

Retributive¹ Punishment



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 5

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Job 8:1–22; Job 11:1–20; Isaiah 40:12–14; Genesis 6:5–8; 2 Peter 3:5–7.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘Do you know how deep the mysteries of God are? Can you discover the limits of the Mighty One’s [God’s] knowledge?’ ” (Job 11:7, NlrV).

THE PROBLEM OF HUMAN SUFFERING surely continues to trouble humanity. We know that “good” people suffer terrible hardships, while evil people go unpunished in this life. A few years ago a book called *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* came out. It tried to find a satisfactory answer to that problem. It did not. Many other writers and thinkers over thousands of years have written of their struggle to understand human suffering. They have not found the right answers.

Human suffering, of course, is the theme of the book of Job. In it we continue to study why even “good” people, such as Job, suffer in this world. The very important difference between the book of Job and other books that deal with suffering is that the book of Job does not depend on human understanding of suffering. (But we do get plenty of that in the book.) Instead, the Bible gives us God’s understanding of the problem.

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

DEFINITIONS

1. retributive—having to do with punishment for a wrong that was done in the past.

MORE CHANGES (Job 8:1–22)

Getting a scolding from Eliphaz is bad enough. But then Job also gets one from Bildad, who says many of the same things that Eliphaz says. But Bildad is rougher on Job than even Eliphaz is. Imagine going up to someone whose children have died and saying to the person, “‘Your children sinned against him [God]. So he punished them for their sin’” (Job 8:4, NIV).

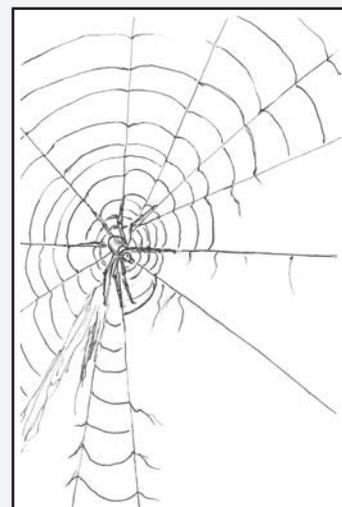
Bildad’s words are puzzling because the first chapter of Job (Job 1:5) makes it clear that Job offered sacrifices for his children. He did so in case they had sinned. So we find a sharp difference here between an understanding of grace² (Job’s actions) and Bildad’s opening words. Bildad’s words show a rough legalistic³ attitude (thought or feeling) toward sinners and belief that the deaths of Job’s children were just and fair because they must have sinned against God. Even worse, Bildad speaks this way when he tries to defend the character (thoughts; feelings; actions) of God.

Read Job 8:1–22. What is Bildad’s argument? And how much truth is he speaking? Suppose you were to forget the meaning of his words and just look at his feelings. What fault could you then find with his words?

Can we really find fault with so much of what Bildad is saying here? After all, no one would argue against the truth that the godless person, who puts hope in earthly, worldly things, really is trusting in something no stronger than a “spider’s web” (Job 8:14). You could not have a stronger biblical principle (important rule) than that.

Perhaps the biggest problem is that Bildad mentions only one part of God’s character (who God is). For example, someone can focus only on law and justice and obedience, while someone else can focus on grace and forgiveness. Going too far to either side or focus usually leads to a wrong picture of God and of truth. We find the same problem here.

As humans we should always work for the right balance between law and grace in what we believe and when we deal with others. Suppose you were to make a mistake on one side (grace) or the other (law) when dealing with someone’s faults (as humans we will, at some point). Then, on which side would it be better to be when dealing with the faults of others? Why?



The person who puts hope in earthly, worldly things really is trusting in something no stronger than a spider’s web.

DEFINITIONS

2. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

3. legalistic—having to do with the belief that you can earn salvation through obeying the law.

LESS THAN YOUR INIQUITY (SIN) DESERVES
(Job 11:1–20)



All our efforts to search out God by ourselves will still leave us knowing little.

“‘Do you know how deep the mysteries of God are? Can you discover the limits of the Mighty One’s knowledge? They are higher than the heavens. What can you do? They are deeper than the deepest grave. What can you know? They are longer than the earth. They are wider than the ocean’ ” (Job 11:7–9, NIV; read also Isaiah 40:12–14). What truth is shown in these verses? And why is it important for us always to remember it?

The words here are a beautiful example of the fact that there is so much about God we do not know. They also show that all our efforts to search Him out by ourselves will still leave us knowing so little. One of the twentieth century’s most famous philosophers⁴ was the late Richard Rorty. He argued that we are never going to understand life and truth. So he said that we should give up trying. Instead of trying to understand life and truth, Rorty argued, all we can do is try to “live” with the mysteries. How interesting! Two thousand six hundred years of Western thought ends in this confession of defeat. Suppose all our searching leaves us in the dark about the nature of the real world that we live in. Then who “by searching” is going to understand that the Creator God is the one who made the life we live? And God is even greater than all He created and life as we know it! Rorty really just supported what we just read from the Bible.

Yet, these verses, deep as they are, are from a speech from Zophar. He is the third of Job’s friends. He uses those words as part of a faulty argument against Job.

DEFINITIONS

4. philosophers—people who study ideas about knowledge, truth, and the nature and meaning of life.

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

It is so hard to understand how someone could come up to a man suffering as Job is and say to him, “*You are getting what you deserve. No, in fact, you are getting less than you deserve.*” What is even worse is that Zophar is doing what Eliphaz and Bildad did. All of them are trying to defend the goodness and the character of God.

Sometimes just knowing truths about the character of God does not automatically make us show it. What more do we need in order to show God’s character?

GOD'S PUNISHMENT FOR WRONGDOING (Genesis 6:5–8)

No doubt, Job's three friends had some knowledge about God. And they meant well in their efforts to defend Him too. They may have been wrong in their thoughts and feelings about Job's situation. But these men also spoke some important truths.

The main idea of their arguments was that God is a God of justice and that sin brings God's just (fair) punishment upon evil and special blessings upon goodness. We do not know the exact time that the men lived. But we accept that Moses wrote the book of Job while he was in Midian. So we think these men lived sometime before the Exodus. And we believe, too, that they lived after the Flood.

Read Genesis 6:5–8. We do not know how much these men (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) knew about the Flood. But suppose they did know about it. How might its story have influenced what they believed to be true about God?

Clearly the story of the Flood is an example of God's just punishment for sin. In it, God directly brings punishment upon those who really deserved it. Yet, the idea of grace is shown in Genesis 6:8. Ellen G. White wrote, too, of the fact that "every [hammer] blow struck [hit] upon the ark was preaching to the people."⁵—*The Spirit of Prophecy*,⁵ volume 1, page 70. Anyway, we can find in this story an example of what these men were preaching to Job.

How is this same idea of God's just judgment seen in Genesis 13:13; Genesis 18:20–32; and Genesis 19:24, 25?

Whether or not Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar knew much about these events, the events show how real God's judgment upon evil is. God is not just leaving sinners to their sin. Nor is He letting sin destroy them. As with the Flood, God is directly responsible for their punishment. He is the Judge and Destroyer of wickedness and evil.

We want very much to (and should) focus on God's character of love, grace, and forgiveness. But why must we not forget how real His justice is too? Think about all the evil that has yet gone unpunished. What should this tell us about how necessary God's punishment is, even though it may not always happen right away?



"Every [hammer] blow struck upon the ark was preaching to the people."

DEFINITIONS

5. Prophecy—special message from God to His people. *The Spirit of Prophecy* is a group of books written by Ellen G. White.

IF THE LORD CREATES A NEW THING (Numbers 16:28–30)



The Lord Himself quickly and directly brought this punishment upon the rebels.

Many examples of direct punishment by God upon evil are written in the Bible. Many blessings for faithfulness are written there too. These were written long after all the characters in the book of Job were dead.

In Deuteronomy 6:24, 25, what great promise is given for obedience?

The Old Testament is filled with promise after promise of the blessings and rewards that God would directly bring to His people if they were to obey Him. So we can find here examples of what these men had said to Job about how God blesses the faithfulness of those who seek⁶ to obey Him and His commandments. Those who seek to live a godly and upright life also are blessed.

Of course, the Old Testament also is filled with warnings about God's just punishment for those who disobey. In the Old Testament, God made a covenant (promise) with Israel at Sinai. Afterward, God warned the Israelites about what would happen if they disobeyed Him. "But you must not disobey him [God]. You must not say no to his commands. If you do, his powerful hand will punish you. That's [that is] what happened to your people who lived before you" (1 Samuel 12:15, NIV).

Read Numbers 16:1–33. What does this event teach about how real God's just punishment is?

The rebels were destroyed. Their punishment was terrible. So it does not make sense to believe in the idea of "sin bringing its own punishment." These people faced just punishment from God for their sin and rebellion (war against God). In this case, we find unusual examples of God's power. It seems that the very laws of nature themselves were changed. "But the LORD will make something totally new happen. The ground will open its mouth and swallow them up. It will swallow up everything that belongs to them. They will go down into the grave alive. When that happens, you will know that those men have made fun of the LORD" (Numbers 16:30, NIV).

Here, the verb "make" ("creates" [NKJV]) is from the same root word used for "created" in Genesis 1:1. The Lord wants everyone to know that it is He Himself who quickly and directly brings this punishment upon the rebels.

DEFINITIONS

6. seek—to try to get or achieve; to make an attempt to do something.

THE SECOND DEATH (2 Peter 3:5–7)

Certainly the greatest and most powerful example of God's judgment will be at the end of time, when all the wicked are to be destroyed. The Bible calls it "the second death" (Revelation 20:14). This death must not be confused with the death common to all people from Adam to the end of time. The second Adam (Jesus) will save righteous (holy) people from death at the end of time (1 Corinthians 15:26). The second death, like some of the other punishments seen in Old Testament times, is God's just punishment upon sinners who have not repented (turned away from sin) and received salvation in Jesus.

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

"Fire comes down from God out of heaven. The earth is broken up. The 'weapons' hidden deep in the earth flow out. Fire bursts from every hole in the ground. The very rocks are on fire. The day has come that shall burn as an oven. All things melt with great 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 huge, flaming lake of fire. It is the time of the judgment and destruction of ungodly men—"the Lord has set aside a day to pay Edom⁷ back. He has set aside a year to pay them back for what they did to the city of Zion.' Isaiah 34:8, NIV."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy [War Between Christ and Satan]*, pages 672, 673.

Sin can bring its own punishment. But there surely are times that God Himself directly punishes sin and sinners, just as Job's friends claim that He does. It is true that all suffering in this world has come from sin. But it is not true that all suffering is God's punishment for sin. That was surely not the case with Job, nor in most other cases too. The fact is that we are involved in the great controversy. And we have an enemy who is out to do us harm. But the good news is that we know that God is there for us. There are reasons for the troubles and suffering we face. But we have the assurance (promise) of God's love. This love is so great that Jesus went to the cross for us. That act of His alone promises to end all suffering.

How can we be sure that someone's suffering is direct punishment from God? If we cannot be sure, then what is the best way for us to deal with that suffering person? Or even with our own suffering?

DEFINITIONS

7. Edom—a word picture or symbol for those who are rebels against God's law.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: As said earlier in this quarter, it is important to try to put ourselves in the place of Job and his friends in the story. Doing so can help us understand their feelings, reasons, and actions. They were not aware of the battle going on in heaven as we are. If we put ourselves in their shoes, it should not be that hard for us to understand the mistake that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar made about Job's suffering. They were making a judgment that they were not supposed to make.

"It is very natural for humans to think that terrible events are a result of great crimes and awful sins. But men often make a mistake in measuring character. We are not living in the time of God's just judgment. Good and evil are mixed, and terrible events come upon all. Sometimes men do pass the boundary line that places them outside God's protective care. Then Satan uses his power upon them, and God may not step in. Job suffered greatly, and his friends tried to make him accept that his suffering was the result of sin and that his sin caused his great suffering. Job's friends judged him to be a great sinner. But the Lord was not pleased with them for their judgment of His faithful servant."—Adapted from Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 3, page 1140.

We need to be careful of how we deal with the whole question of suffering. Sure, in some cases it *seems* easier to understand the reasons for it. For example, someone smokes cigarettes and gets lung cancer. How much simpler could it be? But what about those who smoke all their lives and never get cancer? Is God punishing the one but not the other? In the end, like Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, we do not always know why suffering comes as it does. In a way, it almost does not matter if we know or not. What is important is what we do in answer to the suffering that we find. Here is where these three men were totally wrong.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What does God's just punishment teach us about how we can trust in the fairness of God?
- ② Job's three friends really did not understand all that was happening to Job in his suffering. In a way, is that not the case with us all? We do not understand fully the reasons for human suffering. So how should this understanding help us be more merciful to those who are suffering? How important is it really that we even know the true causes of someone's suffering?