



## Job - Chapter Twenty One

- 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.ii [Job 15:1-21:34 - The Second Cycle \(continues/concludes\)](#)

### Summary of Chapter Twenty One

Job's response closes the second cycle of the dialogue with his friends by focusing directly on the assertion that the wicked suffer immediate and lasting grief, which is at the heart of the argument of each of his friends and is the thrust of Zophar's most recent response in Chapter 20. Job argues that the wicked do not self-destruct in their greed but rather live in grand style and are respected and honoured in death (vv.7-21 and vv.27-34). In the midst of his response, Job questions whether his friends truly understand life on earth; he does this in a manner that makes it seem as if God needs to be instructed (vv.22-26).

#### II.b.ii.6 [Job 21:1-34 - Job Replies: The Wicked Often Go Unpunished](#)

Refer to the chapter summary above.

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

### Job 21:1-3

Listen carefully to my words. Job had made a similar plea earlier: <<*Listen carefully to my words, and let my declaration be in your ears*>> (Job 13:17). Because of the way Job's friends kept repeating themselves and their arguments to him, it was easy for Job to feel that they simply were not listening to him. Instead, Job wanted to prove that he had been listening to them. In this closing speech of the second cycle, Job was determined to prove that he had listened to what his counsellors had said. This he did by quoting or otherwise alluding to their words and refuting them.

Then after I have spoken, mock on. This indicates that Job's hardness towards his friends has not lessened at all; nor has their hardness towards him. They speak with sharp and sarcastic words to each other.

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.

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.

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.

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 21:4-16

As for me, is my complaint addressed to mortals? This demonstrates again that Job’s real point of crisis was his conflict with God, not with man and especially not with his friends. His crisis was fundamentally spiritual in nature, much more than being a medical crisis, an economic crisis, a social crisis, or a family crisis. His struggle was against God and he wondered where God was in the midst of this very dark time.

Look at me, and be appalled. Thus far Job’s friends looked at him and mostly accused and condemned him. He wanted them to take a step back as it were and be appalled or astonished at what had happened to this good and godly man.

Lay your hand upon your mouth. Job believes they have said enough and should speak no more. He will come to the same conclusion about his own statements when he is finally confronted by God: *<<See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth>>* (Job 40:4).

Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? Job challenged the moral order of the universe as previously understood by Job’s friends. He challenged them to see that if it was possible for a wicked man to be seemingly blessed, then perhaps also a righteous man like Job could seem to be cursed. In Job 20:4-11 Zophar said that the wicked die prematurely; Job insisted that instead the wicked live and become old.

**King David provides wise words to those in similar distress to Job:** *<<Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb>>* (Psalm 37:1-2). **Solomon notes his lack of concern:** *<<In my vain life I have seen everything; there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself?>>* (Ecclesiastes 7:15-16), **and the prophet calls upon the Lord to deal with such people:** *<<Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?>>* (Habakkuk 1:13).

Their children are established in their presence. In this and the following verses Job explains many of the blessings that seem to come to many of the wicked, even as they reject God, i.e. they say to God, “Leave us alone!”. In Job 18:19-21 Bildad said that the wicked have no offspring or descendants to remember them; Job countered that their descendants are established with them in their sight and their offspring are before their eyes.

In vv.7-8 Job argues not only that the wicked prosper and their offspring flourish but also that their lives often appear unhindered by any of the signs of judgement that the friends so confidently describe (vv.9-13) – a perspective that shares much with Psalm 73. Furthermore, Job points out that the evidence for what he is claiming is not even concealed by the wicked themselves, who choose to follow their pursuits with open indifference to and even proclaimed defiance against the Lord (vv.14-16).

It is impossible to miss the contrast here. All the advantages that many of the wicked seemed to have, Job was deprived of. Job is the man:

- Whose descendants were cursed and not established.
- Whose house was subject to fear.
- With the rod of God upon him.
- Whose livestock has perished.
- Whose children no longer dance.

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?

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 21:17-21

How often is the lamp of the wicked put out? In Job’s rhetorical question he would answer “Not often enough.” And it would give Job no satisfaction to hear that the judgement would instead come upon the wicked man’s descendants. Job

challenges Bildad's earlier assertion that the lamp of the wicked is put out (Job 18:5-6) by asking how often this is true (vv.17-18). Furthermore, Job's friends have argued that God's judgement of the wicked falls also on the children of the wicked (Job 20:10), but Job replies that, if the wicked person does not see, drink, and know his own punishment, it has little effect as judgement because he is dead and without care for what happens after him (vv.19-21).

**When the Ten Commandments were first given to Israel it seemed that God would indeed punish the children for the sins of their parents: <<You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me>> (Exodus 20:5), and this was still the viewpoint of Jesus' disciples: <<As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?''>> (John 9:1-2). However, Scripture makes it clear this is not the general case: <<In those days they shall no longer say: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge>> (Jeremiah 31:29-31), and: <<The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own>> (Ezekiel 18:20).**

Let their own eyes see their destruction. In thinking upon the seeming comfort of the wicked, Job almost despaired. He cried out to God to bring destruction upon the wicked in his own day and not in the time of their household after them. Job acknowledged that wickedness was never ultimately rewarded and was always punished in the end. The problem for Job was that it never seemed soon enough that the wicked would drink of the wrath of the Almighty. Job suffered in the now and many of the wicked did not.

- 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.

## Job 21:22-26

Will any teach God knowledge, seeing that he judges those that are on high? In previous speeches, Eliphaz had asked how Job could presume to be in the right when God judges even the heavenly beings; refer to Job 4:18 and 15:15. Here, Job recasts the truth of Eliphaz's assertion so as to question the approach of his friends: their presuming to discern events on earth as transparent indicators of judgement contradicts the facts of experience in such a way as to suggest that God needs to be reminded or instructed in their knowledge. However, since God is the judge of those who are on high and unseen, the friends should be all the more cautious of presuming to discern exhaustively what God's purposes are simply based upon what they see on earth.

In the broader context, Job is indeed questioning the ways and wisdom of God in not bringing judgement sooner upon the wicked man. At the same time he sensed that this was wrong, so he corrected himself with his own rhetorical question on this point.

Elsewhere it is shown that there is no one who can teach God: <<*Who has directed the spirit of the Lord, or as his counsellor has instructed him? Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice? Who taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?*>> (Isaiah 40:13-14), or as Paul puts it: <<*For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?*>> (Romans 11:34).

One dies in full prosperity, another dies in bitterness of soul; they lie down alike in the dust. All of mankind is mortal and their life will end in death, whether they have been good or evil - there is no apparent distinction when the end comes. Job is clearly uncomfortable in questioning the ways and wisdom of God, yet at the same time it just seemed so unfair that the good and bad would seemingly have the same fate.

- 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 on the day of calamity,  
and are rescued on the day of wrath?
- 31 Who declares their way to their face,

and who repays them for what they have done?

<sup>32</sup> When they are carried to the grave,  
a watch is kept over their tomb.

<sup>33</sup> The clods of the valley are sweet to them;  
everyone will follow after,  
and those who went before are innumerable.

<sup>34</sup> How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?  
There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood.'

### Job 21:27-34

Oh, I know your thoughts. As Job dared to question God in this way, he could see the reaction on the faces of his three friends. They were appalled that he spoke against God and his justice in this manner. Both Job and his friends did not understand God's ways. Yet there were two significant differences between Job and his friends. First, his friends confidently claimed that they did understand, while Job admitted his perplexity. Second, for Job's friends these were matters of theological and moral theory and interesting topics for discussion; for the severely suffering Job these were life and death questions.

Where is the house of the prince? Where is the tent in which the wicked lived? Job put these words of objection into the mouths of his friends. They thought it was all so simple to analyse; one needed only to look at the house of the prince and the tent of the wicked to see that righteousness was rewarded and wickedness was punished by God's moral order. Yet Job has tried to show that the matter just is not that simple.

Have you not asked those who travel the roads, that the wicked are spared on the day of calamity. Job knew that the wicked faced an ultimate unpleasant destiny; he was more upset that it did not seem to happen fast enough. He believed this knowledge was so common that one could ask those who travel the road and get the correct answer.

The day of calamity is elsewhere spoken of as the Day of the Lord and is not a day to look forward to for so many: <<*Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty!*>> (Isaiah 13:6), <<*See, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it*>> (Isaiah 13:9), <<*Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes*>> (Joel 1:15), <<*Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light*>> (Amos 5:18), <<*For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall*

*be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head*>> (Obadiah 15), <<*The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there*>> (Zephaniah 1:14), and it comes at an unexpected time: <<*For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:2), and: <<*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed*>> (2 Peter 3:10).

Who declares their way to their face. The ultimate destiny for the wicked may be bad but who will confront them now? Why do they get away with so much now? There may be an ultimate moral order to the universe but why is it so slow in being accomplished?

When they are carried to the grave, a watch is kept over their tomb. The clods of the valley are sweet to them. Job understood that the wicked would indeed die; but many of the wicked enjoy honourable funerals and even their death is a kind of sweetness to them. It all just did not seem fair.

Everyone will follow after. In addition to the argument that a person's circumstances are not necessarily a transparent indicator of blessing or judgement, there is an additional warning embedded in Job's description: many people are fooled by the external circumstances of the evil man, who is the subject of this description, into following him in life and honouring him in death.

How then will you comfort me with empty nothings? The complexity of Job's situation was far beyond the ability of his friends to properly analyse. They had no comfort for him with their empty words and their false answers. If in his friends' arguments there was no comfort for him, it is equally true that in his answers he brought no conviction to them. All this is strangely suggestive. Men discussing human life are almost certain to blunder when they attempt to explain it.

This chapter may be called Job's triumph over the insinuated false and defamatory statements and specious but false doctrines of his opponents. The irritability of his temper no longer appears for, from the time he got that glorious discovery of his Redeemer and the joyous hope of an eternal inheritance, i.e. <<*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth*>> (Job 19:25), and now there can be found no more murmurings nor unsanctified complaining. He is now in full control of his emotions and thoughts, and he reasons conclusively because he reasons coolly.