

We continue our Lenten series on the life of Job. It's easy to pick out bits and pieces of what we like out of the Bible and ignore anything that maybe makes us feel uncomfortable. But if we continue to do that, we are creating in our minds an image of God that is just a reflection of our own preferences. We would never be challenged to grow and change if that were the case. Sadly, we can spend our lives being shaped by a God of our liking. In other words, a God who loves what I love will shape me. We want to hear from God only what we want to believe, what makes us feel comfortable. He is just a projection of us at that point. How could a good God help us if he speaks in such language if he says things we don't want to hear?

The Bible has a word for our own ideas about God. It's called idolatry. Idols, as we look in the Old Testament, were made from wood, stone, and metal. But in our day, idols are more sophisticated. They're mental idols. Instead of being shaped by wood and metal, we get these shapes, these ideas about God in our brains because we want God to be what we want him to be. That's why so many people come to Christianity and see it as just a projection of our human thoughts or a power play by churches to sway opinions toward them and not necessarily toward God.

But what if God just is? What if he is God, no matter what, with or without us? And what if God always will be despite us? What if God is not dependent on us, but we're dependent on him? What if God is abundantly good, yet we are running from him? What if God sees everything sad that has happened to us or happened to those we love in this broken world? God sees everything from a different vantage point, his vantage point. God continues to tell us in his Word, "I am who I am. I am not whoever you want me to be." And there is no better place that he tells us this than in the Book of Job.

We're going to see some intense, and I would even say combative, conversations between Job and his three companions, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. We're going to see these men wrestling with the big questions around suffering. We will see that Job's pain is

real and pat answers don't help him. God isn't making sense to Job. He's having this existential true experience with suffering, and he is questioning a foundational belief that he's always had about God, which is his justice.

Last week, Kevin introduced us to something we call the triangle of tension. In the corners of the triangle are Job's righteousness, God's justice, and this retribution principle. Do you remember the retribution principle? The Israelites correctly believed that God was just, but they believed that in order for God to execute justice, he needed to uphold this retribution principle. The retribution principle says that since God is just and fair, the righteous will always prosper, and the wicked will always suffer.

So Job and these companions believed in the retribution principle. It made sense to his companions that Job must have some kind of sin in his life that he's unwilling to admit, which is why he's suffering. But Job believed with all his heart that he was a righteous man. And they asked, "Well, why are you suffering so terribly?" God isn't making sense to him. Job's existential experience with pain and suffering has created a crisis of belief for him. He doubts God's justice.

I trust there are some of us here today; if you could confess this—and maybe you do, maybe you did in our worship set—confess to God that he's not making sense to you right now. It's perfectly appropriate for us as human beings to ask God why he does what he does. But as we're learning, our world is complex. There's good in our world. There's beauty in our world. There's order in our world. But our world's not perfect. Our world is broken by sin. It can be dangerous. It can be unsafe. So, if God isn't making sense right now, I invite you to continue on this journey with us through the life of Job.

There are three sets of speeches that are given here between Job and his friends. We are looking at the second set of speeches. I'll start in chapter 15, hitting some of the highlights.

First enters his friend Eliphaz. In his speech, he offers wisdom to Job. He makes several accusations against Job, making the case that Job is suffering because he's sinful.

But you even undermine piety and hinder devotion to God. Your sin prompts your mouth; you adopt the tongue of the crafty.
Job 15:4-5

Basically, he's saying that Job claims to be righteous. He assumes his ways are blameless. How dare he have such self-confidence! Eliphaz claims Job is flaunting his piety. He's saying that by Job flaunting his piety, Eliphaz can see that Job is not pious. He feels that by Job saying this, he's rationalizing his sin. This is the accusation that Job is not even aware of them anymore and he's using carefully crafted words that are coming out of his mouth. He's spinning facts with these carefully crafted words to support his assertion that he's innocent.

Your own mouth condemns you, not mine; your own lips testify against you. "Are you the first man ever born? Were you brought forth before the hills?" vv. 6-7

His friend is saying if Job stood before God in a courtroom, God would use his own words to condemn him. Eliphaz resents Job thinking he somehow has more wisdom than other people. Are you smarter than that first man born? Are you smarter than Adam? Where were you when God created the world? Then, in verse 17, Eliphaz says, *"Listen to me and I will explain to you; let me tell you what I have seen..."* He's saying, "I've been around the block a few times, I've seen things."

Then Eliphaz continues all the way through the end of the chapter to give his take on the world around him. He is telling Job to look at the fate of the wicked around him. Job is no different. Job should not even think about shaking his fist at God. Shaking his fist is exactly what Job does in chapters 16 and 17. Here's his response to his companion, Eliphaz.

Then Job replied: "I have heard many things like these; you are miserable comforters, all of you! Will your long-winded speeches never end? What ails you that you keep on arguing? I also could speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you. But my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief. 16:1-5

Job is saying, "Can you try to comfort me rather than try to explain why I'm troubled? Can't you stop talking? What's wrong with you? Can't you just be present?" This is a bonus here. Job is helping us understand that when we're coming alongside people who are suffering, they don't need our long-winded speeches about how bad things happen to good people. That doesn't comfort people. Just be a friend. Just be present. Just be an advocate.

Yet if I speak, my pain is not relieved; and if I refrain, it does not go away. Surely, God, you have worn me out; you have devastated my entire household. vv. 6-7

Now, increasingly, what's happening here is Job is turning from shaking his fists at his friends to making these charges against God.

You have shriveled me up—and it has become a witness; my gauntness rises up and testifies against me. God assails me and tears me in his anger and gnashes his teeth at me; my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes. vv. 8-9

In verse 9, Job uses three powerful verbs. He portrays God here as one who assails or tears at him. The idea is like a wild animal hunting down and tearing into its prey. He says that God is gnashing his teeth at him, which portrays God as being aggressive, showing his teeth, and taunting him like Job was his enemy. And then that phrase translated "fastened on me with piercing eyes." It's as if he's surrounded by these archers who are firing their arrows at him like he was a target and has been hunted down. There's no escape.

Now, look at how his community is behaving towards him. One who was once highly respected and thought of as a righteous man is being treated like this.

People open their mouths to jeer at me; they strike my cheek in scorn and unite together against me. God has turned me over to the ungodly and thrown me into the clutches of the wicked. All was well with me, but he shattered me; he seized me by the neck and crushed me. He has made me his target; his archers surround me. Without pity, he pierces my kidneys and spills my gall on the ground. vv. 10-13

That phrase, "his archers surround me," reminds me of the Midwest, where I used to live. The popular sport in the fall was bow hunting for deer. The bow hunters would sit up in trees in these tree stands and they would wait for their prey to meander through a

meadow. Then they would fire on the deer and the deer became a target. They would take those deer out. That's what he's feeling here. From Job's vantage point, the archers surrounded him. God had targeted him with arrows for no apparent reason that he could see at all. "Earth, do not cover my blood; may my cry never be laid to rest! Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high" (vv. 18-19). Job is crying out for justice. He has faith. He has this faith that there is a witness, maybe not here on earth, but maybe a heavenly witness, an advocate who can provide testimony and will defend him.

My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend. "Only a few years will pass before I take the path of no return. vv. 20-22

So, from here through chapter 17, Job returns to the topic of his own death. He doesn't speak of a future resurrection, as we would think. His faith in God doesn't lead to this future resurrection through a personal savior, but instead, he waits for an intercessor that will restore his life on earth and bring justice.

Eliphaz exits, and Bildad, another friend, enters. Bildad's speech to Job tells us that he speaks less from experience and more from wisdom that he has accumulated through his reading and studying. You see that in his speech. We're not going to take the time, but he uses proverbs. We need to remember what proverbs are. They're true and very valuable. They're words of wisdom. Proverbs are never black and white in every situation. Life is more complex. But Bildad fails to see the nuance here. Wisdom says we reap what we sow. You suffer because you do not know God is what he says.

"Surely such is the dwelling of an evil man; such is the place of one who does not know God" (Job 18:21). This is such harsh judgment against Job. He is telling Job that he is guilty of evil deeds. That Job has no knowledge of God. Job's views of God are inaccurate. I find myself at this point wanting to get into the heads of his three friends and understand how they were rationalizing their own lifestyle and their own behaviors, where maybe just weeks or months earlier, they saw their friend Job as probably more righteous than themselves. Now they're here putting judgment on him, rationalizing about why they are not suffering the way Job is suffering. Because they know deep in their hearts that they are not pure. They wonder if they are

more righteous than Job. But we don't get into their heads. What we see here is them trying to rationalize in their narrow perspective of who God is.

Job was devastated by Bildad's words. *"Then Job replied: 'How long will you torment me and crush me with words?'" (Job 19:1-2).* Then, down to verse 6, *"... then know that God has wronged me and drawn his net around me."* His response in chapter 19 is that his friends have deserted him. God has wronged him. God has messed things up. And that leads us to one of the most familiar and often quoted verses in the Book of Job.

I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; vv. 25-26

The word "redeemer" in Hebrew is *Goel*, which was the inspiration for the famous production Handel's *Messiah*. My first thought is that Job knows he's waiting for this prophecy that's going to be fulfilled in Christ, our redeemer. We would look at this and say that we know our redeemer, Christ, lives. But how do we interpret this *Goel* that's translated redeemer in the story of Job?

In the original language, it's very much like the words advocate or witness. As we looked at earlier, he adds this idea of going into a legal situation on behalf of another. The job of this *Goel*, this redeemer, is to recover losses, to salvage the dignity of one who's suffering great loss. And he's convinced that this *Goel*, this redeemer, lives and that he's the one who helps, he's the way, and he will take a stand for him.

So Job, with his skin falling off his body, anticipates that at the end of his ordeal, God would provide a last-minute reprieve, some kind of healing before he dies. Maybe it's physical. Maybe it's emotional. Maybe it's healing his reputation in the community. We don't know, but we do know that Job believes that he will see this *Goel*, this redeemer, with his own eyes and will be vindicated before he dies, which gives him hope. *"I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (v. 27).*

You see where he's going. There's this up and down and up and down. And when you think about suffering that maybe you've gone through, you think about suffering that your loved ones have gone through; it is an up and down, a back and forth. It is complex. It is difficult. It's a journey.

Bildad exits, and Zophar, one more friend, enters. As Eliphaz spoke from his experiences and his observations, and Bildad spoke from proverbs and pithy slogans; Zophar is the theologian. He wants to look at the history of God's story. What do we know from our understanding of how God worked with his people? We know from the Word that he takes away the riches from the wicked, that the wicked will work and can't get ahead, that the wicked will eat and not be satisfied, and that the wicked will suffer physically from sores and pestilence. There's no prosperity in their businesses; stress and misery are what awaits the wicked.

I remember reading in the past about how one of the biggest fears that the Hebrews had was the fear of drowning and deep water. That's *Sheol*, that's going down and under, and there's a deep fear of drowning in the depths. You see that in the Psalms. Zophar ends in verses 28 and 29.

A flood will carry off his house, rushing waters on the day of God's wrath. Such is the fate God allots the wicked, the heritage appointed for them by God. Job 20:28-29

Job's finally responds. This hope of a redeemer and advocate is carried all the way through chapter 21. He gives this brilliant retort here to his companions about their interpretation of this retribution principle. His response is concise, clear, and true. It's true to our experiences as well. It puts to rest his companions and what they're saying in terms of their interpretation of how God works.

One person dies in full vigor, completely secure and at ease, well nourished in body, bones rich with marrow. Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having enjoyed anything good. Side by side they lie in the dust, and worms cover them both. "So how can you console me with your nonsense? Nothing is left of your answers but falsehood!" Job 21:23-25, 34

Here are some observations about the second set of speeches. We cannot draw conclusions about God's behavior by someone's circumstances. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. We should not expect wicked people to get their justice in this life. I want to remind us all that Job is still wrong about this retribution principle. God is fair. He is just but also full of grace and wisdom. In this broken world, we're

probably not going to see, too often, his pure and perfect justice carried out against evil. We'll get glimpses of it, and it'll bring us hope.

If you've ever suffered at the hands of other people or someone you love has, you'll face this great question. How can I really believe that God is a loving God and just God when so often good people suffer, and those who do evil prosper? The doctrine of justice helps us to see that we're not seeing the end of the story here. There's more to it. God says to suffering believers that the day is coming when Jesus Christ will be revealed. Then you will see the full measure of my justice, and you will see the full measure of my love. So keep the faith while you live out your journey in this broken world.

Another observation I see in this is that we should never rejoice or get smug about the hardships someone is going through or the hardships of your enemies. But we should take comfort in knowing that sometimes governments and courts get it right. Sometimes, justice is served in this world. Let the truth of God's justice restrain us from trying to even the score on earth. Trusting in divine justice is meant to help those of us who've been wrong. This is to be an encouragement to us. Paul says,

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. Romans 12:17-19

So, I encourage you to take a little deeper dive into what Jesus means when he tells us in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Here are a couple of summary ideas from Job's life. In the middle of suffering, what do we do? We need to trust in the character of God. How do we deal with pain and suffering? This is so hard and I don't want this to sound simplistic because it isn't.

We need to know God better in the midst of our suffering. We have so much more available to us than Job had available. We have Jesus to trust. We have seen God through Jesus. We have seen God's character in Jesus. We have seen Jesus suffer. We know that God is wise. We know that he's good. We know that he's holy. We know that he's the truth. We know that he's rich in mercy. We know that he's full of grace. We know that he's a just judge. We know that he is love.

And if we look at the last page of the Bible, we know that he wins in the end. We can trust that there's a bigger plan that we can't comprehend.

So when God doesn't make sense to you right now, don't chase after trying to answer the "why" question. Pursuing the why question is a dead end. Instead, when God doesn't make sense, the answer for us is to move toward God and get to know him better.

The second big idea here is God has a different and perfect vantage point on all things. When Job critiqued God's character, he did it based on his limited viewpoint of his life experience. That's what we do, too. We have this limited viewpoint, which creates a limited understanding of who he is and what he's doing. God's perspective is infinitely broader. When God orchestrates events, some will not make sense from our vantage point. And it doesn't matter how mature we are in our faith; there will be seasons when we will go through things, and God just doesn't make sense.

This week, in one of my devotional commentaries on Job, I read about a woman named Kelly. Kelly suffered tremendously because of an injury she had, and she was in chronic pain. She had multiple surgeries that didn't seem to help. I was inspired by her honest reflections on her life and what God continues to teach her through her long struggle. She was asked this with the gloomy prospects of recovery:

Interviewer: "Did you try to work out why this was happening to you?"

This is a very hard question. After many failed surgeries, I began to think that it might not be God's will that I be healed and that maybe I should stop trying. Stop praying. That maybe I was fighting against God's will. There was this point of growth that I was to not see a failed surgery as a sign from God that I'm not supposed to be healed, but that the process was not just about physical healing, but about emotional and spiritual healing. It doesn't mean that I still don't have days when I feel weak, and I fall back into drawing big conclusions that are connected to my experiences rather than the character of God.

Interviewer: "Did your friends prompt you to identify why you were suffering?" And she said,

At times, I think the answer would be yes. At times, it seemed like God was using my

suffering as a testimony in some amazing way to bring him glory, and that's why the medical treatments didn't work. But then, on the other hand, there were times when I was angry. When my other arm began to paralyze itself, and no doctor could explain why, I found myself asking, "God, isn't this enough? You have used my testimony. Why are you taking more away from me?" And I would try to rationalize it at first, saying God has a purpose and a reason for my pain. And I was getting pretty good at it. And over time, my strength, though, would grow weary and faint. And I came to a complete, broken state. I would cry out to God in despair and yet not fully trust that he was listening. But then I would cry out, Jesus, I need you. I can't do this alone. Carry me through. And Jesus would do just that. The sooner I humbled myself before him, and the sooner I realized I was not strong enough to handle it, the sooner my perspective of my experience grew, and my vantage point changed.

Interviewer: "How have your prayers changed over the years?"

Over time, I found myself no longer praying for my arms, no longer praying against my pain or healing of any sort. There were times when I felt God was saying no to healing my pain, and I would pull back from God because I was hurt. I felt God had abandoned me. But after a season of pulling back, I felt the emptiness, and I could not carry on without his strength. So I prayed that God would give me the strength to endure the thorn in my flesh the way Paul endured the thorn in his flesh. But I was convicted because I still wanted physical healing, and God wanted me to pray. He wants me to pray the cries of my heart. So slowly, my prayers begin to shift again. I do still pray for healing for my body, and I also pray for healing of my heart. And instead of always praying that the thorn would be removed, I pray for the strength to endure and the wisdom to have the right perspective on the situation.

Interviewer: "Any 'Aha' moments that you had that you would be willing to share?"

Yes, every time I had something go wrong with my health, I would hear the lie in my head, "God, you don't love me." When I brought that lie to light and was willing to hear what Christ had to say about that,

emotional healing was taking place. I learned that my health challenges had been diminishing my beliefs about God. I'm still in process, and I'll always be in process. There's growing, pruning, and healing taking place. But I'm not allowing this time to allow my beliefs about God to diminish. I still struggle. It's complex. It's hard, and no simple answer satisfies.

So in the middle of suffering what we can learn is we need to trust the character of God and we need to know that God has a different vantage point on all things. May Job continue to teach us as we're on this journey together.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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