

The Cause of Suffering

Job 11–13

This morning we have heard stories of both tragedy and hope. Stories of lives that have been unraveled, and by God's grace are slowly being put back together. This morning we have prayed for many stories of suffering and sorrow in our own congregation. David's accident this week. Gerritt's diagnosis of countless cancerous tumors in his liver. Gary's rapid decline. This world is broken. And God's children are not immune from that brokenness.

The book of Job has helped us take a candid look at how to suffer with both faith and honesty. Faith that recognizes that God is worthy of our worship whether we receive blessing or disaster from his hand. And honesty that realizes God does not silence our cries of despair or expect us to put a good face on it when the world falls apart.

But there's another thing this books helps us do, as we'll see this morning, and that's to consider carefully how we think about the suffering of others.

When someone else's world falls apart, it's hard to know what to do or what to say. So some of us don't do or say anything. Some of us rush in and try to fix the situation. Some of us offer well-meaning platitudes that ultimately ring hollow. Some of us try to explain or interpret the events. Most of us mean well even if it doesn't come across that way.

But even harder than knowing what to do or say can be knowing what to *think*. Did this person somehow bring this tragedy on themselves? Is it their own fault? Is God trying to get their attention? Do they deserve what they're going through? Are they a victim of some injustice? Even if they're the victim, did they do something to attract attention or invite violence?

There is a subtle temptation to look down on someone else in their suffering, or as Job puts it in ch. 13:5, to show contempt for misfortune. To look at someone's outward situation and draw conclusions about the condition of their heart. This is what Job's friends do in their attempt to comfort him in his suffering. And underneath this temptation is a question that is raised and carried through the entire section between Job and his friends: *Can the righteous suffer?*

From Compassionate Comforters to Critical Counselors

We meet Job's three friends at the end of chapter 2, and their conversations with Job take up the bulk of the book, stretching all the way to ch. 31 (or 37, if we include Elihu, who basically makes the same mistake).

But we have to admit they start out really well. Chapters 1–2 set up the story of Job, showing us how and why his world fell apart. Through the narrator, we know things Job didn't know, that the tragedy that befell him—the loss of his entire fortune and family—was a test of the integrity

of his faith. Satan had accused him before God that the only reason he worshiped God was because of what he got out of it. ‘Remove your protection, and he will curse you to your face.’ So God did, on two occasions, and in both of them Job retained his integrity. He grieved deeply. He was undone. But he worshiped God, who both gives and takes away (1:21).

When news of his tragedy reaches his friends, they literally drop everything to come and be with him. They sit with him in silence, mourning with him for seven days (2:11-13). That’s friendship. That’s beautiful. Imagine taking a week of vacation to go and be with a friend who is grieving the loss of everything; it’s no small sacrifice. They start off great. So what goes wrong?

In short, when Job finally opens his mouth in ch. 3, they don’t hear from him what they expect to hear. What Job says, as we saw last week, is how he wishes he had never been born, or that God would let him die, rather than face this kind of misery. He doesn’t curse God, but he does complain about his situation. He’s devastated. What they *expected* him to say, however, was some sort of confession of what he had done wrong to bring about such unspeakable tragedy on himself. They assumed, based on Job’s situation, that his suffering was a result of his sin.

So where does this assumption come from? If you asked Job’s friends, they would probably say what we call *common sense*, or what they call *wisdom*. That’s how the world works. That’s how *God* works. As Eliphaz says to Job in chs. 4:7-8: “Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?” Bad things don’t happen to righteous people. “As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.” If you’re suffering, it’s because you’ve done something wrong, plain and simple. And so rather than complain, you should own it, confess it, and let God start putting your life back together. Their answer to the question, can the righteous suffer, is a resounding NO. For Job to insist upon his innocence is to accuse God of doing something wrong—doing something he *doesn’t do*—causing the righteous to suffer. That would be a perversion of justice.

And so as harsh as Job’s friends seem, from their vantage, they’re defending God’s reputation against the dangerous and self-deluded musings of Job.

Zophar’s Diagnosis and Prescription (11:1-20)

This is what we find when we come to ch. 11 and Zophar’s first speech to Job. Eliphaz and Bildad have already had their turns, and Job has already responded to both of them, in each case maintaining his innocence and continuing to lament his misery. Which is just too much for Zophar to stomach. So he bursts out in v. 2: “Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and a man full of talk be judged right? Should your babble silence men, and when you mock, shall no one shame you?” (11:2-3). I can’t sit back and let you get away saying these things and essentially mocking God. “For you say, ‘My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God’s eyes.’ But oh, that God would speak and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For he is manifold in understanding. . . .” (11:4-6). I just wish God would show up and put you in your place. But since he won’t, I’ll do it for him: “Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.”

Talk about a punch to the gut. All your tragic loss, your livelihood, your fortune, your ten children—you know what, *you deserve even worse*. And the reason Zophar asserts this is

because he is convinced that he has the wisdom to interpret Job's situation. And that Job doesn't. He continues in v. 7, criticizing Job's foolishness.

Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? ⁸ It is higher than heaven - what can you do? Deeper than Sheol - what can you know? ⁹ Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea. ¹⁰ If he passes through and imprisons and summons the court, who can turn him back? (11:7-10)

What Zophar says here is actually pretty good theology. It's not too different than what God himself says when he finally speaks in ch. 38. The problem is that Zophar assumes that while Job can't find the deep things of God, he already has. And armed with that knowledge he condemns Job. He just gets nasty in vv. 11-12: "For [God] knows worthless men; when he sees iniquity, will he not consider it? But a stupid man will get understanding when a wild donkey's colt is born a man!" Yes—he's calling Job a foolish donkey.

But Zophar's not entirely heartless. Based on his diagnosis of Job's situation, he offers a prescription: repent and God will restore you. Verse 13:

If you prepare your heart, you will stretch out your hands toward him. ¹⁴ If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and let not injustice dwell in your tents. ¹⁵ Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure and will not fear. ¹⁶ You will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away. ¹⁷ And your life will be brighter than the noonday; its darkness will be like the morning. (11:13-17)

But you ignore my prescription to your peril. "But the eyes of the wicked will fail; all way of escape will be lost to them, and their hope is to breathe their last" (v. 20).

Zophar and his friends assume that because God promises to reward the righteous and punish the wicked, then if someone is suffering, they must have done something wicked. They don't ask Job how he's doing. They don't try to understand. His outward situation tells them everything they need to know about the cause of his suffering and the condition of his heart.

So what's wrong with Zophar and company's attempt to comfort and correct Job? Where should Job start?

Job's Response: Worthless Physicians Are You All (12:1–13:15)

Job points out three problems with his friends' tactics before offering his own solution to the matter: their false monopoly on wisdom (12:1-3), their flawed system for understanding suffering (12:4-25), and their foolish assumption that they speak for God (13:4-12).

False Monopoly on Wisdom (12:1-3)

Job begins by challenging Zophar's false monopoly on wisdom in ch. 12:1-3. Verse 1: "Then Job answered and said: 'No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you.'" (12:1-2). If there was ever an example of sarcasm in the Bible, this is it. 'Well I guess you speak for everyone, don't you? And wisdom stops right here.' But, Job continues, "I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?" (12:3). He makes a similar point in ch. 13:1-2: "Behold, my eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and

understood it. What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you.” We all know that’s how it’s *supposed* to work—that the wicked suffer and the righteous are blessed. But apparently some things can’t be explained by conventional wisdom, and I’m the case in point.

Flawed System for Understanding Suffering (12:4-25)

Second, he criticizes their flawed system for understanding suffering. There are three things wrong with it. First, it’s *inconsistent*. They think they have God figured out, but their system can’t account for Job’s situation. Chapter 12:4: “I am a laughingstock to my friends; I, who called to God and he answered me, a just and blameless man, am a laughingstock.” That doesn’t make sense. Meanwhile, v. 6, “The tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure, who bring their god in their hand.” So how can Job’s friends miss this? He tells us in v. 5, the heart of the problem: “In the thought of one who is at ease there is contempt for misfortune; it is ready for those whose feet slip.” Because of their system, they think about the misfortune of others with scorn and contempt, and are eager to condemn. If you’re suffering, it must be your fault. But it doesn’t make sense of the evidence. If the righteous never suffer, that means the wicked should never prosper. But here I am, an innocent laughingstock, and there they are laughing all the way to the bank. Your wisdom can’t explain this.

But it’s not really that hard to grasp. Which means that their system is not only inconsistent, it’s *inept*. Verse 7: “But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this?” (12:7-9). If God is sovereign, and I am innocent, then there’s only explanation for the cause of my suffering. God has done this. It’s obvious. How else can you explain it? Verse 10: “In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind.” No one can overpower God. No one can go behind his back or do harm against his will. If I am suffering through no fault of my own, this is from God.

Now Job is not accusing God of doing anything wrong. He is simply explaining him. He has already accepted that the fact that the Lord is worthy of worship whether he gives or takes away, whether we receive blessing or disaster from his hand (1:21; 2:10). That God can give disaster to the righteous is what he’s affirming (cf. 9:22), and that’s what his friends can’t comprehend.

But wisdom is on Job’s side (v. 12). When you test his theory against life, like the ear tests words or the palate tastes food (v. 11), it rings true. The righteous really can suffer. Which means that their system is not only inconsistent and inept, it is ultimately *ignorant* of the true ways of God.

In vv. 13-25 Job gives his own account of God’s wisdom—a wisdom that shows itself in God’s absolute sovereignty (vv. 13-15) and inscrutable ways (vv. 16-25; cf. 9:22). If he tears down, none can rebuild (13:14), and there’s no real predictable pattern to whom he will tear down. “He leads counselors away stripped, and judges he makes fools” (13:17). And not necessarily because they’ve done anything wrong. You can’t predict it. You can’t apprehend the ways of God simply by looking at outward circumstances.

Foolish Assumption that They Speak for God (13:4-12)

Finally, the third problem with Job's friends is their foolish assumption that they speak for God. Job rebukes them in ch. 13:4-12, accusing them of spiritual malpractice. Verse 4: "As for you, you whitewash with lies; worthless physicians are you all. . . . Will you speak falsely for God and speak deceitfully for him? Will you show partiality toward him? Will you plead the case for God?" (13:4, 7-8). Zophar and company think that they are doing God a favor by condemning Job. Job warns them that if they keep it up, they'll be in danger of condemnation themselves.

So this is how not to offer comfort when someone else's life falls apart. A false monopoly on wisdom, a flawed system of explanation, foolishly assuming to speak for God. But how often do we jump to conclusions when we look upon the suffering of others? And how often do we assume that our conclusions happen to line up precisely with God's conclusions on the matter? Maybe not so much with an illness or accident. Unless you've bought into the false gospel of health and wealth, where the only reason someone suffers is because they lack of faith in God, you're probably not blaming someone for their cancer. But what about when their business fails? Or their kids get in trouble? Or their marriage falls apart? Or what conclusions do we draw when we look at tragedies on a national scale from the safe distance of our TV or phone? When we read about Syrian refugees, or another police shooting, or the flooding happening in the south? Do we who are at ease show contempt for their misfortune, eager to mix a little condemnation with our compassion? We have this need to explain tragedy, to assign blame, which in many ways is less about compassion and more about control. But God is in control. And only God can make sense of our suffering; we should not be too quick to assume we've figured him out.

Job's Solution: An Audience with God (13:3, 13-28)

But where does all this leave Job? In ch. 13, he's done answering his friends. Of course he will respond to them several more times in the book, but if they really want to show their wisdom, they'll do it by being silent (13:5, 13).

What he really wants, as he tells us in v. 3, is an audience with God. "But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God" (13:3). There's only one person who can settle this, the one who doesn't seem to be saying anything at all.

If you think about it, this a risky maneuver. Because the God to whom he appeals is the same God who has brought this calamity on him. But where else will he turn? If Job is to be vindicated, if Job is to have any relief from his suffering, there's only one person who can do anything about it. God alone can make sense of our suffering. And so approaching God, who is worthy of our worship whether we receive blessing or disaster from his hand, is a risk Job is willing to take. As he declares in v. 15: "Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face." God may continue to deal with me harshly for reasons I don't understand, but he's the only hope I have.

What Job needs is not the criticism of his friends, but the presence of his God. So if you want to be of comfort when others are hurting, don't worry so much about trying to fix things, or trying to explain them; even less about trying to score a point. If you want to be a friend, point them to God. Sit in silence. Pray for them. Pray with them. Read Scripture. Point them to God. He's the only one who can make sense of our suffering. We must hope in him.

That doesn't mean we'll always get an answer right away. God doesn't answer Job in ch. 13. Or 14. Or all the way until ch. 38. For Job, there are many, many dark nights ahead. And even when he finally gets his audience with God, as we'll see next week, the answers he gets are not the ones he was looking for.

But God will answer Job. And he will answer you and me. In fact he has already begun to answer us in the most profound way—the cross of Jesus Christ. If you want to be a friend in suffering, take them to the cross of Christ. Every human sorrow and tragedy is either a precursor or an echo of the greatest tragedy and sorrow this world has ever known—the cross of Jesus Christ. There Jesus took Job's suffering, our suffering, and made it his. There he took our sin and everything we've ever done wrong, and made it his. He paid for it, by giving his life in our place, that we might be forgiven and free. A freedom we experience in part now, and fully when Christ returns.

So often we try to make sense of our suffering by looking back for some cause—some connection between past sin and present misery—what Job's friends are after. But when we do that we will almost always walk away scratching our heads. But when we look to God, and when he finally answers, what we often find is that instead of pointing us back, he points us forward, not to the cause of suffering, but to its result. God makes sense of our suffering by what he accomplishes through it—making us more like Christ.¹ This is what Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 4: “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (4:16-17).

So how do we think about the suffering of others? Are we eager to mix our comfort with condemnation? Do we draw conclusions about someone's heart based on the trial they find themselves in? Or do we point them to God, the only one who can make sense of their sorrow? Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him.

¹ See Francis I. Anderson, *Job* (TOTC 14; Downers Grove: IVP, 1976), 71.