

July 16, 2006

Job and the Relentless Pressure to Repent for Something We Didn't Do!

Isaiah 64:1-12 / John 9:1-7 / Job 11:13 - 12:6

When I was pastoring my first church in Massachusetts, I had one grandmother who started coming to church with her grandson who was about 10 years old. She was first generation Portuguese, her grandson third generation—and in that area that usually meant devout Catholic.

I didn't get a chance to talk to them that first Sunday, but when they came back the second week I did pull them aside and ask them where they were from, and what had brought them to our church. This is what she told me:

Her grandson went to confession regularly at their local parish. But one day as he sat in the confessional, not being able to think of anything sinful that he had done that day, he told the priest, "I can't think of anything." The priest responded, "Surely you've done something wrong that you can confess." "No," said the boy, "I can't think of anything."

"You have to have done something wrong," said the priest. But the boy (like Job) held to his innocence, until finally, in a somewhat exasperated tone of voice, the priest said to him, "Well then, just make something up!" "That would be a lie," said the boy. And back and forth they went until the boy finally gave in and did make something up, confessed it, and left. "That's why we're here," said the grand-mother. "A child shouldn't be taught to lie, just to have something to confess."

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When I read this passage I couldn't help but think that Job felt somewhat like that little boy — pressured to confess a sin he HADN'T committed! In fact, you'll notice that's the same thing all Job's friends do:

*"They keep telling him he has to have done something really wrong, or committed some horrible sin to bring all this suffering upon himself, repent for it, and all his troubles will all go away."*

That's what they essentially say, over and over and over again! They say it in different ways, and each one gives it a different slant, but it always comes back to the same relentless theme: "You did something wrong Job, admit it, repent for it, and God will forgive you and remove this harsh disciplinary punishment from you."

Now, what's the new slant Zophar adds into the mix? Simply this—whereas both Eliphaz and Bildad implied that it was something Job had done in the past that brought all his suffering upon him, Zophar is a bit more brash and presumptuous, and suggests that it's not merely something Job had done which brought his suffering upon him (as he clearly asserts in verse 6), but he also goes on to assert in verse 14, it is something Job is still secretly doing, clinging to, or refusing to let go of.

There in verse 14 he says:

*"If you put away the SIN THAT IS IN YOUR HAND, and ALLOW NO EVIL TO DWELL IN YOUR TENT (and he means the sin that is in your hand now, or the evil that is in your tent RIGHT NOW AS I SPEAK) then you will lift up your face without shame and stand firm without fear."*

In other words, Zophar is accusing Job of committing some secret, ongoing sin which he stubbornly refuses to admit, or repent for! The expression "put away the sin in your hand," is Zophar's way of saying to Job, "let go of the sin you're clinging to; the sin you're even now refusing to let go of." And the expression "allow no evil to dwell in your tent," is Zophar's way of saying that the sin Job is clinging to is like a guest that Job has invited into his tent and refuses to send away.

Now "tent," here, could refer to Job's "house." Or it could be an symbolic expression for the human body, as both Paul and Peter use it in the N.T. In II Corinthians 5:1, Paul, speaking of our bodies wasting away due to age or illness, says, "Now we know that if this earthly tent in which we live is destroyed..." Or again in verse 4, "For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened..." And in II Peter 1:13 Peter writes, "I think it right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know I will soon lay it aside..."

Thus Zophar seems to believe that Job knows full well exactly what sin has brought his suffering upon him, because he's still metaphorically holding onto it with his hand, or allowing it to dwell in the tent that is his body. He knows exactly what his sin is, but he loves it so much, that he'd rather endure the immense pain he's suffering, than let go of it.

Or to use his other imagery, Job has consciously opened the door of his heart to it, welcomed it in, or brought it into his "tent." And he has become so fond of his guest that he can't bear to say goodbye to it, kick it out, or ask it to leave, even if it means he must suffer unspeakable pain for his refusal to do so. That's Zophar's apparent "take" on the situation.

**AND YOU KNOW WHAT?** With many people his assessment would be “right on the mark!” Because that IS how sin works in the lives of so many, many people. Sin and temptation do come knocking. They stand at the door of your heart and knock, pleading with you, and imploring you to let them in.

Not threatening to do you harm, but offering to be helpful! Offering to meet some unmet need in you, or for you. That’s what sin does. It says:

*“I’ll give you pleasure... I’ll make you wise... I’ll help you get rich.... I’ll make you successful... I’ll satisfy your cravings... I’ll make you feel good about yourself... I’ll help you get back at that person who hurt you... I’ll bring you fulfillment and make you happy... I’ll make people notice and admire and look up to you... No one will ever walk all over you again... You’ll have power and influence if you just let me into your heart.”*

You see, SIN knows EXACTLY how to tailor its appeal to each individual, so as to make it the most enticing, tempting, and irresistible. And because it does, we often open the door of our heart to it, and welcome it in, only to discover too late that once we let it in, it’s HARD to get it to leave! It’s hard to even want to get it to leave!

Because even though sin does NOT come through with all that it promises, it DOES come through with some of what it promises!

Yet, it also brings with it things we never bargained for! Which means entertaining sin is sort of like being on your computer, surfing the web, clicking on that icon, and opening up that website that promised you would win (or had won) some great prize, only to discover hours later (as your computer begins to crash!) that the site you clicked on was infected with a virus that is now spreading throughout every part of your computer, and your powerless to stop it!

Or again, sin is like a smiling salesperson who comes to your door – a pretty, or handsome, well-dressed salesperson. At first you’re hesitant to let them in, but they persist, and make their product sound so good, and after all, they do seem so nice. So you offer to let them come into your home for just for a moment, not really planning to buy anything, only to watch them, after you let them in, walk right past you, proceed to the wall, and like a ghost, become absorbed into it, and then spread into every wall in the house. How do you remove such a guest?

You see, that IS what sin is like! Once welcomed, it attaches itself to us like superglue — to everything in the house (or tent) we call ourselves.

And once it does, it's HARD to get rid of! Better yet, as the Bible teaches, in our own power, and by our own efforts, it is impossible to get rid of! Not the outward manifestations of that sin. We can often control those. Many a convert to Christianity has immediately, upon their conversion, stopped stealing, or swearing, or using drugs. Almost overnight! But those same people often confess that they continued to fight the inner DESIRE to steal, or swear, or use drugs for years and years to come.

In fact, after fighting and losing for quite some time, some have even been able to rationalize that it's ok to retain, entertain, or hold on to those invisible aspects of sin, because after all, no one can see those kind of sins!

No one can see a person's desires, or thoughts. No one can "see" the urge to get high, or the temptation to steal. No one can see unforgiveness, or judgmental thoughts, or inner prejudices. They're there—"in our hand," or "dwelling in our tent" (as Zophar puts it), but they're invisible. And thus we often permit them to stay simply because they meet some perceived felt need, and no one can see them.

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That is what Zophar seems to be accusing Job of doing — secretly clinging to some inner, invisible sin. He knows Job isn't sinning outwardly. He's been sitting there with Job around the clock—24/7 for quite some time now—so he knows Job hasn't sworn, or stolen, or lied, or cheated someone, or gossiped, or been sexually promiscuous, or gotten drunk, or anything like that!

Yet Zophar knows enough about sin to know that the vast majority of sin is NOT visible! He knows that "visible sins"— (the ones we actually see people commit outwardly) — are merely the small few that slip by when our guard is down!

They're the ones that slip out during a moment of weakness! He knows (like we do) that for every VISIBLE sin a person commits, there are hundreds of INVISIBLE sins they've committed that no one has seen!

Things they thought, but didn't say. / Things they felt, but managed to keep bottled up inside. / Things they wanted to do, but didn't do (and wanting to sin, is sin, by the way, even if we don't act upon it!) One sins by lusting, even if they don't sleep around. / By coveting, even if they don't steal. / By being inwardly defiant, even though they may be outwardly compliant. Even by doing all the right things, but doing them for all the wrong reasons.

(Is. 64:6)

In that sense Zophar does wisely understand that sin encompasses FAR MORE than mere outward transgression. And therefore he assumes that since Job hasn't been sinning outwardly, God must be punishing him for some inward, invisible type of sin!

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And with that slightly different twist in place, Zophar then reverts to the party line—Job needs only confess what that invisible sin is, and repent of it, and God will relent, remove his affliction, and Job will once again be in His favor. His troubles will all go away, and Job will recall them “only as waters of a river that have gone by” (v. 16). Life for Job will become brighter than noonday; the darkness he's experiencing will become like morning. He will be secure and hopeful and will rest in safety. He will lie down with no one to make him afraid, and many will court his favor (vv. 17-19).

In other words, if Job will just devote his heart to the LORD (which Zophar implies Job hasn't done); and stretch out his hands to God in prayer, and let go of the sin that he clings to, and allow no evil to dwell in his tent (either his home or his heart) — then he will have hope, and everything in his life will go wonderful, and be bright and rosy! He'll have nothing to fear, be safe from all ills, and everyone will want to be his friend! Follow my advice, suggests Zophar, and all these things will be yours.

Yet we must ask ourselves if that can possibly be true. Does following such advice produce hope, liberate one from all fear, and allow us to rest assured that nothing will ever happen to us? Job himself will go on next week to tell us it does NOT. In chapter 12, verses 1-6 he will essentially tell us he did all those things, and far from being protected from suffering, and lying down with nothing to fear, or having everyone want to “court his favor,” he's instead become “a laughingstock to everyone who knows him—even though he's righteous and blameless.” (v. 12:4)

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That's my **FIRST** point. That following Zophar's advice does NOT lead to hope, but despair! Not liberation from fear, but more fear! Not rest of soul, but ceaseless anxiety and incessant worry!

Let me put it to you this way. What would be your reaction if I were to say to you—(Bruce, or Bill, or Mary...or any of you)—

*“If you'll just commit yourself to Christ unreservedly (holding nothing back) and stretch out your hands to him in prayer; if you'll just put away the sin your clinging to, and let no evil (or sin) dwell in you (or in your household), then all your troubles will go away; your life will be brighter than noonday; you'll be secure in hope, and have peace and rest inside. You'll be able to relax, fear no one and nothing, and numerous people will want to be your friend.”*

At first it sounds quite good, doesn't it?! It has an appealing tone to it, because who wouldn't want a wonderful life with no more trials or troubles, a bright and happy life, a peaceful and relaxed countenance, freedom from all fear, and widespread influence and popularity where many are clamoring to get on your good side?

When the emphasis is laid on the benefits to be reaped,  
it does indeed sound very appealing!

But when you begin to think about the CONDITIONS — and examine what you must do to secure and hold on to all those wonderful benefits, then you come to see that far from making life bright, and happy, and trouble-free, it would actually make you a nervous wreck, bind you up in side, lessen hope, increase despair, and make you afraid of doing nearly anything!!!

WHY? Because all the blessings are offered CONDITIONALLY, and the conditions for receiving them are extremely (even unrealistically) high!

You see, what Zophar is doing is preaching law, and law, far from giving hope, inevitably drives one to despair! Because though it sounds good initially, the person soon discovers they CAN'T fulfill all the necessary stipulations.

Who here can let go of all the sin they cling to and allow no evil to dwell in them? Who here harbors no anger, resentment or unforgiveness toward others? / Who here never covets, or envies; is neither prejudiced, nor ever judgmental, and never does right things for the wrong reasons? / Who here never thinks sinful thoughts, or entertains sinful feelings, or merely contemplates (without doing) sinful things — remembering that merely WANTING to do sinful things IS SIN, even if we don't do them? Anybody qualify?

You see, when we look closely at the CONDITIONS we must fulfill in order to receive the blessings Zophar promises, then we quickly realize that as good and appealing as it sounded at first, it's NOT good news at all! Rather (as all honest law-keepers soon discover once they try to meet the conditions), conditional grace leads to frustration, and fear and anxiety, because they realize they don't possess the power to meet the conditions!

Law tells us what we must do, but it gives us no power to carry it out. And because it leaves us powerless to do the things we must, it breeds futility, diminishes hope, and gives rise to both fear and anxiety — *because we soon realize we can NEVER fulfill the conditions necessary to SECURE or RETAIN such blessings!*

Yet, Zophar suggests Job CAN and MUST do all those things if God is to bless him. And he's not alone. Some Christian groups who believe in "perfectionism" teach the same thing, often driving their people to despair, or into doing what many Christians down through the ages have done—limit the concept of sin to outward transgression—because those are more manageable! It's easier to stop stealing, than it is to stop coveting. It's easier to stop sleeping around, than it is to stop lusting. It's easier to stop doing things outwardly, than it is to stop thinking about them, or wanting to do them inwardly. Yet Zophar tells Job he can, when he can't, merely increasing Job's frustration, as we'll see next week.

Which brings us to our SECOND and LAST point. If following Zophar's advice DOES NOT bring the blessed benefits he promises, then what does? What's the ONLY thing that truly gives one hope, alleviates fear, and imparts peace, rest, and joy to the soul? It is the knowledge and acceptance of God's acceptance of you! An acceptance purchased for you by Christ, offered to you in the Gospel, and received by you on the basis of nothing other than simple trust or faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone.

And to convey what I mean, I'd simply like to tell you a story—a true story about a man named John Wesley—the founder of the Methodist Church—who was converted to Christ on May 24, 1738, at the age of 33 years old. Because his spiritual journey like that of so many raised in churches. So maybe you can listen as I read and see where you are in this journey.

John was one of 19 children born to Samuel Wesley, an Anglican priest in the Church of England, and Susanna his wife. She home-schooled the children, not only in reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also Latin, Greek, history, literature and Christianity. Each night she would set aside one hour to talk to one of her children about his or her spiritual development.

Yet despite all his years of religious instruction, John went off to college religious, but NOT a Christian. One of the reasons was that, "I was strictly educated and carefully instructed until I was about 10 years old, that, I could only be saved 'by universal obedience and keeping all the commandments of God."

By the time he was 17 years old, he had paired it down significantly: "I then hoped to be saved, 1.) by not being as bad as other people; 2.) by having a kindly interest in religion; 3.) by reading the Bible, going to church, and saying my prayers."

By his mid-twenties he began to understand that, “true religion was seated in the heart, and that God’s law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and actions, and began to aim at, and pray for inward holiness, watching against all sin, whether in word or deed, and setting aside 1 to 2 hours a day for religious study and prayer.” As a result of *“doing so much, and living so good a life,”* he says, *“I doubted not that I was a good Christian.”*

Soon afterward he would read *“Christian Perfection,”* by William Law, and as a result, be convicted as never before that he had to obey ALL the Law of God:

*“By my continued endeavor to keep His whole law, inward and outward, to the utmost of my power, wrote Wesley, I was persuaded that I would be accepted of God, and that I was then in a state of salvation. I began visiting the prisons, assisting the poor and sick, and doing what other good I could. I omitted no occasion of doing good... Yet after years of continuing in this course, and coming close to death, I found that all this gave me no comfort, nor any assurance of acceptance with God.... Trusting in my own works and my own righteousness I dragged on heavily, finding no comfort or help therein.... Being ignorant of the righteousness of Christ, which, by a living faith in Him, brings salvation to everyone that believes, I sought to establish my own righteousness, and so labored in the fire all my days... In this vile, abject, state of bondage to sin I was indeed fighting continually, but not conquering. I was under Law and not under grace. I had only faith in God, but not faith in, or through Christ.”*

You see, Wesley was doing exactly what Zophar suggests! He had moved beyond merely being concerned with outward sins, and good deeds, and was trying to be totally devoted, strive for inward cleanness, let go of all sin, and make sure no evil dwelt in his heart or tent – yet he was miserable! Because he was still trying to do it in his own strength, and by his own efforts.

Then, by the grace of God he met a man named Peter Bohler (a Moravian pastor) who shared with him the Gospel truth that he must, “absolutely renounce all dependence, either in whole or in part, upon his own works or righteousness, and he must place his full reliance upon the blood of Christ shed for him, trusting in Christ alone as his sole justification, sanctification and redemption.”

At first Wesley fought such an idea. “That,” he says, “is what the Presbyterians believed!” — a group whom he had long been taught to “construe away” or ignore!

Then after much struggle, he writes, *“I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before 9, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”*

What had Luther written? Simply this (and hopefully it will warm your heart as well): *“Faith is a divine work in us. It changes us and makes us to be born anew of God; it kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart, and spirit, and mind, and powers, and it brings with it the Holy Ghost.... Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times. This confidence in God’s grace, and knowledge of it, makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and all His creatures...”*

*“Although I sin,”* Luther wrote elsewhere, *“I don’t despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life. In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, and no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine, and in my own righteousness, but I have another righteousness.... which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death, but is eternal righteousness and eternal life—my eternal righteousness and eternal life.”* *“Whoever it is that is assuredly persuaded that Christ is his righteousness, does not only cheerfully and gladly work well in his vocation... but submits to all manner of burdens and dangers in this present life... knowing that his obedience pleases God.”*

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Can I ask you what you trust in for your salvation? What gives you hope of divine favor? Zophar says it’s your own renewed efforts at ridding yourself of sin. Is that what you believe? Do you (like Zophar and Wesley for the first 33 years) trust in your own religious efforts at cleaning yourself up?

Or do you trust what the Gospel says? That we must “absolutely renounce all dependence, either in whole or in part, upon our own works or righteousness, and place our full reliance upon the blood of Christ shed to atone for your sins, and trust in Christ alone as our sole justification, sanctification and redemption.”

Like Zophar, some groups teach that, "God will only accept and save you if you clean up your life, and strive for sinless perfection."

The Gospel (on the other hand) tells us that God will count the spotlessly clean and sinless perfection of Jesus as ours, and accept us on the basis of that, even though we will never rid ourselves of all sin, nor ever achieve sinless perfection.

*His favor is a GIFT purchased for you by CHRIST, and it can be yours merely by looking to Christ in FAITH—and trusting in Him alone for your salvation.*