

Week 6: Why Do the Wicked Prosper?

THE BOOK OF JOB - "THOUGH HE SLAY ME"

Job 21, 24; Psalm 73

Introduction

Job's friends have all had their turn, monologuing on and on about how the wicked are cursed and do not prosper. They pretend to be speaking in general terms about the world but they are clearly directing their comments passive-aggressively at Job.

Their point? Job is wicked, because Job is not being blessed. Job gets their point, but decides to play along with their philosophical discussion.

What we get is a bit of a side-trip discussing whether or not God blesses the wicked or not. We already know what the friends say, but now we can see what Job says about this idea.

So we are going to look at that concept this morning. For a moment, this isn't really about Job but about the ideas underneath what Job's friends are saying.

Retribution Principle and Wisdom Literature

There is an idea that has been debated by Jewish scholars, Philosophers, and Rabbis for centuries. It is referred to as the "Retribution Principle".

I have pointed to it multiple times in Job. It is the idea that the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer.

It is a feature of ancient near east wisdom literature both in the Bible and outside the Bible. The book of Proverbs in our Old Testament is an example.

You can read Proverbs, and you might come away thinking that the Retribution Principle is true. But if you pay close attention, you will see that it cannot be true. At least not in the way it appears.

The best example I can think of with this is regarding parenting:

READ Proverbs 22:6 (ESV)

*6 Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

Yet the very first children, Cain and Abel, show that this cannot be a *law*. Cain and Abel are raised by the same parents. One had murder in his heart, the other was the victim of murder.

We can say that the normal pattern, and the right pattern, is that if you raise a child to love Jesus, then he or she will grow up to do that. But that is not always the case. Sometimes, the wrong thing happens. Sometimes, that child departs from how they were raised.

But it is frustratingly normal in the Church for a parent to be judged as a bad parent based on how their child turns out. If the child walks away from God, then the parents clearly didn't "raise them in the way they should go".

This is precisely the thinking of Job's friends.

Does the reverse work? Is being raised to love Jesus a pre-requisite for being a Christian? How many of you have a redemption story about how you were raised in the way that you should NOT go, yet Jesus saved you and put you on the right path?

We could look at more Proverbs, but let's move on to Job.

(Bonus points: check out **Proverbs 26:4-5**)

The Wicked Sometimes Prosper

READ Job 21:7–15 (ESV)

*7Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
8Their offspring are established in their presence, and their descendants before their eyes.
9Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them.
10Their bull breeds without fail; their cow calves and does not miscarry.
11They send out their little boys like a flock, and their children dance.
12They sing to the tambourine and the lyre and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.
13They spend their days in prosperity, and in peace they go down to Sheol.
14They say to God, 'Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of your ways.
15What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what profit do we get if we pray to him?'*

READ Job 24:21–25 (ESV)

*21They wrong the barren, childless woman, and do no good to the widow.
22Yet God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power; they rise up when they despair of life.
23He gives them security, and they are supported, and his eyes are upon their ways.
24They are exalted a little while, and then are gone; they are brought low and gathered up like all others; they are cut off like the heads of grain.
25If it is not so, who will prove me a liar and show that there is nothing in what I say?"*

It's actually rather hard to argue with Job here. Job doesn't have to refer to himself here, because there are plenty of examples in the world around him.

Lately, these verses have felt more real than ever.

I hear some of your stories, and I look at the news and this is what I see:

People that should protect, willfully open the door to predators.
People that should be honorable, do dishonorable things.
People that should be merciful, are vengeful.
People that should be fathers, abandon their children.
People that should speak for God, speak for Satan.

People that should unify, divide.
People that should execute justice, pacify the abuser.

The rich abuse the poor.
The strong abuse the weak.
The redeemed abuse the unredeemed.
Those who know the truth, exchange it for a lie.
Those who once worshipped God now worship things.

Pastors abandon the sheep.
Pastors abuse the sheep.
Pastors use the sheep for their own gain.
Pastors twist God's words for profit.
Pastors build their egos instead of building the Church.

If you don't also see these things, then you aren't paying attention.

Psalm 73

Psalm 73 deals with the same question, but fleshes the issue out a bit more.

This is a Psalm written by Asaph, a Levite worship leader assigned to that role by King David.

READ Psalm 73:1–3 (ESV)

*1 Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.
2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.
3 For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

Asaph makes the same observation as Job, and it almost causes him to lose his faith.

He writes a very similar speech about how the wicked prosper as Job does. (It's as if they wrote them side by side)

READ Psalm 73:12 (ESV)

12 Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

This is a Hebrew saying that means that the wicked are always in uninterrupted ease.

What saved Asaph from full despair at this observation?

READ Psalm 73:16–17 (ESV)

*16 But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task,
17 until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.*

Asaph comes to worship God, gains God's perspective on the wicked. God's perspective looks at all of time, not just a sample. God's perspective is also sovereign and all-knowing. He uses both the righteous and the unrighteous to accomplish His will.

The result of this new perspective for Asaph?

READ Psalm 73:18–24 (ESV)

18 Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.

19 How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!

20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

21 When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,

22 I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.

23 Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.

24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.

It may look like the wicked are prospering, but that prosperity is on a slippery slope. At any moment, God will tap them with His finger and they will fall into His judgment. This "ruin" for the wicked will be so great that their prospering will seem like a dream and this is the real world.

And it ends with one of the most comforting suffering prayers I know:

READ Psalm 73:25–26

25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Their Days are Numbered

When God stirs Himself against the wicked, looking proud and comfortable on that slippery slope, they will all fall.

That day is coming. You will see it.

God is a God of judgment. Judgment is not just wrath. Judgment is when God separates between good and bad, righteous and wicked, worthy and unworthy.

God, in His sovereign timing, with a totally free will, brings all things before Him and judges them. He will resurrect everyone, along with all that they have done.

Every lie told in secret, everything that people thought was left in the grave, will be pulled out before the throne of God. He will judge it all.

GOOD - BAD, RIGHTEOUS - WICKED, WORTHY - UNWORTHY

He will take the pile of bad, wicked, and unworthy and throw them all into hell, where such things go. And then He will look at the righteous, and say "show me your deeds".

All the good deeds you have done will seem dingy, incomplete, paltry, half-hearted. It will seem silly to offer such weak deeds to such a great God. But it is all you have, so you offer it.

And then Jesus will place in your hands all of His good deeds. Beginning with His taking on human flesh with all of its weakness, though He was God. The hard life He lived without complaint. His perfect obedience to His parents, His perfect service to others. His healing the sick, teaching the disciples and multitudes. His love for Judas.

Then His suffering on the cross, the greatest deed of any human.

All of His good deeds go into your hand. YOURS.

Suddenly, the terrifying judgment of God feels comforting, even welcoming.

All that has been wrong has been made right. Even you have been made right.

Conclusion

What then do we say about Job in these verses? Job is not wrong, but he is incomplete.

So, the Retribution Principle is right in the long term, but in the short term it does not always work.

The "long term" scale is eternity. The short term scale is your life.

We avoid losing our faith in the short term by dragging ourselves into God's perspective through worship.

Worship is not confined to music. Worship is most basically about Who or What has your attention. What is the meditation of your mind and heart? If it is the wickedness of the world, and the hardships of your life, and not Jesus then your hope will fade and your faith will weaken.

So we are going to worship with communion, and with song to close.

Luke 22:14–20 (ESV)

14 And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. 15 And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. 16 For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." 17 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. 18 For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

19 And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 20 And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

For Discussion

1- What is the "Retribution Principle"?

2- Why do we call this a "principle" and not a "law"? Consider Prov. 22:6 if you need an example..

Read **Job 21:7-15** together.

3- In what way is Job correct about the world here?

Read **Psalm 73:1-5, 12** together.

4- How do these statements parallel with Job 21?

Read **Psalm 73:16-26** together.

5- Why does Asaph (the writer of this Psalm) come to a different perspective on the wicked than when he started? (vs 16-17)

6- What does he say will eventually happen to the wicked? (vs 18-20)

7- When you become discouraged about the way the wicked seem to prosper in the world, what can you do about it?