

July 9, 2006

True Wisdom—Holding Two Seemingly Contradictory Truths in Tension

Matthew 11:25-30 / Luke 22:20-23 / Job 11:1-12

Today we get to meet the third of Job's three friends. We get to meet Zophar the Naamathite. He has sat there quietly for quite some time, listening to the interaction between Job and Eliphaz, and then Job and Bildad, and then Job spouting off again! And during that whole time, he didn't say anything! But today his willingness to remain silent comes to an abrupt end!

For in today's passage he speaks up, and in doing so, he let's Job have it! In fact, you can almost picture the scene from verses 2-3. There Zophar says:

*"Are all these words to go unanswered? Is this talker to be vindicated?" And as he says it you can just see him looking at Eliphaz and Bildad, as if to say to them: "Do you hear what he just said? Are you going to let him get away with that?"*

And then, having spoken his piece to them, he turns in verse 3, and directs his comments at Job and says, "Will your idle talk reduce men to silence? Will no one rebuke you when you mock? (and he means, "when you mock God?")

And in light of the subsequent dialogue what's the obvious answer to his question?

*"Not if I have anything to say about it!! These other guys may let you get away with saying things like that, but don't expect me to! There's no way I'm going to let you get away with talking to, or about God, like that!"*

So we see that the reason Zophar finally opens his mouth is because he is obviously upset. He can't believe the words he's heard coming out of Job's mouth! Yet unlike Eliphaz (who is a bit more diplomatic when he corrects Job) Zophar holds nothing back! In fact, though he spouts off about wisdom, and what true wisdom correctly consists of, he, like Bildad, goes on to display his own lack of wisdom when it comes to interpersonal or relational skills.

For instead of merely limiting his rebuke to the issue of what Job says (as any truly wise and respectful person would do), he very unwisely goes on to insult, and belittle Job for saying it—adding a mean and unnecessary put down into the mix.

That's why one commentator can say,

*"Eliphaz was the grander of the three—grander in the volume of his intellect and more secure in his wisdom. Bildad is a more stand-for-no-nonsense type person, and Zophar is a noticeably mean-minded (or mean-spirited) type person."*

Mike Mason agrees:

“Zophar,” he says, “is the least sophisticated of the three, the one who wastes the least breath on tact and diplomacy.”

And in his Commentary on Job, Norman Habel points out why people feel that way about Zophar where concerning verse 12 he points out that the “witless man” (or in Hebrew, the “hollow” or “empty-headed man”) is actually an underhanded reference to Job!

*“The metamorphosis,” he says, “of an addle-brained fool like Job into a wise man would be as impossible as the birth of a human to a wild ass... Job, according to Zophar, is indeed a wild ass, and as such will never have the intelligence of a human being.”*

It’s an insult that’s not only unnecessary, it’s mean-spirited and tactless. I mean one might understand someone saying a pejorative thing like that about their worst enemy! But Zophar says it about Job, who is supposedly his good friend!

It would be like having one of your best friends say to YOU (after you honestly shared with them how it made you feel to suffer unspeakable emotional and physical agony for an extended period of time): “You know, it would be more plausible for a donkey to give birth to a human baby, than it would be for a witless, empty-headed, lame-brained fool like you to become wise.” How would that strike you?!

---

You see, Zophar is like some extremely intelligent people I’ve met: They’re smart, and articulate, but relationally inept, and lacking in social skills. They have a high Intellectual I.O., but a low Emotional I.Q. And Zophar displays his for all to see, because he just can’t keep himself from belittling those he disagrees with! He can’t simply address the issue at hand! He has to attack and insult and belittle the person as well.

He can’t disagree without getting nasty! Thereby showing one of the differences between being “smart,” and being “wise.”

Being “smart” is having correct knowledge (and usually a great breadth and depth of it). Being wise (on the other hand) is not only having correct knowledge, combined with knowing how to use that knowledge appropriately, convey it tactfully, and apply it both skillfully and respectfully, with keen insight, good judgment, and a comprehensive understanding of both the intellectual and relational issues involved.

Zophar is smart. And much of what he says is true (as Job will go on to acknowledge when he responds in chapter 12, verse 3). But he's not the type of person you'd want to argue with, unless you liked being insulted! He's not the type of person who knows how to win friends and influence people!

---

Yet, despite his more obvious personality flaws, and lack of emotional intelligence or relational wisdom, there is one thing he says that is very wise and insightful and deserves our further attention. Something I wish every Christian would contemplate and seek to understand. It comes to us in verse 5 where Zophar says this:

*"Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that He would open His lips against you and disclose the secrets of wisdom, for true wisdom has two sides."*

Now in the context, that could have two possible meanings—and please listen carefully! For if we as Christians (or merely as people in any relational context) could comprehend this truth from the start, it would do away with much of the needless arguing, and bickering, relational dissension, and division in the Body of Christ.

This truth, if accepted and applied to the issues of both biblical doctrine and relational disagreements (even political disagreements) would bring about a much needed, and long-yearned for unity and working relationship among individual believers, family members, friends, spouses, political parties and even entire Christian denominations!

And I don't want to overstate the case, or make it sound like it's the cure all that would resolve all relational problems! It won't. People are, after all, people! And some people actually thrive on disagreement. They like dissension! They find peace and unity boring! They need some foe to oppose, or enemy to defeat, or threat to fend off.

So if there isn't one they will seek hard to find one—often making one out of someone who isn't, or at least wouldn't be if they would just take the time and to try to understand the other person's position, rather than attack the other person's position.

Because often (as I hope to point out using Zophar's insight) it's not a matter of one person being totally right and the other person being totally wrong. But rather, it's a matter of both people being partially right, and yet also partially wrong, so long as they will not acknowledge the truth of the other person's position!

So, let's take a look at Zophar's statement that "true wisdom has two sides to it," and let's see what it might mean, and how it can help alleviate (not do away with, but alleviate) much needless division, and unnecessary animosity between individual Christians, entire denominations, spouses, families, political parties and even nations.

---

So what's the **FIRST** way in which Zophar might mean, "true wisdom has two sides to it?" Simply this: When we look at the verse in its context, it could mean that true wisdom has both a hidden, mysterious, and undiscernable side to it, as well as a plain, understandable and perfectly clear to all side to it.

In this sense it would be similar to the statement of Moses in Deuteronomy 29:29, where he says, after giving various stipulations of the Law:

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."

The "secret things" that belong to God are the things beyond man's ability to grasp or know. They are the things God has hidden from us, either because our finite minds could not comprehend them, or because knowing them would somehow be harmful for us, or counterproductive to the plans and purposes God has for His people.

---

The FUTURE, for instance, is one example. It would not be good for sinners to know the exact day they would die, or the exact date when Christ will return. In fact, I believe that's why God forbid John, in Revelation 10:4, from writing down what he had seen. "Do not write it down," God said.

**WHY?** Because knowing that piece of information about the future would have given us information that would have been harmful to us, or God's purposes for us. Being sinners you KNOW what people would do if they were privy to such information! They would plan to live like "sin incarnate" until their very last day, and then, on their death bed, repent and trust Christ just before they died!

---

In fact, John Wesley was probably gave the best answer in relation to this need to know when he would die or when Christ would return. When asked, what he would CHANGE, or WHAT HE WOULD DO DIFFERENTLY if he knew Christ were coming back in 7 days? He responded by saying that HE WOULD CHANGE NOTHING, or DO NOTHING DIFFERENTLY, for he felt that he was already doing exactly what God wanted him to do.

And I say this to you: If you would do something differently, its probably a sign that you are consciously resisting something you feel God's calling you to do, or walking outside the will of God for your life. Because in this sense Wesley is right: It shouldn't take the threat of doomsday a week, month or few years away to get God's people to do what He commands, or wants them to do regardless! Right?!

---

Job's problem was that he wanted an explicit answer for why all this was happening to him. He wanted God to tell him exactly why he was suffering as he was. But as many of us know, and many others will discover, God usually chooses not to fill us in. It is sufficient for us to know He is sovereign, and that if He has permitted it, there is a good and beneficial reason for it.

As J. I. Packer states,

*"Suffering is God's chisel to sculpt us into the likeness of Christ. When in God's providence, believers are exposed to the pressures of being isolated, opposed, tempted, humbled, disappointed, and hurt, the divine purpose is that these things should further our transformation into the likeness of our Savior... God's plan for turning us out Jesus-like involves putting us through many disciplinary experiences that are mysterious and ungratifying to us at the time... If the hunk of stone out of which Michelangelo was hammering and chiseling his David (statue) could have spoken, it would no doubt have said it did not know what shape it was going to end up. It only knew that what was currently happening was painful. And to be realistic, that is often all we are able to say when God is using griefs and pains to sculpt our souls. Perhaps we never become at all aware, and certainly we never become fully aware, of how these experiences mature and refine and at the deepest level, integrate us for our future destiny as we humbly accept and endure them... As for what Shakespeare called, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"—the devastating disasters that seem to strike at random, and multiply far more in some lives than others—the believer's proper confidence about their place in God's plan is well reflected in the words of promise, drawn from Scripture, and put into God's mouth by the hymn writer:*

*When through the deep waters I cause thee to go,  
The rivers of grief shall not thee overflow;  
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.*

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply;  
The Flame will not hurt thee, I only design,  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."*

It's during such times that we (like Job) need to remember that "true wisdom has two sides to it." The hidden, mysterious side which God chooses NOT to reveal to us (but simply asks us to trust Him for); and the revealed side which He has chosen to fill us in on, and which gives us the basis for trusting him on the unrevealed things.

---

Then **SECONDLY**, we come to the other possible meaning of the verse. And that is that true wisdom (or godly knowledge) has two sides to it not just in the hidden vs. revealed sense, but also in the sense that divine truth often has two seemingly contradictory elements to it, BOTH of which must be held in tension if we are ever to come to a correct understanding of such truths.

And it's this way of seeing the verse, which when accepted and understood, does away with much dissension, and division, and disharmony, and needless bickering in families, and churches, and everywhere else! Which is why adopting it, as Zophar points out, is a sign of "true wisdom."

Let me give you one of the most common examples from the theological or doctrinal realms. It's the age old issue of **God's Sovereignty vs. Human Responsibility**. I don't know how many times I have heard people arguing, fighting, and even churches splitting over the issue of whether God is Sovereign or Man is Free and Responsible.

The argument usually goes something like this. **One side** will say: "If God exercises sovereign control over all that happens, then in what meaningful sense can we speak about human choice? If God is absolutely sovereign, doesn't that sovereignty nullify human freedom and responsibility and make man a mere puppet?"

And to resolve the issue, such people often feel driven to deny, or severely limit God's power, and sovereignty, saying instead that God is in charge (like the President of the United States) but not in control (like the President of the United States)! It's an attempt to safeguard the truth of human free agency, responsibility, and culpability, by essentially discarding divine sovereignty.

---

The **other side** of the argument is often stated like this: "If humans are free agents, and make their own decisions as to what they will do, choosing to do as they please in light of their sense of right and wrong, or the inclinations they feel, how can God be said to sovereignly govern His universe if people are doing as they please? Doesn't such freedom dethrone God and nullify His sovereign control?"

These people, unlike the others, often feel compelled to resolve the issue by doing away with human freedom, duty, and culpability in order to guard God's sovereignty. They become "determinists" who essentially believe in fate, and hold to the old saying: "Que sera, sera—whatever will be will be." Everything is written in stone.

One side essentially does away with God's sovereignty in order to guard human freedom, and the other side does away with human freedom in order to safeguard God's Sovereignty—somehow seeing such truths as incompatible opposites, or truths that are inherently contradictory to one another. Yet they do so at the expense of a biblical faith—which clearly affirms both as true!

---

In fact, Jesus (contrary to many Christians) shows Himself to be one who possessed true wisdom, because He clearly taught that both aspects are equally true! In Luke 22:22 He says something you would never hear coming off the lips of most Christians in the same conversation, never mind in the same sentence!

There He says of Judas Iscariot: *"The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed (predetermined or predestined), but woe to the man who betrays Him."* What's He doing?! He's combining in the very same sentence the truth of God's absolute sovereignty and human responsibility in the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus!

The betrayal of Jesus was part of God's redemptive plan. God had previously determined ahead of time that Judas would betray Jesus. Yet, in the very same breath He pronounces woe on Judas for doing the very thing He had previously ordained!! He essentially says that Judas is guilty for betraying Jesus, even though it was part of God's plan from eternity to have Judas betray Him!

And we scratch our heads and say, "How can that be?" If God ordained it, how can Judas possibly be held responsible for doing it? Only if it was Judas's free and voluntary choice, and not part of God's predetermined plan can Judas be held accountable for his evil action!

---

But you see, when we say things like that it's because we fail to see that "true wisdom has two sides to it." It's not that one is true and therefore the other can't be! But rather, according to the Bible, **both are true at the same time!**

**LISTEN: *God is absolutely sovereign over everything that happens, and has ordained all that will ever come to pass. Yet in such a way that people's choices are their own, choosing to do as they please in light of their sense of right and wrong, or the inclinations they feel, and are therefore totally responsible for all that they do! They are BOTH true!***

C. H. Spurgeon, when contesting both the Arminian's (who denied God's sovereignty in order to protect free will) and the Hyper-Calvinists (who denied human responsibility to safeguard God's Sovereignty) showed his true wisdom when he said this:

*"I believe in predestination... I believe that the path of a single grain of dust in the March wind is ordained and settled by a decree which cannot be violated; that every word and thought of man, every fluttering of a sparrows wing, every flight of a fly...that everything is in fact foreknown and foreordained. But I do equally believe in the free agency of man, that man acts as he wills, especially in the moral operations – choosing the evil with a will that is unbiased by anything that comes from God, biased only by his own depravity of heart and perverseness of habits; choosing the right too, with perfect freedom, though sacredly guided and led by the Holy Spirit... I believe that man is as accountable as if there were no destiny whatsoever. Where these two truths meet I do not know, nor do I want to know. They do not puzzle me, since I have given up my mind to believing them both... Can you understand it? For I cannot! How a man is a free agent, a responsible agent, so that his sin is his own willful sin and lies with him and never with God, and yet at the same time God's purposes are fulfilled, and His will done even by demons and corrupt men. I cannot comprehend it; yet without hesitation I believe it, and rejoice to do so..."*

---

You see, many of the doctrines of the Bible are presented in such a way as to ask us to hold two seemingly contradictory truths in tension, not watering down or denying one in order to accept the other, but holding to both as being fully true.

We see it everywhere in Scripture.

- 1.) God is said to be three, but God is said to be one! Not three separate Gods, but one God who is indivisibly three!
- 2.) Jesus is God, says the Bible. He is also man, says the Bible! Not half man, and half God, but fully God and fully man! Not one or the other (which is the heresy of docetism) but fully BOTH!
- 3.) Likewise, salvation is said to be of grace from beginning to end. You can't earn it or deserve it. It is a gift given to those chosen to be in Christ from the creation of the world—those predestined in love to be adopted as God's sons through Christ Jesus, and made alive even when they were dead in trespasses and sins. "It is by grace you have been saved," says Paul. It's all gift!

And therefore those who are lost are lost because they weren't predestined—Right? NO! They are lost because they refuse to believe! Because they reject the truth, and cling to their sin!

***Which means that if someone is saved, they have no one to THANK but God! And if someone is lost, they have no one to BLAME but themselves, their sin, and their own hardness of heart!***

"But that's a contradiction," you say! No, my friends, that's what the Bible teaches! If were saved, it is by the sheer unmerited grace of God! And if we are lost, it is because we loved the pleasures of sin, and the pride of self, and the praise of men more than the truth and praise of God.

What did Jesus say in Mt. 11:25-28?

*"I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was Your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him."*

What's Jesus saying? God chooses to hide truth from some, and reveal truth to others, as He pleases. Meaning that salvation is totally dependent upon the sovereign prerogative & pleasure of God in revealing Himself and His Son to whoever He chooses —affirming God's sovereign grace in election and predestination.

But then listen to what Jesus says in the very next verse!

*"Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

And we're led to ask, "Did Jesus hear what He just said? In the vv. 25-27 He said that salvation, or knowing Him, is totally dependent on God's choosing to reveal Himself to us! But then in vv. 28-30 He says that anyone who is weary and burdened can come! Which one is right?"

**AND THE ANSWER? BOTH** (because "true wisdom has two sides to it!") That's what I've found many theological arguments to be: Two people coming at the same truth from two different directions.

"God's Sovereign!" "No, man is Responsible!" "I'm right!" "No! I'm right!"—back and forth, and back and forth, not realizing that **THEY'RE BOTH RIGHT!** Or that they're both partially right and partially wrong, and won't be fully right until they admit they're BOTH right! What peace that would bring to the church!

If we'd stop limiting ourselves to strictly **either / or** categories and start thinking in **both / and** categories as Zophar suggests!

**THE SAME IS TRUE IN MARRIAGES** — a lot of fights stem from the fact that both spouses have a valid point, but each one is so intent on their own opinion prevailing, that they're not willing to concede the validity of the other person's position!

So many fights would never even happen if couples would just grasp the truth that true wisdom has two sides to it, and the husband would simply admit, "Honey, that's true. You've got a valid point there." And the wife in return would say, "You do too dear."  
(Am I asking for too much of a miracle here?!)

You see, part of being wise, is realizing there's more than just one slant on the truth—be it in issues of doctrine, theology, politics, or relationships. And the sooner we realize it, the more peaceful this world would be!