

If God Is Watching, Why Doesn't He Act?

...yet God charges no one with wrong. Job 24.12

Job has suffered greatly—not just material loss & physical suffering, but the accusation of 3 people who care for him, but accuse him of great sin, sin which apparently only he knows the details. But in this half of Job's speech, he is turning a corner—he seems to be going on the offensive with them, and knocking down their main argument: that God is judging him because of his great sin.

A summary of what Job is saying to his friends in this chapter:

You say I'm suffering for my sin....that is why I am going through what I am—loss of possessions and wealth; sons & daughters; health, dignity, reputation. Yet, if God really does punish sin in the here-and-now, do you see it happening anywhere else? Why does he not set things right for the poor and oppressed? Why doesn't he intervene against the murderer, the thief, the adulterer? How is it that men can hide from him in the darkness? How is it we don't see days of judgment? Don't you know that God even seems to support the wicked—until the end, when they have no escape from him. Payday is coming for them, but not yet.

The Specifics:

What The Wicked Do: 2 - 4a, 9

They move the boundaries of someone's land to effectively steal it; they steal someone's flocks, and pasture them as their own; they steal the single donkey that the orphan has and take the ox of a widow, her only working capital, as the pledge for a loan. The poor are pushed aside from the road of life, taking what little they have. (9) The rich take a child to be a slave for payment of a debt owed by a deceased father and husband. They take a pledge for a debt that the poor can ill afford to give. They are keeping the poor poor—a permanent underclass

The Poor Who Are Abused: 4b - 12

They are reduced to hiding themselves from the general population, people in the shadows, eking out an existence as gleaners. They have nothing, effectively naked, exposed to the elements. They labor in the fields, in the olive groves and presses, in the vineyards and presses with no relief. The city hears the dying cry, the wounded soul begging for relief—and yet God does not get involved (12c).

As I think about this, I am reminded of the old English folk tale of Robin Hood who lived under the injustice of the Sheriff of Nottingham and Prince John while good King Richard was out of the country. The poor were severely oppressed, and forced into difficult circumstances—not unlike what Job describes here.

Perhaps you have heard of the street children of Brazilian cities, so numerous that the police simply shoot them like rats. Perhaps you are aware of the street children in Romania who are turned loose from the orphanages to fend for themselves on the streets, living in the sewers. This is not just an ancient problem, limited to pre-Mosaic law. It is a current problem in many parts of the world even today.

...And Yet God Does Not Charge the Wicked, 12—the repeated cry from v. 1. Nothing is done from on high. Who said that God punishes the wicked?

Another generalization (13) of the wicked: the rebel against the light of God's law, have no awareness of that law and thus do not walk in the way of righteousness. The wicked rebel against the most natural of God's laws, given to men in their consciences (Romans 1). Like the people of Noah's day (*Genesis 6*), the intent of their heart is only evil continually.

More specifics (14-17, 21): The murderer gets an early start on his day to kill the poor and needy. He continues the injustice in the night as a thief. The adulterer plies his craft at dusk, thinking no one will catch him in the act. They bore into households, split apart families, and know nothing of the light of God's law—the darkness of sin is their companion. (21) They do wrong to the woman who has no children, and give no help to the widow. They add to suffering, not relieve it.

Now Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, here is what you have been telling me (18-20): the wicked are on a mighty river, swiftly going downstream out of control. They don't really have any portion in the land—nothing is really theirs to claim, and what they have is cursed. No one works for them, even the heat of summer dries up the very water before they can get it, and death itself—Sheol—snatches them up. Their own mothers forget them, and the worms that devour their bodies in the grave find them sweet. No one thinks of them when they are gone—this is what *you* tell me happens to the wicked. You are telling me that God gives them their just due in this life, and that is why I am suffering—because I am a sinner like that.

What you credit God for doing, is just not getting done. Rather, just the opposite is happening. It appears that God prolongs the life of the wicked. If they despair of life, they actually get better. They are exalted—but only for a little while—for what God does is take them away—finish them off. Their end is no different from the heads of grain, cut off from the stalk, and crushed. But that is later—not now.

You know it to be true—prove me wrong if you can.

What Job has done is thrown the argument of his friends into disarray by the obvious facts of life as they are easily observed. The reality of wickedness in their world—indeed, in our world—is easily seen. Jesus makes such a point with his parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, **Luke 16.19-31**. The rich man cares nothing for the beggar at his gate—a beggar who would have been glad to eat what the rich man throws away. Street dogs provide the beggar with care—and yet the beggar dies—as does the rich man.

Death is the great equalizer, is it not? Equalizer in that rich and poor, master and slave, all die. And yet now justice is observed—the rich man had all that he wanted in the life of flesh and blood. Now the beggar, Lazarus, receives the good, while the rich experiences suffering.

What Job knows, even prior to the giving of the Law, is that God *does* deal with sin—not on our schedule, but on his. Not as we wish he would do it, but as he wishes. Divine judgment is not as his three friends think. God has a both a limit for an individual's, as well as a society's corruption in this life, and for ultimate judge in the next.

Prior to the great flood, God made the observation:

3Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years."

5The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. 6And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. 7So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Genesis 6.3, 5-7)

God has a limit on sin that cannot be breached. God told Abraham that his offspring would be in servitude for 400 years, until the wickedness of the Amorites reached that breaking point—and thus implying that they would be his instruments of judgment (Genesis 15.16).

Again to Abraham, God spoke of the limits of the sin of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, the judgment he would bring, and under what conditions he would relent (Genesis 18.22-33).

From the Genesis passage we conclude that their corruption was sexual—and of course it was.

Yet in *Ezekiel 16* we find that it was more than that, as it was for Israel and Judah:

As I live, declares the Lord GOD, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it. Samaria has not committed half your sins. You have committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed. Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous. (Ezekiel 16.48-52)

God has established a limit, beyond which a society cannot go. Judgment will come, as it did for the pre-Flood world, as it did for the Amorites, as it did for Sodom and her contemporaries, as it did for Israel and Judah. As it will for any, and all of our contemporary societies.

2 Peter 3 speaks directly to this very fact, lest we think that God has forgotten:

This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation." For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that

now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you (note that he is talking to believers here—believers need to repent as well. Judgement begins with the house of God.), not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. (2 Peter 3.1-10)

Judgment is not postponed indefinitely. It is coming. So what are we to do with this reality? Coming back to *Ezekiel 16*, God continues speaking to the people in the Babylonian captivity: *For thus says the LORD GOD: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant...*

Their sinfulness will not be overlooked forever. Payday has come for them, as it comes for all. Yet in the midst of this, there is good news for some: if you are in Christ, judgment has already come on the cross. In a parallel consideration, here is what God tells Ezekiel's audience: judgment is coming, but something else is going to happen:

“...yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and I give them to you as daughters, but not on account of the covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord GOD.” (Ezekiel 16:60-63)

For them, their covenant relationship results in their restoration as God himself atones for them. In like manner, for those in Christ, for those who are in the New Covenant by the blood of Christ, judgment is past, and restoration is coming.

So as believers, what are we to do? How are we to live as forgiven, New Covenant people? Hear again the words of Peter as he continues:

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Peter 3.11-13)

The believer is called to live differently from the fallen society of Job 24, of Sodom, of the Amorites, of Israel & Judah, of our current fallen societies.

What sort of people ought we to be? People who live lives of holiness and godliness, not merely withdrawing from society, but being salt and light within society. We do this, not to escape

judgment, but because we already have. This is how forgiven people live. Not just not abusing the poor, but helping them. Not just avoiding sins, but encouraging righteousness.

In the future chapters of Job, we will see that he provides some encouragement in this direction by his example. He did that because he was righteous.

Should we be any different, since Christ has given us his righteousness on our accounts?

Again I think about Robin Hood. What he did was maintain a sense of order and justice in the presence of injustice. He did so knowing that when King Richard returned from the crusades he would make all things right in the kingdom. The poor and oppressed would once again be able to live freely.

How much more should we, knowing that King Jesus is coming back to make all things right and new? He calls us to be salt and light in a world of oppressive darkness.