

Job: Suffering in View of the Cross
Defensiveness
Job 6, 13
Psalm 31

This has been an eventful week in our nation. If you pay enough attention to the news and you are in possession of a certain personality, then you might consider the events of this past week to be alarming, from the wild fluctuations in the stock market to the city of Houston demanding that pastors turn over sermons in which they may have preached about issues that differ with the mayor's position to the around the clock coverage of Ebola, which may well become far more frightening in days ahead. It may never become full blown here, but if it does, frightening will be one of the milder terms we use.

Except, that believers do not have to live in a state of panic. Ever. We do live that way, of course, but much of that is due to our settling into the life of plenty and ease that marks the experience most of us have had. Okay, life has not been easy, but with the expectation of ease accompanied by enough new homes, new cars, enough trips to Disney and the State Fair to validate our hopes – well, we have had it pretty good, here. No more polio, plenty of whole foods, if we want them, and if we want them badly enough, we will find a way to pay for them, retirement accounts, refrigerators, for goodness sake, air conditioning, and, stop me when I have said enough, the ability to pay for almost all services that people used to do themselves, readily available gas to go places, even places where we take a picnic lunch so that we don't have to spend money at one of 100 restaurants in a 10 mile radius, Novocain for root canals, anesthesia for surgeries that extend life in ways unimaginable 50 years ago, and, – you get the idea.

So, how did writers of the NT and the early church respond when crises confronted them? They acknowledged God's sovereignty, they prayed that he would watch over them, and they preached the gospel. Since the time of Christ, when epidemics and plagues visited villages and nations, Christians have often been the ones to take care of the sick and dying, exposing themselves, of course, while taking care of others. And God delivered every single Christian devoted to the cause, right? No. Many of them died. I am NOT suggesting that you unnecessarily put yourself in harm's way if Ebola comes to our area, but I am saying that we are called to not panic and to be aware that God may well call us to sacrifice ourselves in the care of others, if, indeed, we are confronted with such. "But, what about my family?" Well, there is that in the 21st century, isn't there?

I, personally, do not think we will face an epidemic of catastrophic proportions, but that may simply be denial in the same way that many are given to sensationalism with regard to any potential medical catastrophe. Of course, with the current death rate at 70% of those who contract Ebola – albeit, in developing nations, not here – it is difficult to overstate the seriousness of this disease. Let me remind you – we are called to trust the sovereignty of God, to pray much for those who are suffering, and to preach the gospel.

It is appropriate that we find ourselves in a study about suffering with this week's events fresh on our minds. If I were to ask you what your favorite book of the Bible is, you may be surprised at

how much age plays into your answer, particularly with the book of Psalms. If you are young, psalms are nice, but not necessarily the place you would go to for nourishment or challenge. If you have experienced enough suffering, regardless of your age, the Psalms may well be a lifeline for you. It is my privilege to often point people to the comfort that is readily available in the Psalms.

A few months ago, Shelly Willis was in Florida, ministering to her father who was in ICU, struggling with several health issues. I was in touch with Shelly, via phone, when she had stepped out of the ICU room to talk. I asked how her father was doing and she said he was pretty discouraged. Who wouldn't he be? An active man all of his life, now lying in a hospital, not entirely sure if he would ever get out of there? Either way, life would never be the same. I went to the Psalms, to a verse, in fact, that I often share with those who are in a dark place: Psalm 94:19: When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. I asked, "Can you remember that reference?" Shelly assured me that she could remember, but not too long after we talked, I received a text from Shelly saying, "When I read Psalm 49:19, I thought that this was probably not the verse you intended: "His soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light." Shelly said they got a good laugh with that. I love a family with a sense of humor!

If today is your first Sunday, you will likely have discerned by now that our church is in a study of the book of Job. Actually, our study encompasses a broader look at suffering than simply the book of Job. Our time in Job is limited, and, the texts we consider are representative of a much larger body of work in Job concerning the various topics that we contemplate. Today we are thinking about Job's defensiveness, both toward God and toward his friends who have judged him, so far in our study, and who will heap condemnation on him in the passages we will consider next week.

How do you respond when people judge you, as we read about last week when Eliphaz and Bildad both implied and directly stated that Job's suffering had been caused by his sin? When people judge, either your actions or your motives, do you listen and consider what they have to say, or are you automatically defensive? Some will point to your defensiveness as an indication that they have hit a sore spot and that their criticism, or, judgment, is on target. But, what about when you know you are right in what you have done or in what you have thought or that your suffering is not caused by any sin or poor judgment on your part? What if you are utterly innocent, then what? We are going to see how Job responded, then think about how we should respond to the harsh words of those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because of the nature of the reading today, I will ask you to remain seated during the reading of the word, but before we jump in, let's pray.

Before we look at Job's comments defending himself, it is important to recognize that Job did not consider himself sinless, only blameless with regard to the accusations against him, of some secret sin of his wealth being ill-gotten or of mistreating the poor. Job 13:26 and then 14:15-17. Speaking to God, Job says:

13:26 For you write bitter things against me

and make me inherit the iniquities of my youth.

Then, in chapter 14, where Job says if things were as they should be:

14:15 You would call, and I would answer you;
you would long for the work of your hands.
16 For then you would number my steps;
you would not keep watch over my sin;
17 my transgression would be sealed up in a bag,
and you would cover over my iniquity.

In Job 6, our brother begins to answer his friends' accusations. Verse 14:

14 "He who withholds kindness from a friend
forsakes the fear of the Almighty.
15 My brothers are treacherous as a torrent-bed,
as torrential streams that pass away,
16 which are dark with ice,
and where the snow hides itself.
17 When they melt, they disappear;
when it is hot, they vanish from their place.

Job asks his friends, "Can you just support me, please? I need you and you are attacking me."
Then:

24 "Teach me, and I will be silent;
make me understand how I have gone astray

Say something worth hearing and I will listen.

Job 9:21:

21 I am blameless; I regard not myself;
I loathe my life.

I am blameless – I will die proclaiming my innocence!

Chapter 12:

1 Then Job answered and said:
2 "No doubt you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you.
3 But I have understanding as well as you;
I am not inferior to you.

I know the system as well as you do – serve God and he will bless you. Only, I have observed, over the years, that it does not always work out that way. The wicked go unpunished and there is what appears to be unfairness throughout creation. In chapter 13, Job answers his critics, insult for insult:

- 2 What you know, I also know;
I am not inferior to you.
3 But I would speak to the Almighty,
and I desire to argue my case with God.
4 As for you, you whitewash with lies;
worthless physicians are you all.
5 Oh that you would keep silent,
and it would be your wisdom!

In other words, better to be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt. Later in chapter 13, Job contends with God, quite boldly, though, at first he is speaking to his friends about how he would like to have a conversation with God. He then speaks with more reverence when he addresses God directly. Let's begin in verse 15:

- 15 Though he slay me, I will hope in him;
yet I will argue my ways to his face.

In other words, Job expected to die when he presented his case to the Lord, even though he was certain that the facts were on his side and this suffering was unfair.

- 16 This will be my salvation,
that the godless shall not come before him.
17 Keep listening to my words,
and let my declaration be in your ears.
18 Behold, I have prepared my case;
I know that I shall be in the right.
19 Who is there who will contend with me?
For then I would be silent and die.

Now, Job begins to address to the Lord:

- 20 Only grant me two things,
then I will not hide myself from your face:
21 withdraw your hand far from me,
and let not dread of you terrify me.
22 Then call, and I will answer;
or let me speak, and you reply to me.

Lord, please talk with me!

- 23 How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make me know my transgression and my sin.
- 24 Why do you hide your face
and count me as your enemy?
- 25 Will you frighten a driven leaf
and pursue dry chaff?

“Lord, what have I done? Please tell me!” In the end, God rebukes Job’s friends for speaking wrongly about him and he rebukes Job for questioning him, but God tells Eliphaz that Job has spoken rightly about the Lord. We will think about all of that in more detail when we come to the end of the book in a little over a month. For today, it is interesting to note that God does not rebuke Job for speaking to his friends the ways that he did. Was Job wrong to address his friends with such sarcasm and vitriol? I don’t know. Probably, but since God does not rebuke him, I am reluctant to accuse him. The NT seems to encourage us, on this side of the cross, not to engage in verbal jousting with our opponents, either inside or outside the church. There are limits with believers, of course, but we are often called to overlook sins and forbear with one another. In fact, the command to be silent is given on the basis of the cross. 1 Peter 2:21-23 speaks about how we should handle unjust suffering:

21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

That is beautiful encouragement, is it not? Every day, most of us want to defend ourselves. Every day, someone is saying something about us, to us, in front of us, behind our backs – something that we feel questions our character, our rights, our position, our spirituality. Sometimes we are not in a position to respond, to a boss, say, but sometimes we are in a position to respond when we should keep quiet. It is not enough, according to 1 Peter, to keep from responding verbally in a defensive manner, but in our hearts we are called to trust the Lord rather than feeling the need to always defend ourselves. It is impossible to love others as we should when we are always in defense mode. There are times when we should defend ourselves, but many, many times when we feel defensive, there is no need. Christ died for us and the call is always to trust him.

Typically, in this series, I finish these messages on Job in the NT to bring our greater understanding of suffering to bear, but today I want us to close by looking at Psalm 31, which is saturated with gospel truth and has a grace-filled, trusting heart, looking to Yahweh for affirmation and vindication. Jeremiah, Jonah, and Jesus were all moved to quote this Psalm. You will have no trouble recognizing Jesus’ quote when we come to it. Psalm 31:

In you, O Lord, do I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me!

² Incline your ear to me;

rescue me speedily!
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me!

David, the author of this psalm, is in trouble and he immediately appeals to the Lord for help. He comes to the Lord on the basis of God's righteousness, not his own. Job continually pointed to his personal blamelessness as the basis of his appeal. David pointed to the Lord's righteousness. He knew that his only hope was the Lord.

³ For you are my rock and my fortress;
and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me;
⁴ you take me out of the net they have hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.
⁵ Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

Into your hand I commit my spirit. Those were Jesus' last words on the cross. Jesus' betrayal and apparent abandonment by his Father constituted the most unfair death in the world, from a human perspective – and, yet, it was perfect in God's plan to save us. If David could throw all of his trust on the Lord when he was so often unjustly pursued, and if Jesus could put his full trust in the Father when the heavens were silent and brooding, we can as well. Verse 6:

⁶ I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the Lord.
⁷ I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love,
because you have seen my affliction;
you have known the distress of my soul,
⁸ and you have not delivered me into the hand of the enemy;
you have set my feet in a broad place.

Even if you think God does not see your suffering, he does. He will deliver you – and, then, you may go right back into the pits. Verse 9:

⁹ Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye is wasted from grief;
my soul and my body also.
¹⁰ For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my iniquity,
and my bones waste away.

David acknowledges his sin. A fair amount of our suffering is the result of our sin, isn't it?

¹¹ Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach,
especially to my neighbors,

and an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
¹² I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.
¹³ For I hear the whispering of many—
terror on every side!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.
¹⁴ But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, “You are my God.”
¹⁵ My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!

So, David has many enemies who are whispering against him, much like Job’s detractors, but they will not have the last word. Satan will not have the last word, nor will those who accuse you and who scheme against you. God will have the last word. David has an intimate relationship with the Lord and acknowledges that he is temporary, but God is eternal – my times are in your hand.

One aspect of relational suffering that must be acknowledged is that you cannot be hurt by someone unless you love him or her. Twice in David’s life, with King Saul and, then, later, with his own son, Absalom, people that David loved dearly turned against him and sought to kill him. Hopefully no one has tried to kill you, but if you have live long enough, it is likely that someone you trust with all of your heart will betray you. Why does God allow it? He does not say, but always the lesson is to trust God. The lesson is *not* to never trust people again – you don’t want to live your life that way – but the lesson is *always* to trust God. When you do not trust God you will spend your time defending yourself against every accusation or criticism or disagreement that others have with you. Let the Lord take care of those who do you wrong, particularly those outside the body of Christ. Stand together and read this with me, beginning with verse 16:

¹⁶ Make your face shine on your servant;
save me in your steadfast love!
¹⁷ O Lord, let me not be put to shame,
for I call upon you;
let the wicked be put to shame;
let them go silently to Sheol.
¹⁸ Let the lying lips be mute,
which speak insolently against the righteous
in pride and contempt.
¹⁹ Oh, how abundant is your goodness,
which you have stored up for those who fear you
and worked for those who take refuge in you,
in the sight of the children of mankind!
²⁰ In the cover of your presence you hide them
from the plots of men;

you store them in your shelter
from the strife of tongues.

²¹ Blessed be the Lord,
for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me
when I was in a besieged city.

²² I had said in my alarm,
“I am cut off from your sight.”

But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy
when I cried to you for help.

²³ Love the Lord, all you his saints!
The Lord preserves the faithful
but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride.

²⁴ Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the Lord!

The last verse would be better translated “Be strong, and he will give you courage, all you who wait for the Lord.” Do not expect an end to troubles, but you can have full confidence that God will give you the strength to endure your suffering. And he will be glorified! Let’s pray.