

I Choose to Bless

Beware of Shallow Answers

Job 2:11-21:34

Mark Vroegop

11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. 12 And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. 13 And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

3 After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. 2 And Job said:
 3 "Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man is conceived.' 4 Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. 5 Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. 6 That night—let thick darkness seize it! Let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months. 7 Behold, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry enter it. 8 Let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan. 9 Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning, 10 because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes. 11 "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? 12 Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? 13 For then I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept; then I would have been at rest, 14 with kings and counselors of the earth who rebuilt ruins for themselves, 15 or with princes who had gold, who filled their houses with silver. 16 Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light? 17 There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest. 18 There the prisoners are at ease together; they hear not the voice of the taskmaster. 19 The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master. 20 "Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, 21 who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures, 22 who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave? 23 Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? 24 For my sighing comes instead of my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. 25 For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me. 26 I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes." (Job 2:11-3:26)

On March 27th we will open our THINK|09 conference with a teaching concert by Michael Card. He is going to help us think about the Trinity through singing. I am thrilled that he is coming because he is a theological song-writer. Dale Shaw gave me a book written by Card entitled, "A Sacred Sorrow – Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament." Card makes a very interesting and helpful point about the reality and value of sorrow.

"All of our journeys, yours and mine, began with lament, did they not? Before we uttered our first breathless cries, our mothers lamented in pain giving birth to us, just as God had said would be one of the consequences of Adam and Eve's first doubting (Genesis 3:16). We are all ushered in to a world in which the first sounds we heard were inevitably weeping – weeping for pain and weeping for joy, because the two are often linked more closely than we can imagine."¹

Life begins with a cry. And the hopeful message of the Bible is that there will come a day when "4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore... "(Rev 21:4). But until then we are left in a world where difficulties, suffering, pain, and sorrow are a real and normal part of life.

The aim for this series is to help us embrace the Lordship of Jesus in suffering by clinging to the "who?" question rather than the "why?" question. Last week we looked at the opening narrative of Job 1-2 and learned about pain-filled worship which involves:

- Focus – why am I here?
- Theology – how do I view God?
- Affections – what do I really love?
- Trust – what do I rely upon?

Now you might think that pain-filled worship means no sorrow, little crying, or limited lament. But that is not the case. Clinging to "Who?" doesn't mean any of that. It means dealing with hard questions, painful emotions, and unanswerable questions. And it also means being careful about shallow answers.

Job's Friends

Chapter 2 ends with an introduction of Job's three friends. Apparently they heard about Job's suffering, and they traveled together to go and comfort their friend. Their names are Eliphaz from Teman, Bildad from Shuah, and Zophar from Naamah, and they come to join Job in his week long time of mourning.

There is no reason to doubt their sincere desire to comfort him. Verses 11-3 tells us that they 1) purposed together to minister to him, 2) experienced deep grief at seeing his plight, 3) entered his mourning by tearing their robes and sprinkling dust on their heads, 4) sat in silence as they observed his immense suffering.

As the story of Job unfolds you will see how wrong Job's friends were about many things, but it is important to note here that they began very well. They did what good comforters do: they were present, joined him in sorrow, and were silent. And before we give them too hard of a

¹ Michael Card, [A Sacred Sorrow – Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament](#), (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 2005), 19.

time, let's remember that they did this for seven days! So these are good friends. They may not be good theologians, but they genuinely wanted to help.

Job's Lament

Chapter 3, however, changes the helpfulness of his friends. They are unprepared for Job's grief, his emotion, and his questions. His difficult lament causes them internal tension, and rather than thinking carefully, his friends offer glib answers and a harsh, condemning spirit.

Job is hurting, and it comes out right away in verse three: "Let the day perish on which I was born..." Job wishes he had never been born: "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?" (v 11). Job sees death as a better choice than to live like this: "...for then I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept; then I would have been at rest..." (v 13). He wonders out loud why God doesn't just put him out of his misery, "Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not... (v 20-21). The summary statement comes in 3:26 – "I am not at ease nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes."

Do you know that there is a place for godly lament? A lament is an expression of how people feel with deep and honest fervor.² The Bible, particularly the Psalms, is filled with this kind of expression. In fact, there are more than 60 individual and corporate laments in the Psalms (e.g., 3,12, 22,31,39,42,44,57,71,80,120,137,139,142). Most laments include six elements:

- Address – "O Lord..." (Ps 3:1a)
- Complaint – "...how many are my foes!" (3:1b)
- Trust – "But you are a shield..." (3:3)
- Deliverance – "Arise, O Lord..." (3:7)
- Assurance – "For you have struck all my enemies on the jaw..." (3:7b)
- Praise – "From the Lord comes deliverance" (3:7)

I take chapter three to be the early stage of lament in Job where he expresses his deep grief and his complaint. Later on in the book Job will touch on the other areas saying, "I know that my Redeemer lives" (19:25) and "He knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold" (23:10). But he's not there yet. And his friends make the mistake of confusing a cry of pain with the cry of rebellion.³ The result is that they become worthless counselors – "Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom" (Job 13:5).

² Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for all its Worth, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1982), 175.

³ Doug Pabody shared this helpful distinction with me during one of our staff discussions on Job.

The Packagers of God

I'd like to give you a new name for Job's friends: the packagers of God.⁴ That is what his friends are doing – creating packages of God that are insufficient, unhelpful, and, in the end, unbiblical. Remember that his friends are wrong but that they argue their case well. In other words many of the things that they say are technically true but their application of them makes them entirely wrong. We must be careful with certain truths lest we apply them in such a way that actually creates error. You can use true statements and be wrong.

The speeches of Job's friends come in three cycles. The first two cycles (chapters 3-21), which we will look at today, lay out their fundamental argument. After each person speaks, Job will reply. The third cycle (chapters 22-31) is dominated by growing frustration and Job's increasing defensiveness.

Cycle 1

Job's lament in chapter three is met with strong resistance. His friends try to correct his theology and lead him to repentance.⁵ Job's grief and his questions do not fit their nicely packaged view of God.

Eliphaz leads the rebuke. He suggests that Job is subtly hypocritical, not heeding his own advice. "4 Your words have upheld him who was stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees. 5 But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you, and you are dismayed" (Job 4:4-5). Eliphaz is impatient and judgmental, leaving Job no room for being right and deeply sorrowful.

However, Eliphaz's insensitivity is not the only problem. The real issue behind his lack of tack is a misapplied theological principle expressed in 4:7-8 – "Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same." Simply stated, his principle is that suffering is the result of sin, and blessing comes because of righteousness. Therefore, he believes that the solution to Job's situation is to confess his sin, and God will restore him. Eliphaz's counsel to Job is arrogant and overly simplistic: "As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause..." (5:8). In effect, he says if I were you I'd submit myself to God, close my mouth, confess my sin and plead for deliverance.⁶

⁴ I take this from John Piper's compelling chapter title in The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God – "O Spare Me Now, My Friends, Your Packages of God."

⁵ D.A. Carson, How Long O Lord? – Reflections on Suffering and Evil, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 142.

⁶ Carson, 143.

Job's response is filled with pain and shock. His friends are not helping him, and he believes that they are speaking out of fear. "For you have now become nothing; you see my calamity and are afraid" (6:21). Job's suffering is pressing upon their convenient packages of God. He does not believe that his calamity is directly connected to some sin in his life (see 6:20).

Job's words are too much for Bildad. He is angry: "How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? (Job 8:2-3). Bildad believes that Job is an intellectual inch away from charging God with wrong. Job cannot be innocent since all this calamity has come upon him; Job's innocence would make God unjust. He believes that the solution is for Job to repent - "If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation" (Job 8:5-6). Bildad's argument is clear: since God has not restored Job, he must be unrighteous.

Job's response to Bildad is threefold: 1) I know that God is sovereign and righteous, 2) I am innocent, and 3) I wish there was a mediator. Listen to the following texts:

"Truly I know that it is so: But how can a man be in the right before God? 3 If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times. 4 He is wise in heart and mighty in strength—who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?" (Job 9:2-4)

"Though I am in the right, I cannot answer him; I must appeal for mercy to my accuser" (Job 9:15)

"For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. 33 There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both (Job 9:32-33).

Zophar now enters the debate with a harsh rebuke that Job deserves worse.

2 "Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and a man full of talk be judged right?
3 Should your babble silence men, and when you mock, shall no one shame you?
4 For you say, 'My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God's eyes.'
5 But oh, that God would speak and open his lips to you,
6 and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For he is manifold in understanding. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves (Job 11:2-6)

Zophar's view is this: "God is so holy and transcendent, and Job so flawed and sinful, that Job's suffering is in fact much less than the measure of his guilt."⁷

⁷ Carson, 145.

Job has had enough; he feels the full weight of their insensitivity and their arrogance. "No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?" (Job 12:2-3). Job is outraged. He tells his friends that he is not inferior to them (13:2), that they are worthless physicians (13:4), their maxims are proverbs of ashes (13:12), and that he wishes they would just keep their mouths shut (13:5).

Job cannot reconcile his suffering with what he knows to be true about God and himself. His friends' simplistic solutions do not solve the problem. He sees no point or purpose in what has happened, and he is sure it is not because of some sin in his life. And so Job is left with this tension: "Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face" (Job 13:15).

Cycle 2

Chapters 15-21 record the second cycle of speeches. There is not much new thought that is offered here, rather it is the "same song, second verse, little bit louder, little bit worse." Let me give you a few examples:

Eliphaz: "Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge, and fill his belly with the east wind? 3 Should he argue in unprofitable talk, or in words with which he can do no good? (15:2-3)

Job: "I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all" (16:2-3).

Bildad: "How long will you hunt for words...why are we counted as cattle? Why are we stupid in your sight?" (18:2)

Job: "How long will you torment me and break me in pieces with words?" (19:2). "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at last he will stand upon the earth" (19:25).

Zophar suggests that Job needs to acknowledge that God punishes the wicked. This is obviously how God works:

"...the exulting of the wicked is short and the joy of the godless is but for a moment" (20:5). "The heavens will reveal his iniquity and the earth will rise up against him. The possessions of his house will be carried away, dragged off in the day of God's wrath. This is the wicked man's portion for God, the heritage decreed for him by God" (20:27-29)

Job however doesn't accept this at face value:

“Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? Their offspring are established in their presence, and their descendants before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them” (21:7-10).

Thus after nineteen chapters Job and his friends are at a virtual stalemate. They believe that Job’s misery is because of sin. Job believes that he has done nothing that warrants this kind of punishment. And you, the reader, know that Job is right! His friends, however convincing they may be, are wrong. Job, however frustrated and emotional he may be, is right.

The conclusion to the first two cycles ends in awkward tension. Job rejects their packages of God: “How then will you comfort me with empty nothings? There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood” (21:34)

Let Us Beware!

So what does this painful exchange between a hurting man and harsh friends teach us? What warnings should we heed?

1. Beware of faith without lament

The first lesson that we should learn from these two cycles of speeches is to be wary of a misconception that faith sheds no tears, expresses no pain, or bottles everything up. Christianity, with a God that is both loving and in control, sets us up for lament. An evil God can only do evil things. A impotent God cannot make it stop. But a loving and sovereign God creates the lament of “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” (Ps 13:1) or “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46).

Therefore, resist the tendency to think that people with lots of faith never lament. Further, resist the urge to take someone’s lament as if they will always feel that way or as if they are abandoning the faith. Sometimes a spouse or a friend will say something that they feel but they know is not fully true. Let it go. Job and Jesus expressed painful things that some of us might have said, “Don’t say that.” You can lament and still be a person of faith and trust.

2. Beware of fear couched in comfort

Grief is frightening for those who are watching it. And there is a strong desire to make the grief stop. Searing pain creates difficult questions, and there is a tendency to comfort people so that they will stop making us afraid. Job’s friends were fearful because Job’s suffering didn’t fit their world, and the effect was an outright assault on the grieving person. They attacked the griever.

So let us be warned that it is possible to try to comfort, not because we love the person who is hurting, but because their pain makes us afraid. It takes courage, faith, and strength to say, "I don't know why this is happening."

3. Beware of theology with no loose ends

The words of Job's friends sound like a good theology. However, their application was insensitive, untimely, and unhelpful. Their answers were shallow – true but shallow. Their theology was so tight that it had no loose ends, no mystery, no questions. They had God figured out. And the result was arrogant assumptions about what God was really doing.

Let me caution you: theology with no loose ends is not the study of God; it is the worship of man. Without mystery there is no awe. Without tension there is no humility.

So be careful when you think you have God figured out. Be careful when you think you know why things are happening. Be careful of putting God into neat little packages that are technically true but actually unhelpful.

4. Beware of looking at suffering through any lens but Christ

Job cannot fully answer his own questions and his friends cannot help him because he doesn't see the full picture. He doesn't know about the conversation in heaven, and he also doesn't know about the cross.

Job points to Christ. He's the mediator longed for. He's the redeemer who lives. He's the one who takes the punishment for sin. His suffering is the greatest example of innocence and injustice. And it is being formed into his image which is the ultimate goal of all suffering (see Romans 8:28). We are told to "...run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame..." (Heb 12:1b-2).

So let me tell you that you will never fully understand the meaning of innocent suffering, nor will you value it in any way unless you see it through the lens of Jesus. We have to look to him for our example, our help, and our hope.

The enemy would love to use suffering to cause you to turn from Christ, but that is a foolish choice. The only way that we understand and live with suffering is by looking at it through the lens of Jesus. Everything else gives us shallow answers.

O risen Christ, shine forth and be
A blazing warning by the sea –
A signal where the sailors cling
To life through reefs of suffering,
And need the blast of light and bell:
Beware, what here beneath may dwell.
Beware of subtle, shrewd assaults,
A half-truth can be wholly false.
Beware of wisdom made in schools,
And proverbs in the mouth of fools.
Beware of claims that rise too tall:
“The upright stand and wicked fall.”
Beware the thought that all is vain;
In time God’s wisdom will be plain.⁸

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⁸ John Piper, The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2002), 60.