

The Book of Job:
A Window into a World
of Suffering and Faith, #4

Cold Comfort
Job 4-27

--CEFC 1/28/17

So we have seen a godly man reduced to destitution,
despairing of life itself, cursing the day of his birth,
and now we enter into a long and extended disputation
about what he really deserved from God.
I warned you that the Book of Job could be pretty depressing!
That's why I waited until after Christmas to begin.

If the Book of Job were to be made into a TV series,
I think I have discovered the perfect corporate sponsor—
It's a company called **Despair, Incorporated**,
perhaps you've heard **of it**—
It's a company that declares that "it proudly profits on the negative in all of us."
They advertise a host of profoundly depressing products.

For example, there is the Pessimist's Mug--
It's a crystal-clear mug with a line at the half-way point, with the words,
"The glass is half-empty. Deal with it."

Then there are their De-Motivational Posters—
Suitable for framing, with beautiful pictures, focusing on gripping themes—
I'm sure you've seen the kind of posters I'm talking about.
These are a little different:

One says, "**Despair**: It's always darkest just before it goes pitch black."

Or there's this: "**Defeat**: For every winner, there are dozens of losers.
Odds are you're one of them."

Or "**Ineptitude**: If you can't learn to do something well, learn to enjoy doing it poorly."

"**Procrastination**—"Hard work often pays off over time, but laziness always pays off now."

"**Pessimism**: Every dark cloud has a silver lining.
Unfortunately, every year lightening kills hundreds of people trying to find it."

Here's one that fits Job pretty well—
"**Challenges**: I expected times like this—
but I never thought they'd be so bad and so long and so frequent."
That will encourage you!

"**Adversity**: That which does not kill me just postpones the inevitable."

And then there is this one,
 which seemed particularly appropriate for our topic this morning--
 "Mistakes: It could be that the purpose of your life
 is only to serve as a warning to others." //

Today we are going to consider the "friends" who come to comfort Job in his suffering.
 They make many mistakes,
 and it could be, and I think it highly likely,
 that their purpose in the book
 is only to serve as a warning to us.
 Let's see how we can profit from their failure.

But before we disparage these three men, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar,
 we must first appreciate their good intentions.

They are real friends of Job.
 We read back in chap. 2 that
 when they heard about all the troubles that had come upon him,
 they set out from their various cities and met together by agreement
 to go and sympathize with Job and comfort him (2:11).
 When they saw him, they were overwhelmed by his plight,
 and they joined in his grief.

We're told that "**they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights.**
No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was" (2:13).

As we noted last week, Job had entered into the rituals associated with mourning,
 and it was the role of comforters not only to provide emotional support
 but also to serve the social function of helping to bring the bereaved person
 back into the society of the living.

We don't know how long Job had already been grieving,
 but when they arrived, they patiently observed the required seven days of sorrow,
 sitting on the ground in that ash heap with Job in silence,
 and that alone testified to the depth of their friendship.

So far, so good.
 The problem comes when they break their silence and start to speak./

But notice that it is Job, not the friends, who initiates this interchange.
 And what they heard from him was quite disturbing, to say the least.

When Job opened his mouth in chap. 3,
 the first thing he did was curse the day of his birth.
 His words were full of despair,
 as he wondered why he hadn't died when he came from the womb.

But what was most offensive to the friends, and what sets them off,
 was Job's insinuation that all that had happened to him was God's fault,
 and that he didn't deserve any of it.

Job says in 3:23—"Why is life given to a man
 whose way is hidden,

whom God has hedged in?"

The God who had once "hedged him in" to protect him
had now "hedged him in" to afflict him.
Job claimed to be suffering for no reason, and God was responsible.

As pious believers, Job's friends are provoked by this.
They just can't let that kind of talk stand unchallenged,
and so begins this lengthy dialogue or debate or argument
(whatever you want to call it)
that they have with this broken man./

The writer presents this in a highly stylized literary form¹—
First, it written in poetry, rather than prose.
Then it is a very orderly exchange—
none of the speakers interrupts the others—
each speaks in turn and finishes his speech,
before the next speaker begins.
And in the three cycles of speeches, they each speak in the same order.
You could almost imagine something like this taking place
in the U.S. Senate chambers.

This is no ordinary argument—at least not like any argument I've ever been a part of.
It reads more like a theatre production than a documentary./

And though each of the friends comes from a different location
and they each come at Job from a slightly different angle,
there is a common agreement among them.
This is clearly three against one.

And we get the impression that the three friends represent the consensus viewpoint—
what the polls would show to be the community standard.
Job is in the minority.
In fact, Job stands alone--
it is Job against the world,
and they certainly pile it on poor Job./

Their fundamental conviction is quite simple-- God is just—
he is always just, and he will always be seen to be just—
in the here and now.

In theological terms, it is what is called the principle of retributive justice—
which quite simply states that God will see to it
that people get what they deserve.
How could he do otherwise and still be just?

If you fear God, you will be blessed,
and if you sin, you will suffer.

¹ So Longman.

And this principle can easily be turned around—
 If you are blessed, it must be because you have feared God,
 and if you suffer, it must be because you have sinned.

This must be true, because God is just—
 and that's just the way he has ordered his world.
 And the wise recognize this and live accordingly.

The principle of God's retributive justice—
 all three friends insist upon it,
 and so does Job, by the way—which we will look at next time.

The difference between Job and his friends
 is simply the conclusion that they each take from it.

The friends look at Job's suffering
 and determine that there must have been some sin in his life to cause such pain.
 What else could it be?

Job, on the other hand, is sure that he has not sinned—
 at least he has not sinned to any degree that would merit the treatment he has received,
 so God must be treating him unjustly,
 or at least, something is wrong with the way God is running the universe,
 and Job desperately wants to find out from God what he's up to.

That's the gist of it.
 And they will go back and forth making their case for the next 24 chapters,
 and in the end, neither side will have budged an inch.
 Again, a lot like the U.S. Senate.

Eliphaz begins his response to Job respectfully and almost deferentially--
4:2— "Uh, excuse me," he seems to be saying.

**"If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient?
 "But," he says, after what I have just heard from you,
 "who can keep from speaking?"**

Eliphaz then honors Job for the way he has spoken to others in the past--
 v. 3—"Think how you have instructed many,
 how you have strengthened feeble hands.
 Your words have supported those who stumbled;
 you have strengthened faltering knees."

Then comes the jab-- "physician, heal thyself"--
v. 5—"But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged;
 it strikes you, and you are dismayed.

6 Should not your piety be your confidence
 and your blameless ways your hope?"

Then he goes straight to the point –God is just, so deal with it—
 7 "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?
 Where were the upright ever destroyed?

8 As I have observed, those who plow evil
 and those who sow trouble reap it."

Bildad is up next, and when he hears Job's response,
 he turns up the heat—
 He says,
 2 **"How long will you say such things?
 Your words are a blustering wind.**
 3 **Does God pervert justice?
 Does the Almighty pervert what is right?**
 4 **When your children sinned against him,
 he gave them over to the penalty of their sin."**

Beware, Job—your children got what was coming to them
 and what happened to them may happen to you!
 Not the most kind way of putting it!

He continues--
 5 **"But if you will look to God
 and plead with the Almighty,
 6 if you are pure and upright,
 even now he will rouse himself on your behalf
 and restore you to your rightful place.**
 7 **Your beginnings will seem humble,
 so prosperous will your future be."**

Just turn from your sin, Job, and God will again bless./

Job still won't back down, so when it is his turn,
Zophar is harsher still--

11:1--Then Zophar the Naamathite replied:
 2 **"Are all these words to go unanswered?
 Is this talker to be vindicated?**
 3 **Will your idle talk reduce men to silence?
 Will no one rebuke you when you mock?**
 4 **You say to God, 'My beliefs are flawless
 and I am pure in your sight.'**
 5 **Oh, how I wish that God would speak,
 that he would open his lips against you**
 6 **and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom,
 for true wisdom has two sides.**
 Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin."

Take that Job!
 God has let you off easy—
 you deserve worse than you have been given!
 That's a very comforting thought!

Job, your only hope is to repent, Zophar says—
 11:13 **"Yet if you devote your heart to [God]
 and stretch out your hands to him,
 14 if you put away the sin that is in your hand**

- and allow no evil to dwell in your tent,
 15 **then you will lift up your face without shame;**
 you will stand firm and without fear.
 16 **You will surely forget your trouble,**
 recalling it only as waters gone by.
 17 **Life will be brighter than noonday,**
 and darkness will become like morning."

So it goes on—

and Job gives as good as he gets.

He responds to each friend, in an increasingly unfriendly manner,
 Job says in 16:2—"I have heard many things like these;
 you are all miserable comforters!

- 3 **Will your long-winded speeches never end?**
 What ails you that you keep on arguing?"

In the second round of this heavyweight fight,

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar become increasingly provoked and irritated
 by Job's insistence on his innocence—
 his justifying himself before God.

Zophar is indignant—

20:2--"My troubled thoughts prompt me to answer
 because I am greatly disturbed.

- 3 **I hear a rebuke that dishonors me,**
 and my understanding inspires me to reply."

He says in 20:4—

- 4 **"Surely you know how it has been from of old,**
 ever since man was placed on the earth,
 5 **that the mirth of the wicked is brief,**
 the joy of the godless lasts but a moment."

v. 21—"his prosperity will not endure.

- 22 **In the midst of his plenty, distress will overtake him;**
 the full force of misery will come upon him.
 23 **When he has filled his belly,**
 God will vent his burning anger against him
 and rain down his blows upon him."

Job, maybe your previous prosperity was not a sign of your godliness at all!

In round three the gloves are off.

Eliphaz, who began so gently,

lets Job have it, full force—

- 22:4 --"Is it for your piety that [God] rebukes you
 and brings charges against you?"

No, Job, that's not it at all--
 v. 5 **"Is not your wickedness great?
 Are not your sins endless?**

And then, like an accusing prosecuting attorney,
 Eliphaz actually lists Job's supposed offenses--
 6 **"You demanded security from your brothers for no reason,
 you stripped men of their clothing, leaving them naked.**
 7 **You gave no water to the weary
 and you withheld food from the hungry,**
 8 **though you were a powerful man, owning land—
 an honored man, living on it.**
 9 **And you sent widows away empty-handed
 and broke the strength of the fatherless.**
 10 **That is why snares are all around you,
 why sudden peril terrifies you,**
 11 **why it is so dark you cannot see,
 and why a flood of water covers you."**

In the end, all he can do is urge Job to repent.
22:21 **"Submit to God and be at peace with him;
 in this way prosperity will come to you. . . .
 23 If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored:
 If you remove wickedness far from your tent . . ."**

In chap. 25, in his last speech, Bildad has almost run out of things to say,
 so he just repeats what Eliphaz has already said in his first two speeches--

2 **"Dominion and awe belong to God;
 he establishes order in the heights of heaven.**
 3 **Can his forces be numbered?
 Upon whom does his light not rise?**
 4 **How then can a man be righteous before God?
 How can one born of woman be pure?**
 5 **If even the moon is not bright
 and the stars are not pure in his eyes,**
 6 **how much less man, who is but a maggot—
 a son of man, who is only a worm!"**

Not very flattering--this "worm theology."
 No one is righteous before God,
 and Job should just accept that he is a sinner and repent.

This is the shortest speech of the book,
 and in this third round, Zophar doesn't even speak at all.
 It is clear that the argument has run out of steam.
 Both sides are entrenched in their position.
 It's useless to argue anymore
 The friends just give up and fade away./

As I mentioned,
we're going to look at Job's side in all this next time,
but what are we to make of what the friends have to say?

It is clear that in their fundamental conviction,
Job's friends do speak truth--
God is just,
and the Bible throughout affirms his retributive justice.

As we read earlier in our service,
it's found in the Old Testament--

Moses speaks of it in Deut. 30:15—

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction."

If you keep the Lord's commands,
then you will live and increase,
and the LORD your God will bless you.

**"But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient,
and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them,
I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed."**

And Solomon, in the Proverbs, has the same message:

**Prov. 3:1—"My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,
2 for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you prosperity."**

v. 7 **"Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.
8 This will bring health to your body
and nourishment to your bones."**

And God's retributive justice is found very clearly in the New Testament, too--

Gal. 6:7—"Do not be deceived: **God cannot be mocked.**
A man reaps what he sows."

It is interesting that the only passage in the entire Book of Job
that is quoted in the New Testament
contains words spoken by Eliphaz.
They are cited approvingly by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3.²/

Yes, it's true—
God is just, and he acts justly.
God does act according to retributive justice. /

² 1Cor. 3:19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness" (citing Job 5:13);

But at the end of the Book of Job,
God will declare that these friends have not spoken of him what is right
as his servant Job has (42:7).

Why?
What was wrong with what they had to say?

**These friends are rebuked by God,
first, because they speak the truth, but it was not the whole truth.**

While it is true that God never acts unjustly,
it is also true that God does not always exercise his retributive justice
in an immediate and precise mathematical way.
On top of that, there may be other reasons for the way God acts
that are not explained by his justice.
God cannot be put in some neat little moralistic box,
such that his actions are entirely predictable based on our behavior.

We like to think the world is that way—
We assume there is some intelligible moral order
that gives a clear-cut reason for everything that happens.

It's like that song in *The Sound of Music*
sung by Julie Andrews as Maria
when she falls in love with the Captain Von Trapp³--

*Perhaps I had a wicked childhood;
Perhaps I had a miserable youth;
But somewhere in my wicked, miserable past
There must have been a moment of truth.*

*For here you are, standing there, loving me
Whether or not you should.
So somewhere in my youth or childhood
I must have done something good.*

*Nothing comes from nothing;
Nothing ever could.
So somewhere in my youth or childhood,
I must have done something good.*

It's retributive justice—
"Nothing comes from nothing; nothing ever could."
I must have done something to deserve this good thing in my life.

Of course, usually it's the other way around—
it's when bad things happen that we complain about what we've been given.

³ "Something Good," cited in Ash, 92.

Hinduism with its doctrine of reincarnation explains everything according to this rule:
you get what you deserve even if it is based on what you did in a previous life.

But the Bible speaks otherwise—

There is no simplistic moral equation
that dictates how the principle of retributive justice
must be applied.

It is just not true that all suffering is a result of sin.

Even Eliphaz recognizes that—

5:17--**"Blessed is the man whom God corrects;
so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty."**

God can use suffering to teach us.

And God can use suffering simply to magnify his own glory—

When Jesus' disciples saw a man born blind from birth,
they assumed this principle of retributive justice--

"Nothing comes from nothing;"

so they asked Jesus, "**Who sinned, this man or his parents?"**

"Neither," Jesus said,

"but this happened so that the work of God

might be displayed in his life" (John 9:3).

Getting what you deserve is not the whole truth.

And when you think about it,

a simplistic application of retributive justice would mean
there could never be grace.

That's why strict moralists don't like the notion of grace.

It just doesn't fit, for grace can never be deserved.

Grace seems to interrupt the moral order of the cosmos. /

Bildad simply can't believe that God would treat a godly man

the way Job has been treated.

That would throw the whole moral fabric of the universe into disarray,
the very foundations, the rocks on which he has built his life,
would be demolished.

He says to Job—"You who **tear yourself to pieces in your anger,**

is the earth to be abandoned for your sake?

Or must the rocks be moved from their place?" (18:4).

Everything has to have its place, Job--

Christopher Ash writes:

"Bildad and his friends inhabit a conceptual universe

that is like a tidy house in which everything has its place

and everything is in its place.

Or if it isn't, we may be sure it will soon be put back.

They are the moral equivalent of the very house-proud person

who will not abide things being out of place.

Job, they think, is like a rude guest who comes in and wants to trash the place."⁴

It's too discomfoting, too distressing.

Job himself points this out to them--

6:21—"Now you . . . **have proved to be of no help;
you see something dreadful and are afraid.**"

Job's situation makes them afraid that their whole view of God and the world
is going to be crushed.

That's frightening.

You see, within a simplistic view of God's retributive justice,

we can control what happens to us.

Our prosperity is within our power.

But Job's case "shatters the myth that our own righteousness

can protect us from unjust suffering."⁵

You see, by blaming Job, the friends are trying to protect themselves.

We do this all the time—

when we see someone suffering,

almost our first response is to distance ourselves from them.

We read about a murder in the paper,

and we say, "Oh, that was gang-related. That doesn't affect me."

Or someone we know gets cancer,

and we say, "That's too bad, but you know, he smoked all his life,

so I am OK."

We want to separate ourselves from sufferers—

We want reasons for suffering.

We want to establish why what happened to them won't happen to us,

or at least how we can keep it from happening to us.

What we fear is inexplicable suffering, random suffering—

which is just what makes terrorism so full of terror—

Its violence can affect anyone at any time.

A God who seems to act mysteriously, even randomly, becomes terrible to us.

While holding to a simplistic view of God's retributive justice,

both Job and his friends are struggling to avoid that awful possibility./

Yes, Job's friends speak the truth,

but it's not the whole truth—

God doesn't always just give people what they deserve.

There is such a thing as innocent suffering.

And more than that,

Job's friends speak the truth,

⁴ p. 201.

⁵ Reitman, cited by Longman, 67

but in this case, it is misapplied truth.

It is misapplied, first, to Job's **objective moral state**—
we know that his suffering was not the result of his sin.
He is innocent.

And paradoxically, since that is the case,
the friends' exhortation to repent
so that he can again enjoy God's blessing,
was nothing but a temptation for Job.
If he did repent of sins he knows he did not commit,
it would prove Satan to be right—
Job would be abandoning his own integrity
and would just be using God for his own self-interest.
To his credit, Job refuses to go there.

And, second, the friends' truth is not only misapplied to his objective moral state,
it is also misapplied to Job's **subjective state of mind**.

What they gave Job was not what he needed.

Job was in the depths of a deep, deep pit of despair—
and for good reason.
Everything that he valued—
his property,
his position in society,
his entire family,
his health,
even the loyalty of his wife—
it had all been taken from him.
And his God was nowhere to be found.

He speaks out of the anguish of his heart,
but the friends respond to him as if they were in a theology classroom.
The friends "rationalize rather than sympathize."⁶
They speak from the detached security of the academic arm chair,
while Job is writhing in the pain of the sufferer's wheelchair.⁷

One commentator writes:

"True words may be thin medicine for a man in the depths."⁸

Their insistence that their truth applies to Job's situation
only makes his anguish even more agonizing.
No wonder Job calls them "**miserable comforters**" (16:3).

⁶ Habel, cited in Wilson.

⁷ So Ash.

⁸ Ibid. 123f.

And as a foil to Job, it appears that the friends' sole purpose in the book
is to serve as a warning to us.
So what can we learn from their mistakes?

Let me suggest four areas of application
if you want to avoid being a miserable comforter
as you minister to someone who is suffering—

1) First, I would simply say, **be sensitive and be patient.**

Be sensitive to the various emotional stages that a grieving person may go through.
It may be shock, or denial, or anger, or depression—
or all of them all mixed together.

Recognize that the suffering person may say things
that they would never say in their more rational moments—
and that's OK.
Just be patient with them.

Don't feel as though this is the time for a theology lecture.
That's not what is needed.

I referred to John Feinberg's case last week.

He had written Ph.D. dissertation on the problem of evil,
yet when evil came into his own life in the form of his wife's brutal illness,
he wrote:

"I had all these intellectual answers,
but none of them made any difference in the way I felt."
And we need to be sensitive to that.

We must learn to "**mourn with those who mourn**" (Rm. 12:15).

Sometimes--maybe most of the time--
the best thing we can do is simply show up—
our presence, our listening ears,
and yes, our tears, may mean more than we know.

Feinberg makes some quick suggestions when you visit a person who is suffering deeply--

- 1) don't minimize their pain.
- 2) don't glibly quote Bible verses.
- and 3) beware of saying, "I know how you feel."

It's probably not true, and it probably doesn't matter.
They don't want to know how you feel;
they want to know that you care.

So be sensitive to those who are suffering.
Be patient with them.

Second, I would say, Be humble.

Job's friends thought they knew why Job was suffering,
but they were wrong.

And finally, I would say, **Be prayerful.**

You see, the central message of this dialogue with the friends,
and in fact of the whole book,
is that, in the end, **only God himself could bring comfort to Job.**

The problem of suffering is ultimately a very personal one:
We wonder if God really cares.

Yes, God can use us as the instruments of his love—
but we can't give people who suffer what they need most.

That's why we want to point them to the love of God,
for it is God they need more than us.

Point people to the God who cares—
the God who in his Son Jesus Christ has drawn near to us,
and, in fact, shares in our suffering—
Jesus is a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses,
for he has been tempted in every way, just as we are.
And in his suffering, he even asks our question—"Why?"

In our prayer for those who suffer
we long to connect them with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,
who is able to comfort us in all our troubles (2 Cor. 1:3,4). /

In 1940 at the height of the Battle of Britain in WWII,
C. S. Lewis published his book *The Problem of Pain*.

In his preface to that book he explained its purpose—
to address certain intellectual problems associated with human suffering.

And then he added this sentence:

"For the far higher task of teaching fortitude and patience
I was never fool enough to suppose myself qualified,
nor have I anything to offer my readers
except my conviction that when pain is to be borne,
a little courage helps more than much knowledge,
a little human sympathy more than much courage,
and the least tincture of the love of God more than all."¹⁰

When people are in the depths of pain
some taste of the love of God is what they most need,
but it is in that condition that many find it most difficult to pray.
Shall we not pray for them?

Let's pray right now.

¹⁰ Cited in Carson, *How Long?*, p. 225.

Prayer—

We pray that we might be instruments of your grace and love
as we seek to comfort those who suffer.

We pray that you would shine your light into their darkness
and bring strength and courage and hope.

May we be patient—sensitive to their need,
humble—not presuming to know more than we do;
practical
and prayful

As our Benediction: *Shine On Us*

The Book of Job:
A Window into a World
of Suffering and Faith, #4
1/28/17

Cold Comfort: Job's Three Friends Job 4-27

Job's three friends come to help, but they end up doing more harm than good, and in the end they receive a divine rebuke. This morning we look at their exasperating attempts to set Job right and seek to learn from their mistakes.

I. A Description of the Debate

An Insistence on God's Retributive Justice

II. An Evaluation of Their Arguments:

The Friends Speak Truth, but . . .

A. It is Not the Whole Truth

B. It is Misapplied Truth

By blaming Job, they protect themselves.

III. A Prescription for Us as "Comforters"—

A. Be Sensitive

B. Be Humble

C. Be Practical

D. Be Prayerful

Our Ultimate Need Is to Know the Love of God

Sermon Discussion:

**Cold Comfort
Job 4-27**

- Have you ever been in real suffering? What did you find most helpful? What didn't help?
- What has been your experience trying to help people who were suffering? What have you learned from it? What have you learned not to do?
- What was wrong with the viewpoint of Job's friends regarding his suffering?
- What do we mean by God's retributive justice? Does God always act according to his retributive justice? Why do we want to think that God always deals with people according to what they deserve?
- What is some way that you might be able to help someone who is suffering now?
- Who can you pray for now that God may be their comforter?