

PERVERTING MORAL SUPERIORITY

Zachary Williams

Difficult Lessons from Job's Story Part 2

As we continue our discussion from part one of Difficult Lessons from Job, this article may be the hardest for some to understand. If you read this article and your response is a simple 'yeah, that makes sense,' then you may be missing the point. The key point I desire to reveal in this article is that even as believers, our sense of moral correctness compared to the world can be another kind of superiority, pride, and even a form of wickedness. We need moral clarity and courage without succumbing to different kinds of moral failure.

Job is a fascinating book because what most people quote from Job is a handful of chapters at the beginning, at the end, and sometimes Job 19 (which we will talk about in the last article). But what about the long discussion between Job and his friends? As the reader, we already know Job to be innocent. We also know at the end of the discussion that Adonai shows up and rebukes Job's friends. So, it is easy to dismiss what is being said throughout most of the book of Job because Job's friends are 'wrong' and Job is 'mostly right.' However, the discussion is more reflective of what we experience in our daily lives when we see that Job's friends were 'mostly right'...until Adonai said they were wrong (Job 42:7-9).

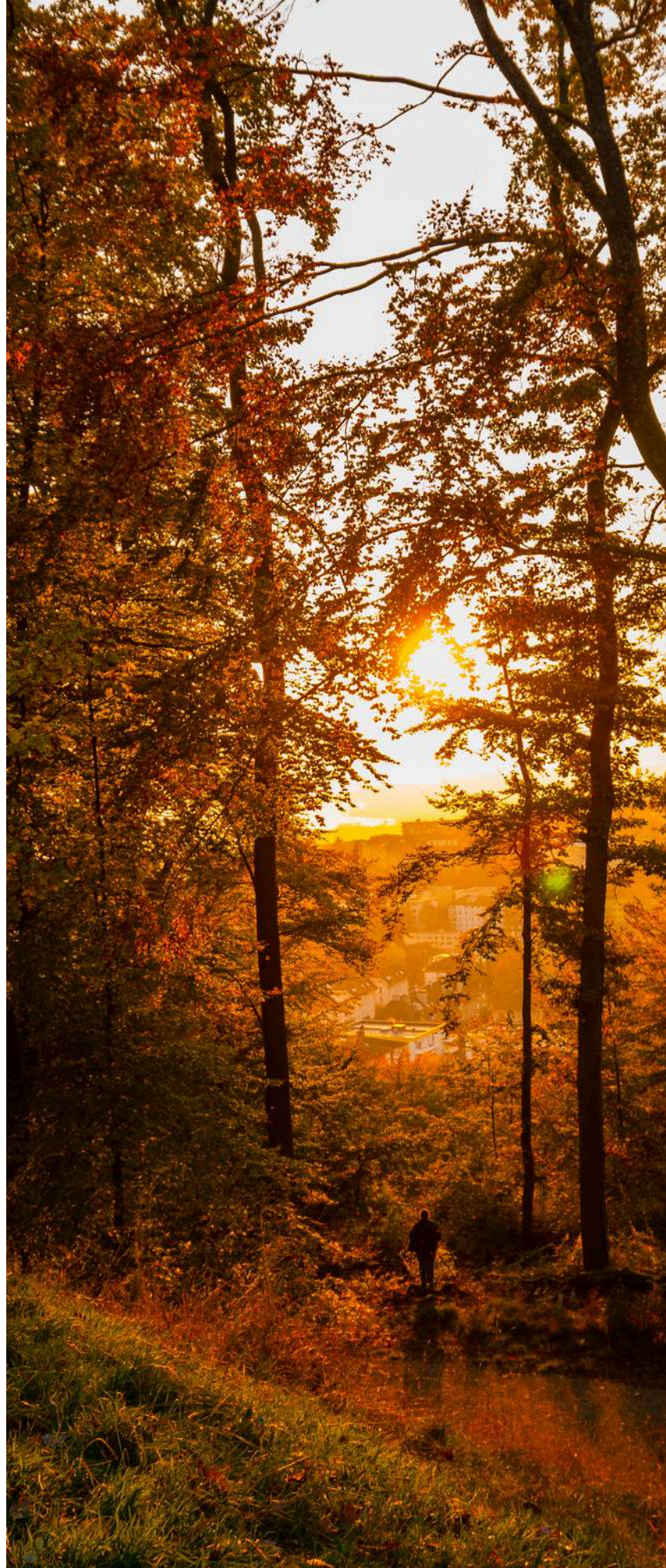
Here are a few examples of things that Job's friends say that I think most believers would agree with ...

“Behold, happy is the one whom God corrects, so do not despise the discipline of Shaddai. For He inflicts pain, but He also binds up; He injures, yes, His hands also heal.” (Job 5:17-18)

“If you devote your heart to Him and spread out your hands to Him, if you put away the wickedness that is in your hand, and allow no iniquity to abide in your tent, then you will lift up your face without reproach; you will stand firm and without fear.” (Job 11:13-15)

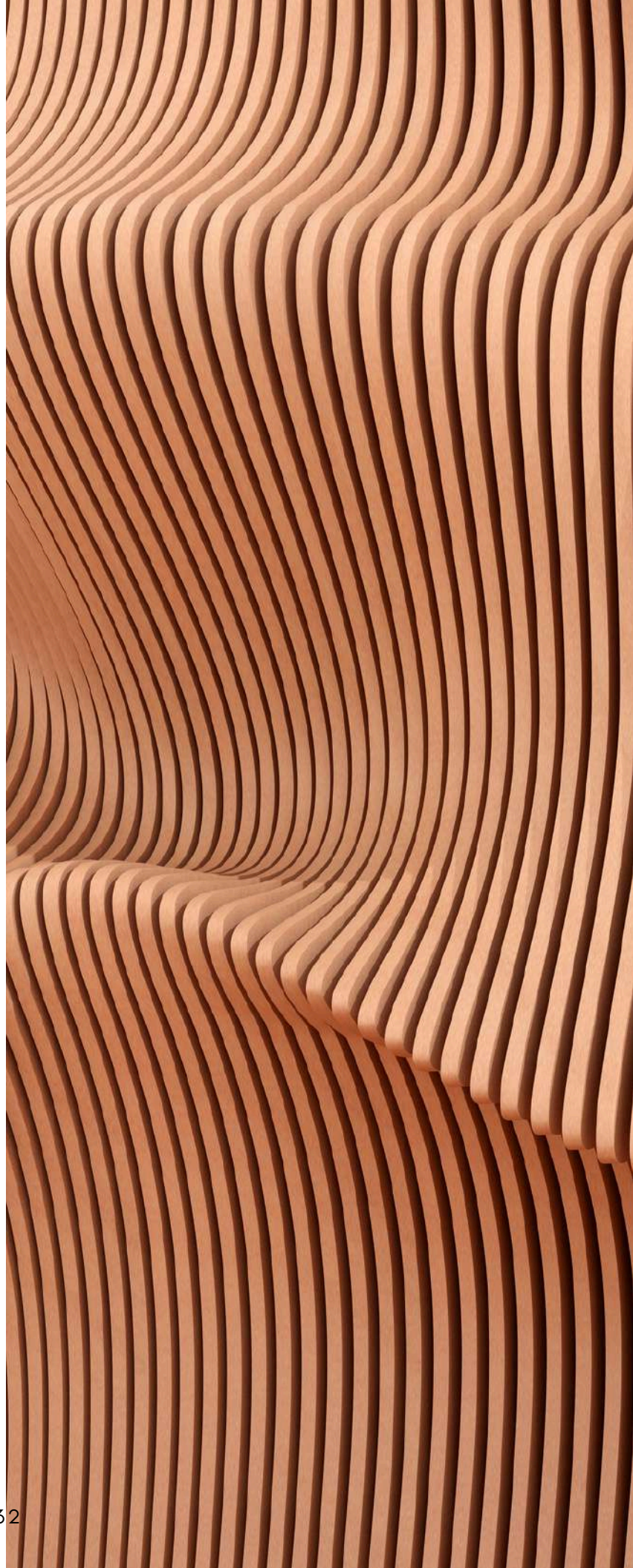
“Dominion and awe are with Him; He establishes shalom in His heights... How then can a man be righteous with God? How can one born of a woman be pure?” (Job 25:2,4)

Those statements sound good, moral, and even honoring to Adonai. So what's the issue? What did they say that was wrong when most of what his friends say is along these lines? Nothing is wrong with their general statements, *per se*. Job even agreed with them sometimes (Job 9:2). The fundamental issue is the way they used 'moral certainties' to accuse Job of sin. They conclude that because Adonai is 'just', He would never allow something like this to happen to Job unless Job in fact had sinned. Job's friends were using morality and their understanding of Adonai against Job to accuse him of some unknown sin.



Their morality is what I would call an outcome-based morality. It suggests that there is a linear and strict relationship between righteous or wicked actions and the consequences of those actions. Good actions equal a blessed life, while bad actions result in punishment. No exceptions! Therefore, suffering and punishment **MUST** be because of Job's "sin." Stop for a minute and consider how often we as believers fall into this same line of thinking. We are trained this way by our parents, which is generally good as children. However, by laying out the over-simplified judgmentalism of this kind of morality, it makes Job's friends look like little more than children accusing and bullying a classmate. Job's friends were not wrong, but they were only mostly right about their general statements, and they were flat wrong about their accusations of Job.

There is also a crucial aspect of morality that considers context in judgments. Even Job's words must be taken in the context that he is being falsely accused. Initially, Job does not necessarily justify himself or even accuse Adonai of doing wrong. Instead, he simply makes factual statements that prove his friend's wrong in the absoluteness and 100% certainty of their statements (Job 12). The most convincing proof from Job is the obvious fact that wicked people often prosper. Job 21, for example, is an entire chapter that is one of the most accurate descriptions of reality in the whole book of Job. That description is correct and honest instead of biased by perverted moral superiority.



I have often borrowed Yeshua's statement that narrow is the road that leads to life (Matthew 7:12-14) to make an analogy. I say that the road of righteousness is a narrow, elevated highway. Many people who are trying to walk the narrow road have simply fallen into the ditch on one side of the road and are yelling at people in the other ditch, and vice versa. They are not continuing to walk the road because they are stuck in the ditch. Those who are truly walking in righteousness are more concerned about staying on the road than accusing others of being in the ditch. If you do not stay focused on the road, you could easily fall into the ditch yourself. Considering this analogy, ...have you ever met somebody who thought the ditch was the road and they were right to be exactly where they were? Have you been that 'somebody' at times?

Perhaps that is the lesson Solomon is trying to teach us in Ecclesiastes when he says neither be too wicked nor be too righteous (Eccles. 7:16-18). You would think he should just say "Be not wicked, be righteous!" Instead, I think Solomon has the wisdom to understand that we cannot avoid all wickedness and need the mercy of Adonai to forgive our sins, and that by trying to be perfect in righteousness we may end up not being righteous at all. As Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur teach us, true righteousness is in the context of a relationship with Adonai (Eccles. 12:13-14), and we need to be humble enough to realize we never get that righteousness on our own.





The difficult lesson of Job's friends is that even if we know perfection is not achievable, we often still try and then look down on others' failures to reach the perfection that we cannot reach ourselves. We often find it easy to relate to Job's suffering in his innocence. It is just as true, but more difficult to relate to how we behave like Job's friends in their arrogant, false moral superiority. Adonai, have mercy on us!

As noted in the end of the first article, I wish that I could wrap up these difficult lessons nicely. Instead, I think we just need to use them to approach Adonai in humility and to seek wisdom in our judgments of ourselves and over others. In this case, it can be hard to accept that even what we think is correct about the relationship between cause and effect regarding righteousness and wickedness is not always so straightforward. Worse yet, thinking we understand it well and making accusations of others could be the very evidence that we have not learned it well either. Like Job's friends, Adonai might rebuke us with a simple, "You are wrong."

In the last article of this series, we will explore Job's mistake and his redemption...because our redemption is no different!



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