

I Choose to Bless The Confusions of God

Job 21-33

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The confusions of God. The title itself is probably confusing, and that's good, because if we're ever going to 'get' the book of Job, we're first going to have to enter into his confusion. And that was a confusion caused, deliberately, by God.

Chuck Swindoll said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." (p. 219). Now if you're like me, having grown up, to use Joe Stowell's phrase, in 'church world', you were probably taught something like this about God in Sunday School: God is good and kind and loving and gracious and fair; He loves us and wants what is best for us; He cares for us as His children and wants to meet our needs. He is also a just God and He will punish bad people. How are we doing so far? Is that good theology? Absolutely. And it works—until you run into life, or life runs into you, head-on. Then you're confused. To believe that God blesses His children and punishes the wicked is all well and good enough. Until you look around and find that that's not exactly the case. Until you run into the buzz saw.

That's exactly what happened with Job. Life was going along as smooth as melted chocolate. And then, totally out of the blue, he got bushwhacked, he ran right into a buzz saw, and there he is at the other end, broken, battered, bleeding, wondering what in heaven happened to him, and he looks back and sees that the buzz saw was God Himself! His categories have all been blown apart. He was, to put it mildly, confused by God.

A.W. Tozer said,

Left to ourselves we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use Him, or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control. We need the feeling of security that comes from knowing what God is like, and what He is like is of course a composite of all the religious pictures we have seen, all the best people we have known or heard about, and all the sublime ideas we have entertained. . . . That God can be known by the soul in tender personal experience while remaining infinitely aloof from the furious eyes of reason constitutes a paradox.¹

Or, in simpler, less philosophical terms, confusion.

Yet herein lies one of the great beauties of our Christian faith. We believe certain things because they have been revealed to us by God Himself. But we don't go and then put our heads in the sand. We look at the realities of life, the existential realities, and try to see that they fit and how they fit with what God has revealed. This is the genius of the book of Job, real

¹ Knowledge of the Holy, pp. 16,18

life, gritty and unvarnished, meshed with real truth, to form an understanding, a worldview, a theology that will serve as a firm foundation for our whole lives, and beyond. And as much as the book of Job appears to be a treatise on human suffering (and it is), it is ultimately the study of God. This world is not mainly about us; it is about God. Do you think you know God? Do you want to know Him? In His fullness, not simply a caricature? Come plumb the book of Job and you will see God in His awesome, stunning, terrifying, comforting, and, yes, confusing depth and breadth. But it will be God as He really is.

Now just a quick review of the book and where we are at in it.²

Prologue, chs. 1,2

Dialogue, chs. 3-27 [3 rounds with 3 counselors]

Interlude on wisdom, ch. 28

Monologues, chs. 29-42:6 [3 speeches by 3 characters]

Epilogue, ch. 42:7-17

So as you can see we're actually spanning parts of 3 sections today, chs. 22-31. Job's friends had come to visit him sometime after his calamities hit. After sitting with him in silence for 7 days, the conversation begins, started, note, by Job in 3:1 when he opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. That prompts a response from the friends, and so the dialogue section of the book consists of a series of speeches from each of the friends, each one responded to by Job. There are 3 cycles of these speeches, and we left off last week at the end of the second cycle. So in ch. 22, we pick up now the 3rd and final cycle of speech and response.

Let me quickly outline today's 10 chapters.

- 22 Eliphaz's speech
- 23,24 Job's response
- 25 Bildad's speech
- 26 Job's response
- 27 Concluding statement by Job
- 28 Interlude on wisdom
- 29-31 Job's monologue
 - ch. 29, the blessings of the past
 - ch. 30, the sufferings of the present
 - ch. 31, the innocence of the sufferer

Box One: The Friends' Box

Last week, Pastor Mark called the 3 friends, "Packagers of God." They had their theology all wrapped up in a bow, they repeated their same lines again and again, and when confronted with evidence to the contrary, they stopped their ears and just talked louder. You see, some of us are confused and don't want to be; they were not confused and should have been! Here's what their box said, "***Suffering is caused by sin.***" **22: 4,5,23**. They had argued this before, although in slightly kinder terms, but now Eliphaz just comes out and says it, "Your wickedness

² NIV Study Bible

is great." How does he know that? Well, it must be the case. Because if this box is true, and you are suffering, it must mean that you are a sinner, and if you are suffering greatly it must mean that you are a great sinner. Job had previously challenged them to tell him how he had sinned, and so now Eliphaz goes on to manufacture some sins in vv.6-11. He had no proof of them; in fact Job, in ch. 31, will argue that none of these things is true. But from Eliphaz's frame of reference, it had to be true, even if it wasn't.

Bildad, in ch. 25, makes the shortest statement of any of the 3 friends, perhaps because he is the shortest man in the Bible—Bildad, the Shuhite. Actually, the reason is that he has nothing significant to add. The friends are running out of ammunition, they are low on fuel, they are fresh out of ideas. In fact, Zophar doesn't even bother to chip in on the 3rd cycle of speeches because there is nothing left to say. Bildad's point is this: God is so great, man cannot be pure compared to Him, so you are also not pure and therefore suffering for your sins, conveniently ignoring the fact that Bildad himself must therefore not be pure and so why is he not suffering for his sins?

Miserable comforters the friends are (16:2) and worthless physicians (13:4), but how were they as theologians? We must pause and examine their box. Is it true? Indeed it is. It does fit with what feels right and fair in our minds, but more importantly it is actually part of God's revelation to mankind. All the way back to the Garden of Eden, God told Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed, they would surely die. Not only that, but consider when the events of this book may have taken place. If the reference to an iron tool in 19:24 is any indication, it was probably late in the 2nd millennium B.C., since iron didn't come into common use in the Middle East until the 12th century B.C.

So that would mean that these events happened after the revealing of the Law to Moses, perhaps around 1400 B.C. The Law (of God) was full of this kind of teaching. If you will obey me, it will go well with you. If you disobey, I will punish you. You see, our early SS lessons were well founded! Deut 28, blessings for 14 vv, curses for 54. In fact, 28:18, curse on cattle; v. 20, sudden ruin; v. 25, defeated before enemies; v. 27, boils, festering sores, and the itch! So the good Dr. Eliphaz and his companions make a perfectly reasonable diagnosis: these things have happened to you, therefore you must be under the curse of God, and therefore you must have not been careful to obey "all His commands and decrees" that God had given His people through Moses.

This principle is still true today. Jn. 6:14, Jesus says to the invalid of 38 years who had waited by the pool called Bethesda and whom He healed in an instant, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." 1 Cor. 11:30, "This is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." --for partaking of the Lord's Supper without recognizing the body of the Lord. Heb. 12:6, "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." In our haste to find another reason behind our sufferings, let us not forget this possibility. Perhaps it is because of our sin.

Box Two: Satan's Target

There is another box, implied, in the book of Job, one that says, "***Blessing is caused by righteousness.***" This, too, fits perfectly with our sense of fairness and justice, our

understanding that you reap what you sow. As we have seen, this is a truth revealed in Scripture. Josh 1:8, for example, says if you will meditate on God's Word and obey it, you will have success. And many more. But, interestingly enough, this is exactly where Satan decides to attack. As we saw in ch. 1, Satan says to God that this truth is the very reason, in fact the only reason, that Job walks in obedience to your commands. It pays. His accusation is that all religious interest is ultimately grounded in self-interest. In this system, God becomes nothing more than a cosmic vending machine. The coinage you put in is not cheap—obedience. But when you've made the payment, you push the button, and out comes the treat. Job, in effect, says Satan, is nothing more than a well-trained dog, trained by divine Pavlovian methods to avoid responses that cause pain and repeat actions that reward, where all you have to do is change the stimulus to change the reflex responses. You're pleased that Job is so righteous? All that's happened is that his reflexes have been conditioned.

Satan's point was not so much that in this system man is reduced to the level of an animal as it is that it reduces God to the level of a machine. There is no real glory for, say, electricity, in the fact that I avoid sticking knitting needles in a socket (something I tried, only once, as a young boy) or that I plug my toaster into it to make it toast my bread. There is no relationship between myself and this impersonal force called electricity. Yes, I respect it, I even have come to fear it, but I don't love it, I have no relationship with it, and if it stops serving me, I'm done with it. If the link between righteousness and blessing can be broken, man will be exposed for the self-centered sinner he is, and You will be exposed as a brute and a manipulator. There is much at stake here! Satan says, in effect, to God, there's nothing inherently desirable about You, there's nothing so attractive in you as a Person that a human would choose to remain connected with you for the sake of the relationship and not for the sake of its benefits. If that could happen, then you would be worthy indeed.

Box Three: Job's Objection

Back to our text now. The second round of speeches ended with Job challenging the assumption of his friends that all of life can be explained by Box #1. While it may be true, he says, life as I observe it doesn't all fit in there. All of ch. 21 is given to the argument of v. 7, "Why do the wicked live on?", and v. 30, "the evil man is spared from the day of calamity." If Box #1 is all that there is, explain these observations! So he exclaims in v. 34, "How can you console me with your nonsense?" It is not so much that Box #1 is untrue, but that it is inadequate. It is like saying "Accidents are caused by slippery roads." That is a true statement. But it means neither that every accident is caused by slippery roads nor that slippery roads always cause accidents. There are other dynamics, other realities out there that must be accommodated in any worldview, in any theological system.

And so we need another box, a Box #3, that says "Not all who sin suffer." And here is Job's point: if your arguments can't explain this box, perhaps there is another box out there they can't explain either.

Box Four: Job's Experience

We need another box. There is more yet to explain, precisely the suffering of the innocent. Job is innocent, more righteous than any man on the face of the earth, and yet he is suffering, suffering terribly. These are undeniable realities, as hard as the friends tried to deny the former. There would appear to be only one possible box left that might accommodate what Job is going through. Job doesn't yet have a handle on it, he doesn't see it clearly, but his line of reasoning is beginning to give it shape. This is the box I'd like to look at from our text this morning, and I'd like to do it by taking us into Job's world as it confronts him "right now" in Job's life.

1. Job's innocence

He has already intimated this (16:17), but now that Eliphaz has made the accusation crystal clear, Job feels he must respond with equal clarity.

23: 4-7, 11, 12

27:2-6 "As God lives" was a form of an oath, saying God can kill me if not true

29:14

31 Job's final legal brief, 16 "If I have. . ." couplets, saying if had done these various sins, then he should be punished in these particular ways. Note the greatness of these claims! D.A. Carson, "Would to God I could claim half so much." Conclusion in vv. 35-37. So, v. 40, the words of Job are ended, he rests his case.

The point is not that Job was sinless; the point is comparative piety. None other than God Himself, twice, called Job "blameless and upright, who fears God and turns away from evil." But of course we know from Rom. 3:23 and elsewhere that Job was of course in fact a sinner. Compared to a holy God, he is a sinner; compared to other humans, he is a saint. And that's the point: if comparatively good people suffer for their sins, why isn't everyone else in the world suffering more than Job. His pain seems altogether disproportionate when compared against God's dealings with others.

So, with this point firmly established, we see that Box #1 is not sufficient. It is true; it is not the whole truth. Correct but not complete. Accurate but not adequate.

2. Job's abandonment

We must remember that Job is not conducting an experiment on the suffering of the innocent, nor is he aware that he himself is the subject of an experiment. This is very much real life for him, not just a reality show. It's not even the Truman Show, an artificial world from which he will one day escape. All that he owned and his 10 children were taken from him, violently, in a single day. Some time later, his health was cruelly snatched from him. And finally his wife, his only remaining companion and support in life, turns against him and says "Curse God" and maybe He will be merciful to you and strike you down dead and you'll be done with this suffering. Job has nothing and no one left in this life. The one thing he has is his integrity, which he clings to fiercely. The other thing he thought he had was his God. But every time he speaks to God, all he hears on the other end of the line is silence.

23:2-9

30:20

And the result is it leads him into despair and, yes, even bitterness.

30:31
27:2

3. Job's terror

Worse than being abandoned by God is to be terrorized by Him. You say, "God's not a terrorist", but that's exactly how Job felt. Look at these incredible verses:

13:21, "Withdraw your hand far from me, and let not dread of you terrify me."

23:13-16

30:11, 15,19,21-23

God has been so harsh with him that even while his soul cries out to talk to God to find out what's going on, his body is saying you better not get near Him or He might strike you again. He had come to the place the Psalmist had in 77:3, "I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint." Or David, in 39:12,13, who said, "For I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were. Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more."

Confusing God

Let me ask, is this the God you know? The same God who dwells in unapproachable light also is the God who came down on Mt. Sinai in a thick cloud and smoke so that when Moses went up the mountain the text says he "drew near to the thick darkness where God was." (Ex. 20:21). This is the God who makes "darkness his covering, his canopy around Him." (Ps. 18:11), whom "clouds and thick darkness surround" (Ps. 97:2). "Truly you are a God who hides Himself", Isaiah says (45:15). Yes, He is a God of light, but He is also a God of darkness, of mystery; He is a God who reveals Himself, but is also a God who hides Himself. Thankfully, God most often to most people is a God who delights in revealing Himself, as He did in sending His Son, such that the disciples could say, "We have seen His glory." (Jn. 1:14). But sometimes in our lives the Sun is eclipsed and we find ourselves on the dark side of the moon. If that has not happened to you yet, it will; if it's not the case now, it likely will be some day.

So in the middle of these realities, of His pain and abandonment and terror, Job is a confused man. 27:14, "Thick darkness covers my face." Etymology of "confusion": With + fusion, 2 things put together that don't fit. Synonyms: befuddling, bewilderment, blurring, confounding, disarranging, disorientation, dumbfounding, mystifying, obscuring, perplexing, perturbing, puzzling, stewing, turmoil, unsettling, upsetting. This is what Job is experiencing, 30:27, "the churning inside me never stops" (NIV). What is theologically self-evident and unassailable in the abstract, is sometimes in radical tension with actual human experience. The existential realities can confuse our theological boxes.

And I wonder, are any of us confused today? You've tried to follow God, know you're not perfect, not depending on good works but the cross of Christ to get you to heaven, but you're trying hard to please Him and BAM! Something hits you right out of the blue and you think, "That's not the God I know." I would suggest perhaps you don't really know God.

So where do we turn? This is where ch. 28 is in one sense the key to the whole book. Remember outline, it's an interlude between the dialogues and the monologues. And it's a poem about wisdom, really a beautiful piece of literature.

- vv. 1-11 You can't mine wisdom, can't get it by human efforts. Man, as a miner, is very clever, but has failed completely to unearth wisdom.
- vv. 12-1 You can't buy wisdom. You can't comprehend its price, it is incalculable. Application for us is you can't get it at a seminar or in a book.
- vv. 20-28 You can only get it from God because only He knows where it is And the way you get it from God is by fearing Him—and obeying Him.

You might wonder what in the world this beautiful, serene poem is doing in the middle of a book full of anguish and angst. Here's his point: there is much confusing about God and His ways. But the only way to try to piece it all together, to make sense of it, is to seek Him nonetheless! And when you obediently seek Him, you will get wisdom and the pieces will begin to fall into place.

Resolution

Not final, because we're not at the end of the book. But as we take our eyes off of man and our problems and our issues with fairness and justice, and as we put them on God and what He is really like, clarity will begin to emerge from the confusion. And there are two main points about God in this section:

1. God's power

23:13 He is sovereign, in control. He doesn't have to ask our permission or explain Himself—He is God.

26:6-14 the things about God that make us tremble are but the outskirts of His ways, the outer fringes of His works. How small a whisper do we hear of Him!

And ultimately we know that we in our human limitations will never fully be able to understand God, for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are His ways above ours. And "Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33) But, thankfully, there is more.

2. God's purpose

The power of God is one answer, and of course who will argue with that. And it's really ultimately the answer that God presents Job with at the end of the book. But there's something unsatisfying about that answer to us as human beings, as much as we are forced to accept it. The "wronged" heart of man yearns for a more complete answer. We want a reason behind activity, a purpose that will drive the mists of confusion away. And out of the blue, like a ray of light in a dark mine shaft, that's exactly what we get in 23:8-10. This is a very important part of Scripture, one that Chuck Swindoll says he has quoted more than any other passage.

8,9: everywhere I turn, He is not there. Even when He is working, v. 9, I can't see him. Yet, v. 10, and here is the beautiful thing, even when I don't know where He is, He knows where I

am! When I can't figure out His Ways with me, He knows the way I take. It's like a one-way mirror, where I can't see Him but He can see me. He knows everything that is going on with me; He is there! The God who sometimes hides Himself never absents Himself; He is who is sometimes in the dark is never in the distance.

Not only that, but, v. 14, He has appointed everything that is happening to me, He is sovereignly in control, He will do all that, and only that, which He appointed for me. All of life comes to me, Father-filtered.

And more! 8b:

1. *When He has tried me:* there is a plan. He is trying me, testing me. This is the only place where Job gets close to understanding what is behind his whole trial. God is, in fact, testing Job, as we saw in chapters 1 and 2, to see if his faith can survive the severing of the link between righteousness and blessing. Job had earlier said, "What is man. . .that you examine him every morning and test him every moment" (7:17,18), but now it is more personal, he realizes that God has singled him out and stuck him in the furnace of trial.

2. *I shall come out:* there will be an end to the trial! It's not going to go on forever, but the test will be over some day and I will come out of the furnace.

3. *As gold:* there is a purpose. God wants him to come out, changed. And this is in fact what trials do to our souls, they purge out imperfections and strengthen our character. Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, Rom. 5: 3,4. James 1:3, "The testing of your faith produces steadfastness." The key to understanding and accepting suffering is not to focus on its causes but rather on its results. In times of severe testing, our first question must not be "*How* can I get out of this?" (Job's wife), but "*What* can I get out of this?" [Wiersbe]

St. John of the Cross: "God perceives the imperfections within us." His love is not content to leave us in our weakness and so

He takes us into a dark night. He weans us from all the pleasures by giving us dry times and inward darkness. In doing so He is able to take away all these vices and create virtues within us. Through the dark night pride becomes humility, greed becomes simplicity, wrath becomes contentment, luxury becomes peace, gluttony becomes moderation, envy becomes joy, and sloth becomes strength.³

This may be hard to see from our perspective. But remember, Rom. 8:28, is an expression of faith, not understanding!⁴

"The Weaver"⁵

My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me,
I cannot choose the colors he worketh steadily.
Oft times he weaveth sorrow and I in foolish pride
Forget he sees the upper and I the underside.
The dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skillful hand

³ David Roper, *Elijah, a Man Like Us*, pp. 88,89.

⁴ Ellison, p. 81

⁵ Quoted in *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Michael Green

As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern he has planned.
Not 'til the loom is silent and the shuttle case to fly
Shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why.

3. God's justice

So we have the tip of the iceberg, Boxes 1&2. Then we have those aspects of life that are less visible, less obvious, but where God is at work nonetheless, Boxes 3&4. But there is still something missing, for if 3&4 are somehow not right, then we are still left with questions.

Where is the justice?

For Box 3, the answer is clear, in 27:13, that God will judge and punish in the end, same answer as in Ps. 73, "until I understood their final destiny." God will, in the end, put all things right and punish all the evildoers.

But how about for Box 4, is that just? Part of the answer is that it works good in us, as we have seen. But the other part of the answer is that ultimately innocent suffering is vicarious, and here's where the Cross fits. It's not just in one sense—but it allows God to remain just and yet justify the wicked.

Application

You fit into one of these four boxes.

Box 1: Examine yourself to see if God might be disciplining, punishing you

Box 2: Praise God, keep walking in His ways

Box 3: Take heed, it's not going to last forever, you're not going to get away with it

Box 4: Persevere. Hang in. God is testing, he has a purpose and a time limit.

When God puts you in the furnace of affliction, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat [Wiersbe]. But how do you hold on? You see, it is a matter of faith. The Scottish pastor Samuel Rutherford said, "It is faith's work to claim loving-kindness out of all the roughest strokes of God." That's hard. And, as your faith reaches out into the person of God, bless Him in the process.

Job was like Sarah Edwards, the wife of Jonathan Edwards. In 1758, Jonathan had just become the president of Princeton, and had moved there to start work. A month later, his wife, Sarah, was packing up their home in Stockbridge, before moving to be with him.

At that time, Smallpox was killing people in the colonies, and a new vaccine had been developed. To prove to the students that the vaccine would work, Jonathan volunteered to take it. It backfired. His mouth swelled and he couldn't drink, and this great, Godly man died at 54 years old.

Jonathan's physician wrote a letter to Sarah. She received it, read it, and then wrote to her daughter Esther, whose own husband, Aaron Burr Sr. had died six months earlier.

She said:

My very dear child, what shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. Oh that we may kiss the rod and lay our hands upon our mouths! The Lord has done it; He has made me adore His goodness that we had your father so long. But my God lives and He has my heart. Oh what a legacy my husband, your father, has left us. We are given to God, and there I am and love to be.
Your affectionate Mother,
Sarah Edwards

And remember, we are not alone. Satan asked God if he could sift Simon Peter. God apparently gave him permission. But Jesus said he would pray for him that his faith would not fail. But Jesus is praying for you the same as for Peter if you are in the darkness. And that, afterwards, and there will be an afterwards, he would strengthen his brothers. (Lk. 22:31,32)
Would you do the same?

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