



Job - Chapter Eleven

II Job 3:1-42:6 - Dialogue: Job, His Suffering, and His Standing before God (continues)

II.b Job 4:1-25:6 - The Friends and Job: Can Job be Right Before God? (continues)

II.b.i Job 4:1-14:22 - The First Cycle (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eleven

Like Bildad in Chapter 8, Zophar responds with a sharp challenge to what he sees as empty words and presumption in Job (vv.2-12). He then calls Job to prayer and repentance, promising that God will transform Job's circumstances if he will simply step back from his pride (vv.13-20).

Zophar's indignant speech makes an implicit connection between moral standing and knowledge of God: since Job's situation marks him out as morally corrupt, he cannot know God rightly.

II.b.i.5 Job 11:1-20 - Zophar Speaks: Job's Guilt Deserves Punishment

Refer to the chapter summary above.

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."

⁵ But O 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.

Job 11:1-6

Zophar the Naamathite. This friend of Job speaks the least of them all, only here and in Job Chapter 20, but perhaps he speaks the most arrogantly and confrontationally to Job. Zophar was a severe man. Like Bildad he lacked compassion and was ruthlessly judgemental. He is the most inveterate of Job's accusers and generally speaks without feeling or pity. In sour godliness he excelled above the rest. He was too confrontational to speak much in measured verse.

Should one full of talk be vindicated? Zophar had had enough of Job's protests to innocence. In his mind, all of Job's eloquent complaining shows him to be nothing more than a man full of talk, one who should not be vindicated. Therefore, Zophar will continue with a rebuke of Job - when you mock, shall no one shame you?

The reader may sense that Job's friends are losing patience with him. In a remarkable display of friendship they sat with him for seven silent days; refer to Job 2:13. They only spoke in response to Job's agonising as recorded in Job Chapter 3. Then they tried to help Job see that it must be some sin on his part that has prompted this great calamity in his life, but Job refused to see it. The more they insisted and the more Job stubbornly denied it, the more frustrated they became with him.

Clearly the discussion is heating up. It may have been in Zophar's nature to be caustic and abrupt, or it may just be that things have reached such an impasse that all the friends are now prepared to level direct accusations at Job.

Should your babble put others to silence? This is a true enough statement in itself. People should speak the truth but in a way that is beneficial to others: <<*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear*>> (Ephesians 4:29), and: <<*Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving*>> (Ephesians 5:4). However, Zophar was wrong to label Job's heartfelt pleas as babble. He clearly had not compassion for Job's trials.

For you say, “My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God’s sight.” Zophar did not truthfully represent Job’s words here. Job did not claim to be pure and clean, as if he were sinless and perfect; but in fairness to Zophar, it should be noted that Job did claim to be in the right and this was virtually a claim to be pure and clean in this matter.

Job knew that there was no special or specific sin on his part behind the loss of his children, his health, his servants and his material wealth. Even so, Job knew that he was a sinner in a general sense and could not be considered righteous compared to God:

- <<*Therefore my words have been rash*>> (Job 6:3b).
- <<*Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?*>> (Job 7:21a).
- <<*How can a mortal be just before God?*>> (Job 9:2b).
- <<*Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse*>> (Job 9:20).
- <<*For I know you will not hold me innocent*>> (Job 9:28b).

Therefore, Job’s claims to be blameless in Job 9:21-22 can be understood to refer to the fact that there was indeed no special or particular sin on his part that prompted his great suffering. Indeed, even God recognised Job as blameless in this sense in Job 1:1, 1:8 and 2:3.

But O that God would speak, and open his lips to you. Zophar shares Job’s longing that Job might have a direct audience with God, but for exactly the opposite purpose. Job longs for vindication; Zophar is certain that Job would be readily condemned.

Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves. In the thinking of Zophar, not only was Job wrong to claim to be either pure or clean, he was actually so guilty before God to deserve far worse than he had suffered.

Zophar here sounds like a man who has carefully studied a particular theological idea (especially in Reformed Theology) known as total depravity. In this idea, the sinfulness of man - both inherited from Adam and actually practiced by the individual - is so great that one could say regarding every suffering of life, “Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.” Unfortunately, Zophar is among the miserable comforters: <<*I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all*>> (Job 16:2) who were actually quite wrong in their analysis and advice: <<*After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: ‘My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has’*>> (Job 42:7). Whatever the merits

of the theological idea of total depravity, it did not speak to Job's circumstance at all.

- 7 'Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?
- 8 It 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 judgement, 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.

Job 11:7-12

Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? Of course, this is rhetorical for humans will only ever know what God reveals about himself to them: <<*He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end*>> (Ecclesiastes 3:11), <<*For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?*>> (Romans 11:34), and: <<*'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ*>> (1 Corinthians 2:16). There is irony in v.7 that will be revealed to Zophar only in the events of the epilogue; refer to Job 42:7-9. Although he accusingly asks Job whether he is able to discover the depth and extent of God's work, it is Zophar who presumes that God's purposes in Job's suffering are transparent enough to rebuke Job and call him to repent. After instructing Job in the doctrine of total depravity, Zophar went on to teach Job about the transcendence of God. Therefore, in Zophar's thinking, Job was wrong to question God.

It is higher than heaven – what can you do? Deeper than Sheol – what can you know? This indicates that God's influence and dominion goes far beyond this earth out into the universe and beyond, and down into the deepest depths of the earth. Zophar is using his limited knowledge of creation to acknowledge that the Lord rules over everything and everyone. The apostle Paul prays that the church will

have this same foundational understanding of the power and love of God: <<*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen*>> (Ephesians 3:18-21).

Who can hinder him? The next lesson in Zophar's theology was the sovereignty of God. Zophar believed that the best thing Job could do was to accept his punishment from God instead of protesting the injustice of it. In Zophar's mind, Job's punishment was just and God was actually giving Job less than he deserved.

For he knows those who are worthless; when he sees iniquity, will he not consider it? Zophar here implied that what Job wanted was for God to turn aside from justice. Zophar wanted Job to know that it was wrong - and wicked - to wish that God would not consider the deceit and wickedness of man; in this case, Job's own deceit and wickedness.

Although there is a question about how the second line of this proverb relates to the first, i.e. whether the first line is being compared to the impossibility in the second of a wild ass giving birth either to a human or to a domesticated colt, the function of the proverb in Zophar's speech is clear. He is calling Job to stop insisting on foolishness because, like the path of a stupid person, it will never lead to understanding. Zophar calls Job instead to turn away from the insistence that he is in the right and to seek God in prayer and repentance (vv.13-20).

The angel of the Lord used the description of a wild ass in relation to Abraham and Hagar's son Ishmael: <<*And the angel of the Lord said to her, 'Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin'*>> (Genesis 16:11-12). In this case, of course, it is meant figuratively and not literally, as intended by Zophar.

For Zophar - as with others who share his basic theological perspective - there was no mystery in Job's situation at all. God was sovereign, God was just, Job was a sinner and therefore he should be thankful that he was not even worse off than he was.

¹³ 'If you direct your heart rightly,
you will stretch out your hands towards 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.

Job 11:13-19

If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away. Given Zophar's theological understanding of Job's situation, the answer is easy. Job should simply repent and seek the mercy and goodness of God.

At the renewal of the covenant Joshua instructed the people of Israel to put away their passed sin in just such a way: *<<Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord>>* (Joshua 24:14). In general, the sin of Israel had been very great up to this point; Zophar was wrong in his accusations against Job's whose situation was not due to his sin at all!

You will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away. This is what Job longed for; to be so restored and blessed again that he would forget all this ever happened to him. Zophar said - falsely - that this could be Job's portion if he would only repent of the great sins that brought this disaster upon him. Although Zophar was wrong in understanding the cause, he did know what the cure would look like - to be able to forget the misery and remember it only as the waters that have passed away.

Charles Spurgeon states, "We seem to lie all broken in pieces, with our thoughts like a case of knives cutting into our spirit; and we say to ourselves, 'We never shall forget this terrible experience.' And yet, by-and-by, God turns towards us the palm of his hand, and we see that it is full of mercy, we are restored to health, or uplifted from depression of spirit, and we wonder that

we ever made so much of our former suffering or depression.” And again, “We remember it no more, except as a thing that has passed and gone, to be recollected with gratitude that we have been delivered from it, but not to be remembered so as to leave any scar upon our spirit, or to cause us any painful reflection whatsoever. ‘You will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away.’”

And your life will be brighter than the noonday; and no one will make you afraid; many will entreat your favour. Zophar encouraged Job to confess and repent of his sin by showing him how God would bless and honour him, restoring him to a bright, confident, admired life once again.

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.’

Job 11:20

But the eyes of the wicked will fail; all way of escape will be lost to them. Zophar’s final statement about the fate of the wicked stands in stark contrast to what he describes in vv.13-19 as the benefits God will bestow on Job if he will only repent. Zophar’s statement is meant to warn Job against continuing in his current path; refer back to v.18 and the contrast relating to hope.

There is indeed much to admire in the theology and philosophy of Zophar and Job’s friends. They say much that is generally true and valuable, and it is - in general - backed by the wisdom of the ancients. They believed in God’s power and his absolute righteousness. They also believed that God would forgive a sinner and take him back into favour if the sinner responded correctly to the punishment God appointed. Nevertheless, the application of this creed - these deeply held beliefs about how life and God and the universe work - was completely wrong in Job’s situation. The reasons for his calamity were completely out of the comprehension of Job’s friends, although they were confident that they understood the situation completely.