Job is saying: 'If God is going to be proved just, I don't want it to be because someone has argued it carefully and well and convincingly; I want it to be *because it is so*'. So he says, 'Let's not show any partiality *either for God or against Him*. He is saying, Partiality *for* God will be discerned and judged by God, if you are trying to protest too loudly! You do not have to plead the case for God. Let God Himself be God! He will speak for Himself. If you are trying to build up some case for God, it is like trying to gather together ashes, or build defences of clay. God in His reality will break through those. It is only the reality of God as He really is that can be the true answer.

In that, Job is anticipating God Himself appearing to him at the end of the Book. This alone brings us true satisfaction.

IT TAKES ONE TO KNOW ONE

The next time Zophar speaks is in chapter 20. Remember how bitter he was against Job right from the start; how prepared he was to condemn him and write him off before he even began. In this, he does not let up on Job.

- 20:1 Then Zophar the Naamathite answered:
2 'Pay attention! My thoughts urge me to answer,
because of the agitation within me.
3 I hear censure that insults me,
and a spirit beyond my understanding answers me.
4 Do you not know this from of old,
ever since mortals were placed on earth,
5 that the exulting of the wicked is short,
and the joy of the godless is but for a moment?'

Zophar is saying here really that Job is a wicked and arrogant person, and a godless man. Forgive me for saying so, but sometimes it takes one to know one! I have on

occasion been appalled at when I have caught myself judging another person, and putting on them, usually when they do not deserve it, something that I am doing myself. That seems to be the trap that Zophar has fallen into here. He is obviously very stirred by what is happening: there is haste and agitation within him. He feels he has been insulted and censured by Job—which indeed he has!—and he won't accept that. So he says, 'the exulting of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless is but for a moment', and the implication of that is: 'So why else do you think you are the way you are now?'

Titus 1:15 says, 'To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted.' Even when we are looking at something or someone that is quite pure, our distorted vision will see it as corrupted and twisted. Sometimes, if we want to see ourselves as we really are, we should look at what we are trying to put on other people. I am sure that is what is happening here with Zophar: he sees Job as proud and arrogant and wicked, but it would appear that much of that could be a description of Zophar himself.

THE DOOM OF THE WICKED

Zophar goes on to say about the wicked:

20:6 Even though they mount up high as the heavens,
and their head reaches to the clouds,
7 they will perish forever like their own dung;
those who have seen them will say, 'Where are they?'
8 They will fly away like a dream, and not be found;
they will be chased away like a vision of the night.
9 The eye that saw them will see them no more,
nor will their place behold them any longer.
10 Their children will seek the favour of the poor,
and their hands will give back their wealth.
11 Their bodies, once full of youth,
will lie down in the dust with them.

Zophar is trying to address the issue of what Job says later in chapter 24 (see previous session: Bildad II) by saying: 'Sure, the wicked do mount up to heaven, and they are full of youthful vigour, but their time is short, and they will get it in the neck, and their children certainly will'.

20:12 Though wickedness is sweet in their mouth,
though they hide it under their tongues,
13 though they are loath to let it go,
and hold it in their mouths,
14 yet their food is turned in their stomachs;
it is the venom of asps within them.
15 They swallow down riches and vomit them up again;
God casts them out of their bellies.
16 They will suck the poison of asps;
the tongue of a viper will kill them.
17 They will not look on the rivers,
the streams flowing with honey and curds.
18 They will give back the fruit of their toil,
and will not swallow it down;
from the profit of their trading
they will get no enjoyment.

- 19 For they have crushed and abandoned the poor,
they have seized a house that they did not build.
- 20 They knew no quiet in their bellies;
in their greed they let nothing escape.
- 21 There was nothing left after they had eaten;
therefore their prosperity will not endure.
- 22 In full sufficiency they will be in distress;
all the force of misery will come upon them.
- 23 To fill their belly to the full
God will send his fierce anger into them,
and rain it upon them as their food.
- 24 They will flee from an iron weapon;
a bronze arrow will strike them through.
- 25 It is drawn forth and comes out of their body,
and the glittering point comes out of their gall;
terrors come upon them.
- 26 Utter darkness is laid up for their treasures;
a fire fanned by no one will devour them;
what is left in their tent will be consumed.
- 27 The heavens will reveal their iniquity,
and the earth will rise up against them.
- 28 The possessions of their house will be carried away,
dragged off in the day of God's wrath.
- 29 This is the portion of the wicked from God,
the heritage decreed for them by God.'

It seems almost as if Zophar has a delight and fascination with the doom of the wicked: especially with that arrow going through and coming out the other side, covered with whatever is inside (verses 24–25). There is a sense in which what Zophar says is true, that, though the wicked may be prospering, they are often not happy in their riches. But often they are—very happy and comfortable, thank you very much! Zophar, however, says that this unhappiness is inevitably so: in the day of God's wrath, if not before, they will certainly be dealt with in no uncertain terms. At least Zophar sees this as coming at the hand of God, which is a little more explicit than Bildad was able to be.

'WHY DO THE WICKED LIVE ON?'

Job's response this time is more measured than the first time he replied to Zophar—he is a bit more tired this time perhaps. He does not want to enter into bickering and argument at that level. You could argue all day as to whether the wicked get their just deserts or whether they don't. As right through, Job desires to come before God, and to bring his friends with him. It is not just that he wants to be before God, but he can see that there is a block in their understanding and in their largeness of spirit, and he says, 'Can't you come before God with me, and see what I am looking for?' He says, 'Is my complaint against human beings? It isn't really: you can say what you like; it is God that I want to come before'.

- 21:1 Then Job answered:
2 'Listen carefully to my words,
and let this be your consolation.
3 Bear with me, and I will speak;
then after I have spoken, mock on.

- 4 As for me, is my complaint addressed to mortals?
Why should I not be impatient?
5 Look at me, and be appalled,
and lay your hand upon your mouth.
6 When I think of it I am dismayed,
and shuddering seizes my flesh.

Job is talking about his suffering again, and he is bringing them back to reality. He overlooks Zophar's rudeness and condemnatory tones, and takes his point seriously. As he does later with Bildad, here Job steadily points out that what Zophar has said does not match with reality.

- 21:7 Why do the wicked live on,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
8 Their children are established in their presence,
and their offspring 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 never miscarries.

That is very important, if you are a breeder of stock.

- 21:11 They send out their little ones like a flock,
and their children dance around.
12 They sing to the tambourine and the lyre,
and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.

The children of the rich have great parties. Is there a hint of wistfulness here, in that the celebrations of Job's own children are now silent?

- 21:13 They spend their days in prosperity,
and in peace they go down to Sheol.
14 They say to God, 'Leave us alone!
We do not desire to know your ways.
15 What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?
And what profit do we get if we pray to him?'
16 Is not their prosperity indeed their own achievement?
The plans of the wicked are repugnant to me.

Job may be saying here: 'The counsel that you are trying to give me is far from me'. Or he may be saying, 'That is not how I was when I was in prosperity, but there are plenty of people who are in prosperity who say, "Who cares about God? We are fine! What difference is He going to make to our balance sheet?"'

- 21:17 How often is the lamp of the wicked put out?
How often does calamity come upon them?
How often does God distribute pains in his anger?
18 How often are they like straw before the wind,
and like chaff that the storm carries away?

Well, the friends have got to face up to that question. Job then addresses what Zophar said in 20:10, that the children of the wicked will suffer loss:

21:19 You say, 'God stores up their iniquity for their children.'
Let it be paid back to them, so that they may know it.
20 Let their own eyes see their destruction,
and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty.
21 For what do they care for their household after them,
when the number of their months is cut off?

Job's response here is in line with how God has set it out in Deuteronomy 24:16, and Ezekiel 18, that we will each be accountable for our own misdeeds. But Job does not try to set that up as a counter-system to Zophar's proposition. Job acknowledges the personal freedom and sovereignty of God in all these matters, even though it remains a mystery to him:

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

27 Oh, 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 wicked are spared in the day of calamity,
and are rescued in the day of wrath?
31 Who declares their way to their face,
and who repays them for what they have done?
32 When they are carried to the grave,
a watch is kept over their tomb.
33 The clods of the valley are sweet to them;
everyone will follow after,
and those who went before are innumerable.
34 How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?
There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood."

That is Job's answer to Zophar: How does what you say match with the reality of life as it is widely experienced? What you say is invariable is plainly not so. So how can the converse implication that Job is one of the wicked, simply because these adverse things have happened to him, be sustained?

We do not hear again from Zophar. He has blown himself out. He cannot answer Job, and he has nothing more to say. As we saw of the other two: Eliphaz and Bildad each speak three times—though Bildad is running short by the time he comes to his third turn—but Zophar only manages twice, and then is silent.

like booths made by sentinels of the vineyard.
19 They go to bed with wealth, but will do so no more;
they open their eyes, and it is gone.”

Job may be saying there that the wicked man can be ruined overnight, or that one morning he may wake up and find himself dead!

27:20 Terrors overtake them like a flood;
in the night a whirlwind carries them off.
21 The east wind lifts them up and they are gone;
it sweeps them out of their place.
22 It hurls at them without pity;
they flee from its power in headlong flight.
23 It claps its hands at them,
and hisses at them from its place.”

That does show that Job can be as orthodox as the next man, and probably has a better grasp of it all. He does acknowledge that judgment comes to the wicked. What he is doing here is setting it out from the perspective of God. When he does that, he sees that all he has said about the wicked prospering in their lifetime does come to amount to nothing when God judges it. That is not the position from which the others were arguing. They were trying to say, ‘It is a fact of experience that the wicked always get their just deserts’. Job removes it from that and says, ‘It is not a fact of experience that the wicked get their just deserts, but I desire to come before God, and let’s have a look at it from God’s point of view, and then what you see there is that of course the wicked, like any one, will perish’. It seems to me, however, that the way Job presents it is so much more expansive and all-encompassing—read it again and see if you agree with me—than the way the comforters were trying to set it up to match their view of the way the world should be. That should be a lesson to us not to try to ‘teach our grandmother to suck eggs’!—as perhaps Zophar was trying to do with Job.

Father, You have given us hearts and minds to think and to see and to attempt to understand all that is in this life. You have given us great minds, which are capable of knowing You. We pray that, in all our dealings with life, and in our attempting to understand the things of God and the things of living, we may use our minds rightly: that we may give them to You, and seek to see things with the eyes of hearts that have been opened by You and anointed by Your Spirit. We thank You for Your servant Job as presented to us here, under great pressure to argue back at the lower level. He turned his eyes to You, and attempted to turn the eyes of those with whom he was speaking, to see things in that perspective. We pray that we may not get so caught up in the things of this world, and in our own concerns, that we may lose that vision. We thank You that Your Spirit has come to us, and we pray that, in all the things that we need to know, more and more, we may discern Your glory. In Jesus’ name. Amen.