

Job 20
July 5, 2026

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: Have you ever seen someone who seemed dishonest or cruel succeed in life? If yes, how did that affect your view of justice? [Let people engage]

Transition: We've all seen situations that make us question how justice works. Zophar thinks he has the mystery solved. Let's evaluate Zophar's argument and then consider whether his conclusions fit Job's situation-and our own experiences. Let's begin.

BOOK:

Zophar

20 Then Zophar the Naamathite replied:

² "My troubled thoughts prompt me to answer
because I am greatly disturbed.

³ I hear a rebuke that dishonors me,
and my understanding inspires me to reply.

⁴ "Surely you know how it has been from of old,
ever since man (or Adam) was placed on the earth,

⁵ that the mirth of the wicked is brief,
the joy of the godless lasts but a moment.

⁶ Though his pride reaches to the heavens
and his head touches the clouds,

⁷ he will perish forever, like his own dung;
those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?'

⁸ Like a dream he flies away, no more to be found,
banished like a vision of the night.

⁹ The eye that saw him will not see him again;
his place will look on him no more.

¹⁰ His children must make amends to the poor;
his own hands must give back his wealth.

¹¹ The youthful vigor that fills his bones
will lie with him in the dust.

¹² "Though evil is sweet in his mouth
and he hides it under his tongue,

¹³ though he cannot bear to let it go
and keeps it in his mouth,

¹⁴ yet his food will turn sour in his stomach;
it will become the venom of serpents within him.

¹⁵ He will spit out the riches he swallowed;
God will make his stomach vomit them up.

¹⁶ He will suck the poison of serpents;

the fangs of an adder will kill him.

¹⁷ He will not enjoy the streams,
the rivers flowing with honey and cream.

¹⁸ What he toiled for he must give back uneaten;
he will not enjoy the profit from his trading.

¹⁹ For he has oppressed the poor and left them destitute;
he has seized houses he did not build.

²⁰ “Surely he will have no respite from his craving;
he cannot save himself by his treasure.

²¹ Nothing is left for him to devour;
his prosperity will not endure.

²² In the midst of his plenty, distress will overtake him;
the full force of misery will come upon him.

²³ When he has filled his belly,
God will vent his burning anger against him
and rain down his blows upon him.

²⁴ Though he flees from an iron weapon,
a bronze-tipped arrow pierces him.

²⁵ He pulls it out of his back,
the gleaming point out of his liver.
Terrors will come over him;

²⁶ total darkness lies in wait for his treasures.
A fire unfanned will consume him
and devour what is left in his tent.

²⁷ The heavens will expose his guilt;
the earth will rise up against him.

²⁸ A flood will carry off his house,
rushing waters (washed away) on the day of God’s wrath.

²⁹ Such is the fate God allots the wicked,
the heritage appointed for them by God.”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What stood out to you? What questions do you have? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you learn about man? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you learn about God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit? [Let people engage]

Q: What is your takeaway? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

Be careful not to oversimplify God's ways. Zophar assumes suffering always means sin and prosperity is always temporary for the wicked. The book of Job challenges that assumption.

Remember that earthly success is not the final measure. Zophar is right about one thing: wealth, power, and success are temporary. Even if his timing is off, Scripture consistently teaches that earthly gain doesn't last.

Resist self-righteousness. Zophar's confidence blinds him. He never considers that he could be wrong.

Trust God's justice without pretending to understand it. Job teaches that God is perfectly just, but His justice isn't always immediate or fully visible in this life.

Zophar reminds us that it's possible to say true things about God in a way that misrepresents Him. As followers of Christ, we're called not only to speak truth but to speak it with humility, compassion, and an awareness that we don't always know what God is doing.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W.W. (1996). Be Patient. (pp. 77-80) Victor Books

"The truest help we can render an afflicted man is not to take his burden from him, but to call out his best strength that he may be able to bear it." **Phillips Brooks**

It All Depends on Your Point of View

Zophar is next in line to speak, but he has nothing new to say. It's the same old story: God punishes the wicked, so Job had better get right with God. His key text is Job 20:5, "The triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the hypocrite but for a moment." This theme has already been discussed by Bildad (8:11–19; 18) and Eliphaz (15:20–35), but Zophar is so disturbed by Job's last speech that he feels he must speak. "I hear a rebuke that dishonors me, and my understanding inspires me to reply" (20:3, NIV). Zophar felt insulted by Job and decided to defend himself.

1. The awful fate of the wicked (Job 20:4–29)

Zophar makes three affirmations to prove that the fate of the wicked is indeed terrible: their life is brief (Job 20:4–11), their pleasure is temporary (vv. 12–19), and their death is painful (vv. 20–29).

Their life is brief (Job 20:4–11). Zophar declares that from the beginning of human history the triumphing (“mirth”) of the wicked has been short. We wonder where he got his information, for the Lord waited 120 years before sending the Flood (Gen. 6:3), and God gave the wicked Canaanites at least four centuries before He judged them (15:13–16).

Most of the people in Scripture who pondered the problem of evil in the world started from a different premise—the wicked enjoy long life and freedom from trouble, while the righteous suffer much and die young (Pss. 37; 73; Jer. 12:1–4). Zophar was deliberately blocking out a lot of data to prove his point.

According to Zophar, the higher the wicked man climbs in his success, the farther down he will fall when his judgment comes. When he falls, he will go down the drain like his own dung; and people will ask, “Where is he?” (Job 20:6–7) He will vanish like a forgotten dream or like a night vision that cannot be called back (v. 8).

Not only will the wicked man’s person and name vanish, but so will his wealth. After his death, the truth about his crimes will become known; and his children will have to use their inheritance to pay back the people their father has robbed. Their father was still in “youthful vigor” when he died (v. 11, NIV), but now he lies lifeless in the grave. According to Zophar, the wicked die young, when they least expect it.

When you survey both sacred and secular history, you discover that there are no ironclad rules that govern when either the wicked or the righteous will die. Generally speaking, people who ignore God’s laws are more vulnerable to problems that could lead to an early death. Sexual promiscuity, the use of narcotics (including alcohol and tobacco), and a reckless lifestyle can all help shorten a person’s life; *but there is no guarantee that this will happen*. It’s amazing how some godless people live to an old age. Perhaps this is the grace of God in giving them time to repent.

Zophar was not talking about the natural consequences of a wicked life, but the judgment of God on sinners. Zophar and his two friends were certain that Job was a hypocrite, that his pious life was only a veneer to cover his secret sins. In his second speech, Eliphaz will even name some of the sins that Job committed! (22:5–9) But God does not always judge hypocrites and other sinners immediately, and the death of a young person is no evidence that he or she was a hypocrite.

The godly Scottish Presbyterian minister Robert Murray McCheyne died when he was only twenty-nine years old, and missionary William Whiting Borden (“Borden of Yale”) was only twenty-five years old when he died in Egypt. David Brainerd, saintly missionary to the Native Americans, was twenty-nine when he died. According to Zophar, these men must have been guilty of secret sin, and God took them at an early age.

Their pleasure is temporary (Job 20:12–19). Zophar uses *eating* as his basic image here. The wicked man enjoys sin the way people enjoy food, keeping it in his mouth where he can “taste it” before swallowing it. In fact, he enjoys sin so much, he can’t make himself swallow it! But

eventually that delicious food in his mouth becomes poison in his system, and he becomes ill and vomits everything up. While enjoying his sin, he hasn't noticed that he's been bitten by a poisonous viper and is destined for death. In other words, sin carries with it both enjoyment and punishment; and if you want the one, you must also accept the other. The pleasures of sin are only for a season (Heb. 11:25).

But God's judgment involves much more: the wicked man not only gets sick from his sin, but he does not enjoy the everyday blessings of life (Job 20:17). "He will not see the streams, the rivers flowing with honey and cream" (NKJV). The land of Canaan was a land "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8; Lev. 20:24). Milk and honey were staples, not luxuries; and a land "flowing with milk and honey" would be productive and able to support the people. But the wicked man has lost his taste for basic foods, and nothing satisfies him anymore. His taste for sin has ruined his enjoyment of the fundamental blessings of life.

Using the image of *eating*, Zophar has made two points: what the wicked man swallows will make him sick and will take away his desire for the good things of life. He makes a third point in Job 20:18–19: the wicked man will not be able to enjoy (swallow down) some of the things he labored for. Because he acquired his wealth through sinning, that wealth will not satisfy him. This certainly has been reflected in the lives of many people who have rejected Christ and devoted themselves to the pleasures of sin. The more they indulge, the more they crave; and the more they satisfy that craving, the less they enjoy. The less they enjoy, the more they have to sin in order to recapture the old thrills; and the more they sin, the more they destroy their ability to enjoy anything. To change the image, they have "blown all their fuses"; and the machinery of life no longer functions as it once did.

Their death is painful (Job 20:20–29). Not even his riches will be able to prevent death from coming to the wicked man (Job 20:20; see Ps. 49). While he is enjoying his prosperity, the wicked man will experience distress, misery, and God's burning anger. God will "rain down His blows upon him" (Job 20:23, NIV). The evil man will try to run away, but God will come at him with a sword and shoot at him with a bronze-tipped arrow that will pierce him.

At this point in his speech, Zophar starts to sound like Bildad (Job 18). He describes the wicked man trying to escape God's judgment. The arrows come at him as he runs through the darkness, and the fire falls around him. Then a flood catches up with him and destroys everything. But that's not the end: The wicked man is finally dragged into court where heaven and earth testify against him and find him guilty (20:27).

Zuck, R. B. (1985). *Job*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 742-743) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

5. Zophar's second speech (chap. 20)

This sixth speech by Job's companions is the most stinging of all the diatribes. Infuriated and insulted, Zophar blasted Job, seeking to convince him that his wealth had vanished because that is what happens to those who deprive the poor.

a. The anger of Zophar (20:1–3)

20:1–3. Like his two partners before him, **Zophar** could not remain silent; he too had to speak another time. **Troubled** and **disturbed** at Job's rude words, Zophar felt he must respond. Job had said the three had insulted him numerous times (19:3), but now Zophar volleyed the notion that Job had insulted *him*. Some comforter he turned out to be! Job had said God "closed their minds to understanding" (17:4), but Zophar retorted that his **understanding** forced him to **reply**. He had to share his insights!

b. The brief prosperity of the wicked (20:4–11)

20:4–11. Since Job claimed to **know** so much (a false accusation, for Job did not claim that), he should be aware, Zophar argued, that from the beginning of human history any **joy** experienced by a sinner is **brief** and for **a moment**. Job may be arrogant, Zophar arrogantly affirmed (!), but he will be brought low and die. Though high as **the heavens** he will, in contrast, be brought low like **dung**. People will not know where he is, for he will have vanished **like a dream** (four men in the Book of Job spoke of dreams: Eliphaz, 4:13; Job, 7:14; Zophar, 20:8; Elihu, 33:15). He will be unseen (20:9, a retort to Job's words in 7:8), **his children** will have to pay his obligations **to the poor** (since he had oppressed them, 20:19), and he will lose all his ill-gotten **wealth**. Repeatedly in this oration, Zophar mentioned wealth (vv. 10, 15, 18, 20–22, 26) and its transience, an expansion of Eliphaz's earlier statement along that line (15:29). All this suggested that Job acquired his riches dishonestly. A wealthy man, if wicked, will find that his energy will be buried with him. Zophar here may have been responding to Job's mention of **vigor** in 18:7 (cf. 21:23 and "dust" in 10:9).

c. The impoverishment of the wicked (20:12–19)

20:12–16. A sinner may enjoy sin-gained wealth like some **sweet** delicacy that he relishes **in his mouth**, but like **sour** food he will lose it. Wealth becomes like poisonous snake **venom** (cf. v. 16) with its bitter consequences.

Riches gained by godless means are not retained, Zophar argued. In fact they are vomited **up** and they **kill** the wicked like the deadly **poison of serpents** (cf. v. 14) or the venom of an adder's **fangs**.

20:17–19. **Streams** with their drinking water, and **honey and cream**, symbols of prosperity, cannot be enjoyed by sinners. "Cream" may be curdled milk or a kind of yogurt, a delicacy in the Middle East. As a transgressor dies, he must **give back** (cf. v. 10) the results of his toil and profits from his business without having enjoyed them. The reason for all this is that he took advantage of **the poor**, even taking their **houses**, in order to enrich himself. Of course Zophar had Job in mind, but later the suffering saint, here badgered again by verbal blows, denied such accusations (29:12, 15; 31:16–22).

d. The anger of God against the wicked (20:20–29)

20:20–23. Though always **craving** for more wealth (another unfair charge by Zophar), a wicked person will find that it **cannot save** him for it **will not endure**. Troubles will come **upon him** (**misery**, *ʾāmāl*, was a response to the same Heb. word used by Job in 3:10, 20; 7:3; 16:2; see

comments on 3:10), and just when he is enjoying his prosperity (with **his belly**; cf. 20:14, full), **God will** lash out at him in His **anger** (cf. v. 28). The one who was angry, it seemed, was Zophar, not God! Zophar's vinegar-mouthed diatribe falsely and viciously incriminated Job as a selfish profiteer, heartlessly tyrannizing the poor. Such an arraignment was totally unfounded. 20:24–29. If Job tried to escape from God's anger, one **weapon** would down him if another did not. Pulling out the **arrow** (cf. 6:4) to try to save himself would do no good (cf. 16:13). He would experience **terrors** and **darkness** (cf. 15:30; 18:18), and **fire** (cf. 18:15; 22:20) would enshroud and **devour** his wealth.

God will not let a wicked person escape, Zophar averred. **The heavens and the earth** would witness **against him**, an obvious rejoinder to Job's desire that the earth not hide God's injustice to him (16:18) and his longing that his witness and intercessor in heaven act on his behalf (16:19–21).

His theft of the houses of the poor (20:19) will be requited by **his own house** being carried off by **a flood** (cf. 22:16) in **God's wrath** (cf. 20:23). **Such is the fate**, Zophar summarized, of **the wicked**. This is what **God** has **appointed for them** as their **heritage** (cf. 27:13). How then, as Zophar saw it, could Job think that his situation was any different? Since he had lost his wealth so suddenly, how else could such a calamity be explained except that he was wicked? Zophar, of course, in his philosophical shortsightedness, made no allowance for a person being afflicted for any reason other than retribution for sin. In his stubborn invective, he flared at Job with venomous words, like the poisonous snake he spoke about.

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Garrett, D. A. (1998). *The Poetic and Wisdom Books*. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (p. 208-209). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Zophar's Second Response (20:1–29). As Zophar rehashed the fate of the wicked, it is clearer still that Job was the subject. Job had said his Redeemer would arise against the dust (19:25);

Zophar said Job's vigor would lie dead in the dust (19:11). He accentuated the unrepentant attitude (19:12–19) and fleeting wealth (19:20–23) of the wicked, which was exactly how the friends regarded Job.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Job20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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