

Retributive Punishment



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Job 8:1–22, Isa. 40:12–14, Job 11:1–20, Gen. 6:5–8, 2 Pet. 3:5–7.*

Memory Text: “‘Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?’” (*Job 11:7, NKJV*).

The problem of human suffering surely continues to daunt humanity. We see “good” people suffer immense tragedy, while evil ones go unpunished in this life. A few years ago a book came out called *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* It was one of numerous attempts over the millennia to come to a satisfactory answer to that problem. It didn't. Many other writers and thinkers have written of their struggle to come to terms with human suffering. They don't seem to have found the right answers.

This theme, of course, is the theme of the book of Job, and in it we continue to explore why even “good” people, such as Job, suffer in this world. The crucial difference between the book of Job and the others, though, is that Job is not based on human perspectives of suffering (though we get plenty of that in the book); rather, because it's the Bible, we get a look at God's perspective on the problem.

This week we read more speeches from the men who came to Job in his misery. What can we learn from them, especially from their mistakes, as they try, as others have done, to come to grips with the problem of pain?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 12.

More Accusations

As if getting a lecture from Eliphaz weren't bad enough, Job then faced one from Bildad, who said something similar to what Eliphaz had said. Unfortunately, Bildad was cruder and harsher toward Job than even Eliphaz was. Imagine going up to someone whose children had died and saying to the person: " 'If your sons have sinned against Him, He has cast them away for their transgression' " (*Job 8:4, NKJV*).

This is ironic, because the first chapter of Job (*Job 1:5*) makes it clear that Job offered sacrifices on behalf of his children for that very reason, in case they had sinned. So we see a contrast here between an understanding of grace (as seen in Job's actions) and Bildad's opening words, which reveal a harsh, retributive legalism. Even worse, though, is that Bildad speaks this way in his attempt to defend the character of God.

Read Job 8:1–22. What is Bildad's argument, and how much truth is he speaking? That is, if you were to forget the immediate context and just look at the sentiments expressed, what fault, if any, could you find with his words?

Who can find fault with so much of what he is saying here? " 'For we were born yesterday, and know nothing, because our days on earth are a shadow' " (*Job 8:9, NKJV*). That's powerful, true, and very biblical (*James 4:14*). Or what's wrong with his warning that the godless man who puts his hope in earthly, worldly things is really trusting in something no firmer than a "spider's web" (*Job 8:14*)? That's about as biblical a thought as one could get.

Perhaps the biggest problem is that Bildad is presenting just one aspect of God's character. It's an example of being in a ditch on one side of the road or the other. Neither place is where you really should be. Someone can, for instance, focus only on law and justice and obedience, while someone else can focus on grace and forgiveness and substitution. Either overemphasis usually leads to a distorted picture of God and of truth. We see a similar problem here.

As humans we should always strive for the right balance between law and grace in our theology and in our dealing with others. If, however, you were to err on one side or the other (and as humans we eventually do), which side would it be better to err on when dealing with the faults of others, and why?

Less Than Your Iniquity Deserves

“‘Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than heaven—what can you do? Deeper than Sheol—what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea’ ” (*Job 11:7–9, NKJV; see also Isa. 40:12–14*).

What truth is being expressed, and why is it important for us always to remember it?

The words here are beautiful expressions of the fact that there is so much about God we don't know and that all of our efforts to search Him out by ourselves will still leave us knowing so little. It's interesting that one of the twentieth century's most famous philosophers, the late Richard Rorty, basically argued that we are never going to understand reality and truth, and so we ought to give up the attempt. Instead of trying to understand reality, Rorty argued, all we can do is try to cope with it. How fascinating: 2,600 years of the Western philosophical tradition culminates in this expression of defeat. If all our searching leaves us in the dark about the nature of the reality that we live in, then who “by searching” is going to understand the Creator—the one who made that reality to begin with, and so is even greater than it? Rorty essentially affirmed what we just read from the Bible.

Yet these texts, profound as they are, were from a speech from Zophar, the third of Job's acquaintances, and he used those words as part of a faulty argument against Job.

Read Job 11:1–20. What is right with what Zophar is saying, but what is wrong with his overall argument?

It's so hard to understand how someone could come up to a man suffering as Job is and say to him, basically, *you are getting what you deserve. No, in fact, you are getting less than you deserve.* What's even worse is that he is doing it, as were the two others, all in an attempt to vindicate the goodness and the character of God.

Sometimes, merely knowing truths about the character of God does not automatically make us reflect it. What more do we need in order to reflect God's character?

Divine Retribution

Job's three friends undoubtedly had some knowledge about God. And they were earnest in their efforts to defend Him too. And, as we saw, as misguided as their words to Job were (especially given the context), these men were expressing some crucial truths.

Central to their arguments was the idea that God is a God of justice, and that sin brings divine retributive punishment upon evil and special blessings upon goodness. Though we don't know the exact time that the men lived, we accept that Moses wrote the book of Job while he was in Midian, so they lived some time before the Exodus. Most likely, too, they lived after the Flood.

Read Genesis 6:5–8. Though we don't know how much these men (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) knew about the Flood, how might its story have influenced their theology?

Clearly the story of the Flood is an example of divine retribution for sin. In it, God brings punishment directly upon those who specifically deserved it. Yet, even here the concept of grace is revealed as seen in Genesis 6:8. Ellen G. White wrote, too, of the fact that “every [hammer] blow struck upon the ark was preaching to the people.”—*The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 70. Nevertheless, to some degree we can see in this story an example of what these men were preaching to Job.

How is this same idea of retributive judgment seen in Genesis 13:13; 18:20–32; 19:24, 25?

Whether or not Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar knew much about these incidents, they reveal the reality of God's direct judgment upon evil. God wasn't simply abandoning sinners to their sin and letting that sin itself destroy them. As with the Flood, God was the direct agent of their punishment. He functioned here as the judge and destroyer of wickedness and evil.

However much we want to (and should) focus on God's character of love, grace, and forgiveness, why must we not forget the reality of His justice as well? Think about all the evil that has yet gone unpunished. What should this tell us about the necessity of divine retribution, whenever and however it comes?

If the Lord Creates a New Thing

Many instances of direct divine punishment upon evil, as well as blessing for faithfulness, are recorded in Scripture long after all the characters in the book of Job were dead.

What great promise is given here for obedience? *Deut. 6:24, 25.*

The Old Testament is filled with promise after promise of the blessings and prosperity that God would directly bring to His people were they to obey Him. So, we can see here examples of what these men had said to Job regarding God's blessing the faithfulness of those who seek to obey Him and His commandments and to live a godly and upright life.

Of course, the Old Testament also is filled with warning after warning about direct divine punishment that would come for disobedience. In much of the Old Testament, especially after the covenant with Israel at Sinai, God is warning the Israelites about what their disobedience would bring upon them. " 'But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against [His] commands, [His] hand will be against you, as it was against your ancestors' " (*1 Sam. 12:15, NIV*).

Read Numbers 16:1–33. What does this incident teach about the reality of divine retributive punishment?

Given the nature of how the rebels were destroyed, this incident cannot be chalked up to the idea of "sin bringing its own punishment." These people faced divine and direct retribution from God for their sin and rebellion. In this case we see supernatural manifestations of God's power; it seemed that the very laws of nature themselves were changed. " 'But if the LORD creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the LORD' " (*Num. 16:30, NKJV*).

The verb "creates" here is from the same root used for "created" in Genesis 1:1. The Lord wanted everyone to know that it was He Himself who immediately and directly brought this punishment upon the rebels.

The Second Death

Certainly the greatest and most powerful manifestation of retributive judgment will be at the end of time, with the destruction of the wicked, called in the Bible “the second death” (*Rev. 20:14*). This death, of course, must not be confused with the death common to all the descendants of Adam. This is the death from which the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, will spare the righteous at the end of time (*1 Cor. 15:26*). In contrast, the second death, like some of the other punishments seen in Old Testament times, is God’s direct punishment upon sinners who have not repented and received salvation in Jesus.

Read 2 Peter 3:5–7. What is the Word of God telling us about the fate of the lost?

“Fire comes down from God out of heaven. The earth is broken up. The weapons concealed in its depths are drawn forth. Devouring flames burst from every yawning chasm. The very rocks are on fire. The day has come that shall burn as an oven. The elements melt with fervent heat, the earth also, and the works that are therein are burned up. Malachi 4:1; 2 Peter 3:10. The earth’s surface seems one molten mass—a vast, seething lake of fire. It is the time of the judgment and perdition of ungodly men—‘the day of the Lord’s vengeance, and the year of recompenses for the controversy of Zion.’ Isaiah 34:8.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 672, 673.

Though sin can bring its own punishment, there surely are times that God Himself does directly punish sin and sinners, as Job’s protagonists argued. It’s true that all suffering in this world has arisen from sin. But it’s not true that all suffering is God’s punishing of sin. That was certainly not the case with Job, nor in most other cases as well. The fact is that we are involved in the great controversy, and we have an enemy who is out to do us harm. The good news is that, amid it all, we can know that God is there for us. Whatever the reasons for the trials we face, whatever the present outcomes of those trials, we have the assurance of God’s love, a love revealed as so great that Jesus went to the cross for us, an act that alone promises to end all suffering.

How can we be sure that someone’s suffering is direct punishment from God? If we can’t be sure, then what’s the best approach for us to take with that suffering person? Or even with our own suffering?

Further Thought: As said earlier in this quarter, it's important to try to put ourselves in the place of the characters in the story, because doing so can help us to understand their motives and actions. They didn't see the battle going on behind the scenes as we do. If we put ourselves in their shoes, it shouldn't be that hard for us to see the mistake that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar made in regard to Job's suffering. They were making a judgment that they were really not qualified to make. "It is very natural for human beings to think that great calamities are a sure index of great crimes and enormous sins; but men often make a mistake in thus measuring character. We are not living in the time of retributive judgment. Good and evil are mingled, and calamities come upon all. Sometimes men do pass the boundary line beyond God's protecting care, and then Satan exercises his power upon them, and God does not interpose. Job was sorely afflicted, and his friends sought to make him acknowledge that his suffering was the result of sin, and cause him to feel under condemnation. They represented his case as that of a great sinner; but the Lord rebuked them for their judgment of His faithful servant."—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1140. We need to be careful in how we deal with the whole question of suffering. Sure, in some cases *it seems* easier to understand. Someone smokes cigarettes and gets lung cancer. How much simpler could it be? That's fine, but what about those who smoke all their lives and never get it? Is God punishing the one but not the other? In the end, like Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, we don't always know why suffering comes as it does. In one sense, it almost doesn't matter if we know or not. What matters is what we do in response to the suffering that we see. Here's where these three men were totally wrong.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What does the reality of retributive punishment teach us about how we can trust in the ultimate justice of God, even despite how things seem now?
- 2 These three men really didn't understand all that was happening to Job in his suffering. In a sense, isn't that the case with us all? We don't fully understand the reasons for human suffering. How, then, should this realization help us to be more compassionate with those who are suffering? As stated above, how important is it that we even know the immediate causes?