

January 21, 2007  
Inconsistencies, Half-Truths, and Earnest Seekers  
Psalm 74:1-11; 18-23 / Job 21:1-34

Growing up in middle class America and being influenced in my teens and early twenties by expressions of evangelicalism that characterized the values of middle class America, I was consciously taught and subconsciously internalized many of the following widely accepted “generalisms”:

Anyone who works hard can get ahead / that only lazy people are poor / that dishonesty does not pay off / that if you do all the right things, things will go right for you. / That in the end good people always win out / that the system is fair and everyone has equal opportunity / that personal success is in direct proportion to personal effort / that anyone can make something out of themselves if they try hard enough / And that the person of faith and integrity will (or should) always have their needs met, and be spared of suffering.

Those were just a few of the “generalisms” I learned growing up in New England. And in some ways, with little exposure to anything outside my protective little middle class suburban New England bubble — I believed them — that is, until I started to look outside that protective little cultural bubble! (A process Job speaks of as “questioning those who have traveled” (v. 29))

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The **FIRST STEP** toward dismantling some of those ideas came when I went to college in the City of Boston, at a school that backed up to the projects, at a time when racial tensions over busing and desegregation were high. And I remember being in class, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the main building, when we heard a disturbance, everyone ran to the window, and saw a gang of teens beating a class-mate down on the street — the unfortunate victim of having done nothing other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Add to that the drugs, prostitution, developers buying up land and driving the poor people out, immoral people living in extravagant wealth, while honest hardworking people struggled to survive, and I soon came to see that city people did not hold to the same “generalisms” that suburban middle class people held to. In fact, many of those “generalisms” that seemed to hold TRUE in my small hometown suburban culture, did NOT hold true in the crowded city culture.

And admitting that some of the “generalisms” I was taught didn’t hold up elsewhere was a struggle! It’s hard to have your bubble burst! But it was also part of growing up and learning that life isn’t always as neat and tidy as we’d like to make it!

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The **SECOND STEP** in that dismantling process came when I was back-packing around Europe, all by myself, for 3 months, and on one occasion being roughed up at night on a train outside Lubec, Germany (near what was then the East German border) by the drunken members of a German soccer team who were obviously didn't like Americans.

And for the first time in my life I experienced what it was like to do nothing wrong, and have people want to hurt me (and I'm German)! I felt what it was like to be in the despised minority, and have people pre-judge me without even getting to know me, simply because of where I was from.

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The **THIRD STEP** in that dismantling process was going to the Dominican Republic months later, where I encountered people who worked harder and longer hours than most Americans I know, but are locked in a cycle of poverty they can't break out of no matter how hard they work!

There I learned that poverty often has nothing at all to do with laziness / that the system is often unfair / that equal opportunity is limited to certain nations, races, and even specific geographic locations within those certain nations / and that good people don't always win out in the end.

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The **FOURTH STEP** in that dismantling process took place in Honduras. Because there I learned that crime and corruption DO PAY — often very well (as is the case with the Honduran president who just happened to be in office during the Contra War and siphoned off millions of the millions that Regan poured into that country). He, his children and his grandchildren are now living in opulent luxury — thanks to Uncle Sam — and will for generations to come. Numerous mansions, a private helicopter, beach front properties, and on and on.

It was there I learned that justice goes to the highest bidder / that caste system structures still exist in the West / that most often you must have money to make money (the source of that money in many cases being laundered drug cartel money). I learned that you can do all the right things and still have everything go terribly wrong / and that some of the most successful people didn't get where they are by HARD WORK or VIRTUOUS EFFORT, but by exploiting the poor, bribing officials, swindling foreign governments and pilfering international relief monies – in 1999 being voted the most corrupt nation in Latin America!

You see, Job is right. Crime often does pay (people wouldn't do it if it didn't)! The wicked frequently DO live on and grow old increasing in power (v. 7) — I've seen it. They DO see their grandchildren established around them — educated in the best schools, and playing safely and free from fear behind high cement block walls topped with razor wire, protected by armed guards, served by maids, and driven here and there in luxury cars by their chauffeurs (vv. 8-9). It's true. They DO have great wealth and dance at opulent parties "making merry to the sound of the flute" as Job puts it in verse 12. They spend their years in prosperity and DO often go to the grave in peace (v. 13) — some rejecting God, others mocking God, and others even using their wicked gain to support God's work — driving to church every week in the vehicles they purchased with stolen relief money, or laundered drug cartel money! Some don't, I grant you that, but many do.

And Job, by the way he phrases verses 17-18, essentially admits that it is a sometimes yes, sometimes no, situation. He doesn't say the wicked ALWAYS live to a happy old age.

But he knows it happens enough that he can ask, "Yet how often IS the lamp of the wicked snuffed out? How often DOES calamity come upon them? How often ARE they swept away like chaff in a gale?" trusting that any honest person will know from observation that although they sometimes are, often they are not.

Because he's wise (and wise people are willing to peer outside their protective cultural bubbles to take an honest look at the world around them), he realizes that sometimes evil people are judged in this life, and sometimes they are not — though he does seem to imply that they escape judgment in this life more often than not — which he obviously feels (like many of us) is not fair and that God should do something about it! In fact, he actually quotes a cultural generalism of his day which is sometimes true, though he obviously feels it shouldn't ever be — the fact that sometimes, "God stores up a man's punishment for his sons" (v. 19).

"Let God repay the man himself," Job says belligerently, "so that he will know it. Let his own eyes see his destruction; let him drink of the wrath of the Almighty! For what does he care about the family he leaves behind when his allotted months come to an end." After all, Job would say, he's a wicked man and wicked men tend to think only of themselves — that's why they turn to wickedness!

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So what can we learn from all this? **FIRST** we can learn that truly wise people are very leery about holding to, or basing their lives upon unthinking half-truths, or simple "pat answers" to difficult questions — pat answers that ignore an enormous amount of evidence which proves such generalisms false.

They see that many issues are much more complex than we'd like to think; that the threads of many problems — both personal and social — are intertwined with the threads of many other problems! That few issues are totally isolated issues, but rather all tangled up with other issues — like fishing string that goes under the boat and gets all tangled up in someone else's line!

In fact, because "pat answers" and "cultural or religious generalisms" ignore or deny any evidence that would undermine them, Job can go on to call such head-in-the-sand generalisms "nonsense" and "falsehood" (v. 34). Which means J. I. Packer is right when he says, "A partial truth when it's presented as the whole truth becomes an untruth." Job says the same exact thing! Lopsided counsel, or counsel that focuses ONLY on the evidence it already agrees with, and ignores all the evidence which would challenge its credibility—is worth-less. It is nonsense and falsehood, says Job. And he's right.

The wisest counsel — the only counsel worth listening to comes from someone who has considered all the issues involved, looked at all the evidence that is valid and credible, and adjusted their opinions accordingly in light of it.

If you're on a jury, wrestling with the issues life and death, you don't want some judge to declare as inadmissible, evidence which would crack the case wide open, merely because it would cause you to adopt an opinion contrary to the one he or she wants you to hold!

NO! You want to make your decision based on ALL the evidence you can get your hands on, not just some of it, or a purposely slanted presentation of it!

The person earnestly seeking viable answers to the ultimate questions and complex issues of life will be turned off by simplistic pat answers that are not willing to consider justifiable evidence to the contrary — evidence which anyone with an inquisitive mind can see and struggles to find answers to.

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Which brings us to the **SECOND** thing we can learn. That being sheltered from trials and suffering by prosperity or by "having things go our way" often tends to lead to what I'll call the oblivious life — (which Job's friends are obviously living) — a life that either consciously or unconsciously lives oblivious to the difficulties, and hardships and struggles that others face. Oblivious to the real causes of their own prosperity (God's grace!), or the complex roots of their problems (which aren't always sin)!

You see, Job's friends believe they are blessed, have prospered and have been protected from harm or sickness because they trust in God, have lived an upright life, have believed the right things and done the right things. They say as much in verses 21-30 of the very next chapter. That was the conventional wisdom of their day, and because it was, Job may have believed it also at one time or another in his life. But whether he did before or not, it's obvious that he certainly doesn't any longer!

WHY? Because he now knows from EXPERIENCE—the personal experience of suffering the catastrophes that have befallen him, that one can trust in God, live an upright life, have believed all the right things, and done all the right things (as we'll see in chapter 31), and still have sickness, disaster, and harm befall them or their loved ones.

And can I say of Job's friends that only through the experience of suffering will their false cultural or religious generalisms or conventional wisdom be shattered. As long as they continue to prosper and everything continues to go their way, they can retain the false belief that all the blessings that have come their way are coming because they've done everything right. Why shouldn't they believe it? Nothing has happened to challenge or altar that false perception. Which means they will continue to hold to it unless or until something happens which forces them to reconsider or altar it — as was the case with Job.

It is unfortunate, but unless they were to have some catastrophe befall them, for no apparent reason, and in spite of the fact that they were doing just as they always had, with no particular moral lapses, they will never have to altar their erroneous assumptions. That's just the way people are. We tend to hold to conventional, cultural, or religious generalisms, unless or until something unexpected happens to challenge, contradict, or show the falsehood of such generalisms.

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Let me give you another false cultural or religious generalism that I had adopted which had to do with Palestinians. All my life I had come to believe that Palestinians were scary people. I watched the news, saw them carrying guns and demonstrating in the streets, heard of them hijacking planes and ships, and associated all of them with Yassar Arafat, the PLO, terrorism or Hezbolah — my perception being that they were all Muslim and all anti-Israel.

Then, I got to Honduras, only to discover that most of the Hondurans in my congregation were Palestinians! Dear, sweet, devout, hospitable, loving, prayerful, intelligent, generous people — Christian people — many of whom were avidly evangelical and not anti-Israel.

Most of the Bible Studies I held there in the last six years there were at their houses! I had inadvertently embraced a false perceptual generalism that crumbled quickly when I finally got to know some of them personally. In fact, when someone from the U.S. Embassy recommended me to do a kidnap negotiation for a Palestinian family in San Pedro, I essentially got to live with them, talk to them, pray with them, and eat at their table during the 10 harrowing days we had together negotiating the release of their dad (who, out of gratitude, later “adopted me into the family” as his 11<sup>th</sup> brother (he had ten other brothers))!

And that experience completely obliterated the false cultural or religious generalism I had gone to Honduras with. Under the worst of situations they were some of the most kind, warm, giving, sensitive, polite and hospitable people I’ve ever met —people I bonded to more than anyone else I knew there.

And I’m not saying ALL Palestinians are that way. Surely my previous caricature is true of some. But not all! In fact, it wasn’t true of ANY of the many I met and got to know – one in particular whose godly life and zeal for Christ puts mine to shame!

If you want to be wise, my friends, you need to be ready to have your perceptions challenged, and often, experience is the best teacher.

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Then **THIRD**, and **LAST**, Job teaches us that pat answers, half-truths and false generalisms tend to turn off earnest seekers after truth. Job shows us that. He has listened to the spiritual advice of his friends, but because it is so slanted, and lacking, and because he has shot holes in it with irrefutable evidence which they refuse to even consider or make adjustments for, he calls it “nonsense.”

He has no use for it — and he’s a believer! Imagine if he was an unbeliever earnestly seeking truth—yet bringing up facts which they refused to admit! He’d simply walk away from the faith before he ever embraced it, thinking that people who won’t even admit reality, and refuse to at least take a stab at answering his questions can’t have a very viable faith.

You see, giving pat answers to complex questions (which Christians in the past have been notorious for doing) often does that — it turns many earnest seekers away from the faith. Some of you may remember, many years ago, when it was popular to have bumper stickers or posters that had a face of Jesus smiling and simply said “Jesus is the answer.”

And not long after it became popular I heard one person ask in all earnestness, "If Jesus is the answer then what's the question? Is Jesus the answer to every problem? And if He is, why doesn't it seem like it works in the lives of so many Christians?"

I mean catch phrases are quaint, but they oversimplify things. Like the phrase "Just Say No!" It can't resolve the drug problem, because there are so many other factors involved in drug abuse besides simply saying no — like boredom / low self-esteem / unresolved anger / lack of parental guidelines and communication / broken families / absentee dads or moms / curiosity / our innate sinfulness / rebellion / lack of meaning and purpose in life / the desire to escape emotional pain or hurtful realities for just a while / and so forth and so on! Telling people to "Just Say No" may work with kids who already have an inkling to say no anyway, and just need a little support, but it doesn't do much to persuade the person wrestling with all those other things.

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Job probably feels the same way. His friends keep telling him over and over again, "Just Do This," or "Just Do That." "It's all up to you Job. You control whether you will continue to suffer or not." That's what they're essentially saying. Yet as anyone who has gone through intense suffering knows, if it were really that easy, everyone would merely do what they needed to do and be done with it! (As my kids used to say, "Duhhha!")

But as Job knows, he has no control over his suffering whatsoever. He did nothing to bring it on himself (other than be the most righteous and blameless person on earth!), and thus he can't do anything to make it go away (other than begin sinning since Satan's purpose in afflicting him was to get him to sin by cursing God)—and Job, being a righteous man will not sin in order to stop his suffering!

So he's between a rock and a hard place. He won't sin to stop his suffering, and he CAN'T repent for something he didn't do!! He can't take back sinful thoughts he didn't have, or sinful words he never spoke! His suffering came upon him apart from anything he'd done, so repenting WILL NOT make it go away, since sinning wasn't what brought it on in the first place!!!!

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Now you can see why he would call their advice "nonsense." It WAS little more than the overly simplistic conventional wisdom of the day. They were merely spouting off the cultural and religious generalisms of the day, and thus most everyone would have agreed with it, and not Job.

But this is the whole point of Job's argument. The religious generalisms of his friends do not apply in his case, nor do they apply in the cases of all those wicked people who do go through this life happy and content, living in luxury off the riches they've swindled or stolen from others! And it is such exceptions to the rule which force Job to reject their generalisms —something I've found to be true of most seekers after truth. Like Job, they've either been, or seen, exceptions to the conventional religious wisdom of the day and so they are looking for better or more comprehensive answers to their questions.

They know generalisms are too simplistic, and thus they reject them, and begin looking for answers that are more capable of addressing the issues raised by what they've seen. "Seekers" are "seekers" precisely because they've seen evidence that refutes the religious generalisms / they've seen the nonsense of overly simplistic and unthinking pat answers / and they've seen the falsehood of presenting partial truths as the whole truth. And thus, feeling we can't possibly know what we're talking about if generalisms are the best we can do, they turn elsewhere to find the answers to their questions, or to find direction in their spiritual search.

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And I know (all too well!) that there are some questions we will NEVER be able to give an adequate answer for this side of heaven. Our fallen minds probably couldn't grasp it even if God spelled it out for us — plus they're too finite to grasp His infinite wisdom even if they weren't fallen!!

After all, Job NEVER REALLY DOES get the answer he's looking for. The book ends by merely stating restating what Job says in chapter 23, verse 13 — "God is sovereign, He does whatever He pleases, and no one can stop Him." In many ways we must simply trust that God knows, and does what is right, and be content with that.

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Which means that to the many seekers out there, who have, praise God, and should, reject the conventional religious wisdom of the day, our response should be — to let them ask their questions, and voice their concerns, and express their doubts, and share why they feel the simplistic generalisms just don't cut it. We should WANT them to do that!

Where we are able we should seek to give answers to their questions — good comprehensive ones! But we should also be humble enough to admit we could never possibly have an answer to all their questions, and merely point them to the One who could — should He so desire. We should honestly admit our limitations and lovingly direct them to the One who is "The Way, the Truth, and the Life," and let them wrestle with God, like Job does.

There's no shame in that, my friends. It's merely part of being honest, and thus part of being godly. Seekers are probably more turned off by pat answers than an honest, "I don't really know."

That's the mistake Job's friends make — they DO try to give Job pat answers for why he's suffering as he is, and how to end it — *when the best response would have been to say:*

"We simply don't know Job, why God has allowed all this suffering come upon you. We can make some guesses, Job. Scripture does give us some clues. But in reality, Job, God alone knows why He has chosen to let this suffering come upon you. So Job, let's turn to Him in prayer. Let's assume that what you're telling us about yourself is true, and simply ask Him to have mercy. Let's admit we don't have all the answers and simply lift you up in prayer to the One who does."

THAT would have been the wisest course of action, for a person wrestling with the question "Why do the righteous suffer?"

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In fact, that's what I'd like to do now — lift up those of you who are suffering in prayer to the only one who knows and understands — so let's pray:

"Lord, You and You alone know why the righteous suffer. Why it is that when we're holding the course, and doing everything the same as we always have, some unexpected illness, or disaster seemingly drops out of the sky from nowhere, causing us to scramble for answers amid all the pain and disarray.

Help us Lord, because we don't understand. It may be sin, but as we've seen from Job, it may have nothing to do with any particular sin at all — You alone know. Help that to be enough for us.

We don't want to spend our days in endless or needless speculation — distracting us from our service to You and filling our hours with unnecessary questions of why, what's to blame, who's to blame, what did I do to offend you, have I upset you... Lord, they could go on and on and on ad infinitum...

No, Lord, we don't want to consume our precious hours with needless speculation. So Lord, please I pray, give peace to the unsettled heart, give hope in the midst of the trial, give to each troubled soul a sense of your Spirit's presence in the midst of their trouble, for just to know You are with us in the fray, or experience the sense of Your presence in our struggle, so fills our hearts with peace, that we can face anything just knowing You are with us.

Do this Father, I pray, by the comforting and effectual influences of Your Holy Spirit, for those who trust in Your Son Jesus Christ—to the praise of Your glorious grace. Amen.