

WHY DOESN'T GOD INTERVENE?

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the great benefits of the book of Job to us is not only the discussion of its great central theme, but also the glimpses we get in these three friends of Job of various types of what I would call Pharisaism. I know that the pharisaical party did not surface until many centuries after Job was written, but in the New Testament the Pharisees were one of the great enemies of our Lord. Pharisaism is always orthodoxy without true godliness. It is an appearance of being orthodox, correct in theology, and even righteous in outward behavior, but actually it represents a distortion of Christian truth.

Here we have three Pharisees who are assaulting Job. They represent to us three styles of Pharisaism, and I think as we read them we can see how often they represent what our attitudes have been. This is one of the reasons why this book was written, to show us how wrong these friends were. At the end of the book, God plainly says that these men did not treat Job in the right way, that they are wrong.

This is a revelation to us that Pharisaism is one of the most deadly enemies of the truth today. In many ways the church has fallen into Pharisaism, a kind of outward rightness with an inward wrongness. So as we look at these men we can perhaps recognize some features about ourselves and some things we need to correct.

Zophar is the one whom we call "Zophar the Zealous." He tends to be hotheaded and impassioned in his addresses. He represents the type of Pharisaism that comes on heavy with impassioned words and strong outbursts of feeling. He tries to carry the argument by the force of its eloquence and delivery in his every appearance, and especially in this, his last appearance in the book. Chapter 20:

Then Zophar the Naamathite answered:

**"Therefore my thoughts answer me,
because of my haste within me.**

**I hear censure which insults me,
and out of my understanding a spirit answers me." {Job 20:1-3 RSV}**

This man (I think he was the youngest of the three friends although we do not know how old he was) seems to be greatly insulted by the fact that Job does not give way to their argument that sin is always judged by God and that suffering is a sign that you have sinned. This is the continual argument of these friends of Job, and Zophar is very upset at Job's resistance to this, so he confesses in these words that he is impatient in his speech and insulted in his spirit. It is out of this that he speaks with a great deal of passion to Job.

Beginning with Verse 4 through the rest of the chapter, you get his final argument which is nothing but repetition of what he has said over and over again: the wicked are always punished. In Verses 4-11, Zophar's argument is: the prosperity of the wicked is always short. As he says in Verse 5, "The joy of the godless [is] but for a moment." Then in Verses 12-18 he describes the punishment of the wicked as being very certain -- there is no way to avoid it, though the wicked seek to do so, and though they revel in their prosperity, God will certainly bring judgment upon them. Now Zophar means in this present life the wicked, the unrighteous, the ungodly, those who ignore God cannot escape his judgment. God will get them sooner or later. Then in Verses 19-22 Zophar describes the wicked as doing things that are clearly apparent; the evil comes out in the open. Obviously he is suggesting that because Job has gone through this time of torment, with these awful boils breaking out upon him, it is evident that his evil too is coming into the open. Then he describes the terrible fate of the wicked, Verses 23-29:

**"To fill his belly to the full God will send his fierce anger into him,
and rain it upon him as his food.**

**He will flee from an iron weapon;
a bronze arrow will strike him through." {Job 20:23-24 RSV}**

"Utter darkness is hid up for his treasures; ..." {Job 20:26 RSV}

**"The heavens will reveal his iniquity,
and the earth will rise up against him." {Job 20:27 RSV}**

He closes with these words, Verse 29:

**"This is the wicked man's portion from God,
the heritage decreed for him by God." {Job 20:29 RSV}**

In Chapter 21 we get Job's very reasoned reply. There are times when Job speaks rather testily, rather sharply, to his friends, and other times, perhaps when the pain is not as intense, he is able to speak more calmly and dispassionately. And here, in Chapter 21, you see a careful attempt on his part to answer these arguments. He begins with his appeal for a hearing.

Then Job answered:

**"Listen carefully to my words,
and let this be your consolation.
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 upon your mouth [i.e., with astonishment].
When I think of it I am dismayed,
and shuddering seizes my flesh." {Job 21:1-6 RSV}**

Basically he is saying here, "If you can't help me, at least listen to me; that can be your consolation. You're trying to console me, and that's not helping a bit, but if you would listen to what I have to say, that would be some help from you. You are not a problem; it is God who is my problem," he suggests. "Not man, but God. I don't understand him." Then he says, "It is my condition, my pain and anguish, that forces me so to search and try to come to answers." With that as an introduction, he now examines the argument of these friends, that punishment is always the result of sin. In Verses 7-13 he says that the facts contradict what these friends say. In fact, he says, the whole lives of the wicked are often untroubled.

**"Why do the wicked live,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
Their children are established in their presence,
and their offspring 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 cast her calf.
They send forth their little ones 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." {Job 21:7-13 RSV}**

Their whole life is lived, Job argues, and nothing ever seems to trouble them. They are outwardly and openly wicked, and yet they are happy, their families grow up well, and they seem to be free from difficulty. Many of us have felt this way. We see those we think ought to be under the judgment of God but they are not; they seem to be untroubled. We are faced with this question of the fairness of God.

His second argument is that they even defy God, and they prosper, Verses 14-16:

**"They say to God, 'Depart from us!
We do not desire the knowledge of thy 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." {Job 21:14-16}**

"I do not agree with this," he says, "but that is what they actually say. They defy God; they ask him to get out of their lives; they resist him, and God lets it be. Nothing ever happens to them, they seem to live untroubled lives, and God does not strike them down."

He goes on to point out that God's judgment is very infrequent, Verses 17-18:

**"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?" {Job 21:17-18 RSV}**

Many people who deserve punishment from God's hand seem to live without ever being touched, he says. Then he argues, God's judgment is delayed (Verses 19-21), and, finally, God's judgment is very uneven, Verses 22-26:

**"Will any teach God knowledge,
seeing that he judges those that are on high?
One dies in full prosperity being wholly at ease and secure,
his body full of fat and the marrow of his bones moist.
Another dies in bitterness of soul,
never having tasted of good.
They lie down alike in the dust,
and the worms cover them." {Job 21:22-26}**

Life seems to be unfair. There is a basic unfairness at the root of things, and this is what causes many people to be troubled by the claims of Christians about a loving, faithful, just and holy God. You often hear the question raised, "If there is a good God why does he let this kind of thing happen?" Job is raising the same question. He says to these pious, respectable friends. "Your arguments do not square with the facts. You say God always visits wrath upon the wicked. What about these wicked people who live without a touch? God never does a thing to them. What about the fact that he seems to treat people very unfairly? Folks who seem to deserve nothing but the grace of God, who are loving, gentle, kind people, have endless problems, and die forsaken. And some who are selfish and cruel and self centered are the ones who seem to be able to live without struggle. What about this?"

Then he turns to examine his friends themselves, and points out the falseness of their friendship, Verses 27-28:

**"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 dwelt?'" {Job 21:27-28 RSV}**

They were referring, of course, to Job. He says, "I know you're thinking that I am a good example of the truth of your argument because God has taken away my wealth, my family, my possessions, and you're saying to yourself, 'Ah! Where is all the wealth of this man? Here is proof right here that what we say is true.'" And though they were not saying it quite as baldly, Job says, "I know what you are thinking, your hidden surmisings. I know also your unsupported convictions here." Verses 29-33:

**"Have you not asked those who travel the roads,
and do you not accept their testimony
that the wicked 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 requites him for what he has done?
When he is borne to the grave,
watch is kept over his tomb.
The clods of the valley are sweet to him;
all men follow after him,
and those who go before him are innumerable." {Job 21:29-33 RSV}**

He tells his friends, "If you'll just inquire around among the traveling salesmen, the people who get around and see life, you'll find that they support what I'm saying. The wicked often escape the day of calamity. It's not just true around here, this is true everywhere. The wicked live above the law, and nobody says to them that they're doing wrong. They get by with it. They die highly honored in their death and their graves are adorned and guarded and God does nothing about that." So he says at last, Verse 34:

**"How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?
There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood." {Job 21:34 RSV}**

If you intend to argue with Job you had better get your arguments well in hand. This man is able to see through the error of logic in these people's position. They have a theology that does not square with experience, and that is where the problem lies. These friends represent people -- and there are many around today -- who have God in a box. They have what they think is a clear understanding of all the ways of God and they can predict how he is going to act, but when he acts in a way that they do not understand and do not expect, they have no way of handling it because it is their creed they have faith in and not in God himself. This is what Job is learning. His creed has been demolished by his experiences. He has had to file his theology in the wastebasket because it did not fit what he was going through. Someone has well said that a man with a true experience is never at the mercy of a man with an argument. These men are unable to answer Job because his experience rings true.

That concludes the second round of addresses, and in Chapter 22 we begin the third and final round where only two of these friends speak.

This brings us back to Eliphaz the Temanite, whom we have called "Eliphaz the Elegant" because he appears always to be calm, speaking very smoothly with plausible sentences and obvious courtesy in the way he says things. But by now he is beginning to get very upset and angry, and, as often happens with someone like that, he loses his cool entirely and begins to pour out invective and accusation upon poor Job. Through this chapter we will see that he accuses Job of imaginary motives; he invents false charges against him; he assumes rather insulting concepts that Job holds, and he ends with some very inappropriate exhortations.

First, the imagined motives, Chapter 22:

**Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered:
"Can a man be profitable to God?
Surely he who is wise is profitable to himself.
Is it any pleasure [literally, profit] to the Almighty if you are righteous,
or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless?" {Job 22:1-3 RSV}**

He is inferring that Job thinks he is defending himself to the glory and honor of God, that God's integrity is at stake, and if Job confesses anything wrong God will falter and fail thereby, and that God's image in the eyes of men hangs on Job's ability to appear righteous. Now Job never thought that at all. Throughout this account Job's view of God is that, though he does not understand what God is doing, he sees him as a God of justice and righteousness. Though he is puzzled and uncertain and has no way of applying that to his own situation at the moment, he never thinks of God as being anything other than the God of holiness. So it is an entirely false charge.

Eliphaz goes on in Verse 4:

"Is it for your fear of him that he reproves you,

and enters into judgment with you?" {Job 22:4 RSV}

Here Eliphaz is suggesting that Job feels that God is unfairly punishing him, but once again, Job never said that. If he did he would be doing what Satan wanted him to do -- he would be accusing and blaspheming God. It is true that Job asks God questions about his motives, but never once does he say "You're at fault" and charge God with unrighteousness, as Eliphaz suggests. I think this is one of the most helpful things we can learn from the book of Job, because, in our testings, in our pressures, in our times of torment, Satan is trying to get us to do the very thing he tried to get Job to do -- he is trying to get us to blame God and accuse him of being an unfair and unjust God. If that is where he brings us to, we have fallen, we have gone over the brink and become guilty of an accusation against the God of righteousness. Job never does that. He comes very close, but he refuses to do that. And so, upset and angry at Job's resistance against his charges, Eliphaz goes on to invent, out of the blue, unsupported charges against him, Verses 5-11:

**"Is not your wickedness great?
There is no end to your iniquities.
For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing,
and stripped the naked of their clothing.
You have given no water to the weary to drink,
and you have withheld bread from the hungry.
The man with power possessed the land,
and the favored man dwelt in it.
You have sent widows away empty,
and the arms of the fatherless were crushed.
Therefore snares are round about you,
and sudden terror overwhelms you;
your light is darkened, so that you cannot see,
and a flood of water covers you." {Job 22:5-11 RSV}**

Not one of these things was true; he simply begins to invent things.

Today there is a kind of Pharisaism that seeks to get you to agree with its limited theology and if you refuse to do so you begin to have invective and charges poured out against you. In my wife's early Christian life she began listening to a radio broadcast that taught her the truth from the Scriptures, and the pastor of her church became very angry and upset at her, and brought her before him and tried to straighten her out, using invective instead of the Scriptures. When she would not be persuaded, because she was learning the truth from the Word of God, he did this very thing that Eliphaz did. He railed against her, and charged her with all kinds of things that she had not done, threatening to expose her to the church as a heretic. She endured a great deal of mental torment and suffering through that time.

There is nothing worse than this kind of unfounded, murderous, slanderous attack that Job has to face here from his so-called friends. Eliphaz goes on, in Verses 12-14, to assume rather insulting concepts that he thinks Job held:

**"Is not God high in the heavens?
See the highest stars, how lofty they are!
Therefore you say, 'What does God know?
Can he judge through the deep darkness?
Thick clouds enwrap him, so that he does not see,
and he walks on the vault of heaven.'" {Job 22:12-14 RSV}**

This is a childish charge against Job. "The trouble with you, Job, is you think God is such a limited being that he can't even see what you're doing. He's up high in heaven and the clouds come in between and shut you off, and you think you're getting by with hiding your sin because God can't see through the clouds!" That is ridiculous, for Job has already demonstrated that he has the consciousness of the mightiness, the greatness, the majesty and the mystery of God far beyond what these friends hold. But they cannot live with that, they will not accept it, so they charge him with these childish concepts.

Eliphaz goes on to charge him with only pretending to hate iniquity. In Verses 15-20 Eliphaz suggests that Job

is saying that he rejects the wicked and their way of life when actually he holds to it. In Verse 17 Eliphaz mimics Job when he says of the wicked:

**"They said to God, 'Depart from us,'
and 'What can the Almighty do to us?'
Yet he filled their houses with good things
but the counsel of the wicked is far from me." {Job 22:17-18 RSV}**

You notice that Job said those very things back in the last chapter in Verse 16. Eliphaz is mimicking him, "That is what you say, 'The counsel of the wicked is far from me' but you don't mean it at all. You're just as wicked as the rest of them." So with this mockery and scorn he tries to break through Job's argument. Then he ends with beautifully phrased language. This man has a mighty command of the language, but he ends with very inappropriate exhortations to Job to confess his sin and return to God, and God will pour out blessing upon him. All of which certainly is true. If Job could find the sin that they claim he is guilty of, but as he examines his life he knows there is nothing he has not dealt with, and though he does not claim sinlessness, he does say that he cannot find what the trouble is.

That brings us then to Chapters 23 and 24, where you have Job's expression of his deepest problem. At this point he does not even attempt to answer the arguments anymore. He simply cries out of a troubled heart in the presence of these friends, expressing halfway to God and halfway to them how he feels. He asks two questions, one in Chapter 23 and one in Chapter 24, and these are the great unanswered questions that men continually ask today that lie at the root of much doubt and much unwillingness to accept the presence of God.

In Chapter 23 Job is asking, "Why is God so seemingly absent from human affairs?" He begins with expressing his own longing for God:

**"Today also my complaint is bitter,
his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning." {Job 23:2 RSV}**

He is having a bad day physically, but he cries,

**"Oh that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his seat!
I would lay my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me." {Job 23:3-5 RSV}**

Though his pain increases his frustration grows because he cannot find any way to get into contact and argue the point with God and get some answers to his problem. And yet, in the midst of the darkness, there is an unshaken confidence in God. He says in Verse 6:

**"Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; he would give heed to me.
There an upright man could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted for ever by my Judge." {Job 23:6-7 RSV}**

Many times we have seen this. Job feels that if he could get a chance to lay out before God the situation as he sees it, God himself, in his basic justice, would admit that he was right. So he describes his search, Verses 8-9:

**"Behold, I go forward, but he is not there;
and backward, but I cannot perceive him;
on the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him." {Job 23:8-9 RSV}**

Have you ever felt that way, abandoned, you cannot find God, cannot find any answers, wanting some relief from the mental torture that increases your doubt and troubles you?

At this point Job again declares his own righteousness and his faith that God will see him through at last, Verse 10:

**"But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold." {Job 23:10 RSV}**

That expresses a great deal of confidence that God is a God of justice. Job says "I don't understand what I am going through. I felt I've been doing the right thing and still this torment goes on, but I know that God will explain it to me some day." That is as high as his faith can rise at the moment.

Then he goes on to restate his sense of righteousness. (We will not read it all, we will come to it again later.) But in Chapter 24 he raises the second question that many people have asked: "Why is God silent? Why doesn't he judge evil?"

**"Why are not times of judgment kept by the Almighty,
and why do those who know him never see his days?" {Job 24:1 RSV}**

He goes on to describe vividly the conditions of life. Thieves and scoundrels flourish (Verses 2-3); poor people suffer terribly, they are mistreated, they have to scratch for a living, and they are exposed to the elements (Verses 4-2). Verses 7-8:

**"They lie all night naked, without clothing,
and have no covering in the cold.
They are wet with the rain of the mountains,
and cling to the rock for want of shelter." {Job 24:7-8 RSV}**

He says that they are exploited by the rich; they work for nothing in their fields and fruit-groves. Finally they die or are wounded and cry out to God, Verse 12:

**"From out of the city the dying groan,
and the soul of the wounded cries for help;
yet God pays no attention to their prayer." {Job 24:12 RSV}**

A lady said to me the other day, "I don't know what's wrong with me, but God won't answer my prayers. I cry out for help, I ask him for wisdom, and nothing ever happens. He just ignores me." Many have felt this way.

Job goes on to describe how the criminals strike in the darkness, and God does nothing about it, Verses 14-15:

**"The murderer rises in the dark,
that he may kill the poor and needy;
and in the night he is as a thief.
The eye of the adulterer also waits for the twilight, ..." {Job 24:14-15a RSV}**

These adulterers slink around in the darkness, lurking there to do their evil deeds.

Then he faces the question, "Why does God delay justice?"

Job says his friends argue that God invariably punishes the wicked (he sums up their argument in Verses 18-20), but he says the facts are quite different, Verses 21-22:

**"They feed on the barren childless woman,
and do no good to the widow.
Yet God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power;
they rise up when they despair of life." {Job 24:21-22 RSV}**

There are the two great questions that hang unanswered in life: Why is God so absent when he is so needed? Why is he so silent when he should speak? It is only when we get into the New Testament that we get any direct revelation to help us with this. Both Paul and Peter tell us that these are but evidences of God's patience and longsuffering with men. As Paul tells us in Romans, "His goodness is meant to lead us to repentance," {cf, Rom 2:4}. So if we are getting by with things now, it is only because God is withholding his hand, that he might give us a chance to learn the truth about ourselves. Peter says, "Don't accuse God of slowness in fulfilling his promises, as men count slowness, because God is longsuffering to us, not willing that any should perish but wanting to give all a chance to come to repentance," {cf, 2 Pet 3:9}. That is why God lets these things go on sometimes. For if he started judging, he would have to include us, as well as everyone else. Job has not come to that answer yet. That question remains.

So the final speaker comes in, Bildad the Shuhite. "Bildad the Brutal" we call him, a cold intellectual, the theorist who always has everything worked out carefully in his theology and who is absolutely unmoved by any appeal to his emotions. He has a very short address here consisting of the same two old arguments, worn out by now.

First, God is all-powerful, Verse 2:

**"Dominion and fear are with God;
he makes peace in his high heaven." {Job 25:2 RSV}**

There is no way of combating the greatness, the power, the wisdom and the insight of God. This is true, as is his second point:

**"How then can man be righteous before God?
How can he who is born of woman be clean?
Behold, even the moon is not bright,
and the stars are not clean in his sight;
how much less man, who is a maggot,
and the son of man, who is a worm!" {Job 25:4-6 RSV}**

It is interesting to see that the Scriptures never treat man like a worm. God's view of man is that though he is in deep trouble, and though he has turned his back upon light and plunged himself into darkness and is reaping the result of his own iniquity, God never treats him as a worm. He treats him as a very deeply loved individual and a very valuable commodity whom he is ready to give tremendous commitment to in order that he might redeem him. It is true that only when a man admits that he cannot help himself, that he is indeed a wretched person, that he can be helped. But God never sees him as worm. Bildad reflects a narrow theology that does not fit the facts.

In Chapter 26 Job hangs up the phone, in a sense. He says there is no use talking to them anymore. His answer to Bildad is one of rather deep and rich irony, Verses 2-4:

**"How you have helped him who has no power!
How you have saved the arm that has no strength!
How you have counseled him who has no wisdom,
and plentifully declared sound knowledge!
With whose help have you uttered words,
and whose spirit has come forth from you?" {Job 26:2-4 RSV}**

Sarcastic praise, in which he is suggesting that they have been of no help at all to him. I think, however, that Job needs to learn something from this, and we will see in the next chapters that he does. Oswald Chambers reminds us that God can never make us into wine if we object to the fingers that he uses to crush us with. Or if we do, it will be at great pain to ourselves. Job does not see here that God also is using these friends in his life. Satan has sent them; God is using them; and we will soon see the result in Job's life. Once again he goes on to state the majesty of God in a brilliant and moving passage, and he closes with this word in Verse 14:

"Lo, these are but the outskirts of his ways;

**and how small a whisper do we hear of him!
But the thunder of his power who can understand?" {Job 26:14 RSV}**

What he says is simply that there is a mystery in God that no man can plumb. Even when we have understood something of the greatness of his wisdom and majesty in nature, when we have learned of his omnipresence, his omnipotence, and his omniscience, and we know that as part of our theology, it still does not explain all of his ways. God is in a much bigger box than any of us can build.

I always think of that verse from one of Robert Browning's great poems where he describes how a young man in the arrogance of his youth has worked out all his theology so that God is carefully boxed in. He knows the answers to all the theological riddles of life; there is no place for God in it; he can handle it all himself. He comes to an old bishop and tells him he does not need God any longer. Then the old bishop says to him,

"Just when we're safest
There's a sunset touch;
A fancy from a flower bell;
Someone's death;
A chorus -- ending from Euripides,
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
The Grand Perhaps."

Oswald Chambers says this of Job: "We must get hold of the great souls, the men who have been hard hit -- hit and have gone to the basis of things and whose experiences have been preserved for us by God, that we may know where we stand."

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for Job, and for the encouragement we receive from this book, to know that other men and women in the past have faced the same difficult questions that we have faced, and it has not shaken their faith, it has not overwhelmed them and knocked them off their feet and caused them to curse you and rebel against you. Help us to take heart in what trials we may be going through, and know that you will bring us through. Help us also to cry, with Job, "You know the way that we take; and when you have tried us, we shall come forth as gold." We pray in his name, Amen.

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