

Job's Three Friends, Conversation #1: Job 4-14
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In a book entitled, *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis records the anguish he experienced in the loss of his wife to cancer. In some ways, the emotions he expresses are similar to Job's in chapters 3 and following. He is confused, angry, despairing, questioning. Lewis asks, "where is God?" He said he felt like God had slammed the door in his face and bolted and double bolted the door on the inside. There was silence, and the longer he waited the more emphatic the silence became.¹ In the depths of his anguish he voiced his complaint with God. He said that it was difficult to pray because of all the prayers he and his wife had offered up to God, hoping and trusting that God may heal her. He said, "Not hopes raised merely by our own wishful thinking; hopes encouraged, even forced upon us, by false diagnoses, by X-ray photographs, by strange remissions, by one temporary recovery that might have ranked as a miracle. Step by step we were 'led up the garden path.' Time after time, when He seemed most gracious He was really preparing the next torture."² In his next journal entry he immediately corrects himself. He says, "I wrote that last night. It was a yell rather than a thought. Let me try it over again." Lewis wrestles to come to terms with the things he knows to be true about God, and the deep pain in his own heart. And we see him very vulnerable and transparent in his grief.

In Job 3, which we studied last week, we observed Job in the utter depths of despair. He cursed the day of his birth. He desired death. He questioned life. He had lost his possessions and his children, he was afflicted with severe sickness, and his wife had discouraged him further in the face of these trials. And while his trust in God was initially strong, the reality of what has happened has now brought him very low. Beginning in chapter 4 Job encounters yet another trial, which comes in the form of so-called friends. Matthew Henry compares the three friends to the messengers in chapter 1 who brought Job the bad news of what had happened to his belongings and to his children. The messengers came one right after the other with tragic news. The friends spoke to him one after the other with harsh censures. And both the messengers and the friends, unknowingly, were serving Satan's purpose in attempting to bring Job to a point of cursing God.³ The

¹ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1961), Pg. 9.

² Pg. 27.

³ Henry, Matthew: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody : Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, S. Job 8:1

greater purpose in all of this, God's sovereign purpose, is what actually comes to fruition, which we'll see when we come to the end of the book.

What we need to see this morning is the theology of the three friends, and how it is mistaken. And then we'll also look at how Job responds to his friends.

The Theology of the Three Friends

We should first remember that they are to be commended for a couple of things. They did make the effort to meet together and travel to be with their friend Job in his suffering. And when they arrived, they did not immediately begin to speak. They wept and tore their clothes and sprinkled dust on their heads. And they sat with Job for seven whole days without a word. It was Job who finally broke the silence in chapter 3, and now in chapter 4 the friends begin to respond.

There is a very clear format to these speeches. Eliphaz speaks first. It could be that he was the oldest and therefore was given the privilege of going first. Then Job responds. Then Bildad speaks and Job responds. And finally, Zophar speaks and Job responds. This takes us through chapter 14, which is what we'll cover today. Then there are two more cycles of this same exact pattern, the only change being that Zophar remains silent in the third time around.

The first speech of Eliphaz is found in chapters 4-5. He is the most gentle of the friends, and begins with a kind word, even though it is brief. He says in verses 3-4, "Behold, you have instructed many, and you have strengthened the weak hands. Your words have upheld him who was stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees." But then very quickly Eliphaz gets to the issue that all three friends will emphasize again and again. It is summed up in verses 7-8, "Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same."

The friends obviously had no knowledge of the events of chapters 1-2. They didn't have the vantage point that we have to be able to see the discussions between God and Satan that brought all of this about. Eliphaz and Bildad and Zophar did not know that Job had actually been singled out by God as a blameless and upright man, who feared God and turned away from evil. They didn't know that the very reason Job was being afflicted so severely was because of his godliness. Without this understanding of what was going on, and instead with a simplistic understanding of how God works, their assumption was that Job must have sinned in some grievous way that prompted God to discipline him like this.

These men had a very basic understanding of how God deals with us. On the one hand there are the righteous, who receive blessings from God. And on the other hand there are the wicked who receive punishment from God. Those are the two categories. And therefore since Job is suffering, he must have sinned in some way to deserve this suffering. That's the conclusion that Eliphaz and the other friends come to. And we should acknowledge that this seems to be a reasonable and logical conclusion. It certainly resonates with our sense of justice and how things should work in life. You live right, and things will go well for you. You mess up, and you're going to have problems. That's what Eliphaz is saying here in 4:7-8. He's saying to Job, the way I see it, those who suffer are those who have done evil.

Now what's wrong with that statement? Certainly we would agree that God is just and that He does punish sin, and that we're all sinners who deserve His punishment. But what Eliphaz fails to understand is that God may have other purposes in suffering. Eliphaz doesn't have a category for the righteous sufferer. He speaks from his own experience in life and what he has observed. Verse 8, "As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same." And certainly that is true in many cases. But we could say to Eliphaz (as Job does later), I have also seen godly saints, men and women who love the Lord and are dedicated to Him, and yet they are stricken with cancer, or they lose a loved one, or they lose their job. What about them, Eliphaz? What's going on in those situations?

Eliphaz does affirm that God disciplines His children for their good. In 5:17-18 he says, "Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproves; therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he binds up; he shatters, but his hands heal." This is true. It is what Hebrews 12 tells us, that "the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (verse 6). We should be aware that, in the midst of our suffering, God wants to refine us and sanctify us. We should be looking for the lessons that He has for us in our trials.

John Calvin, in a sermon on Job 5:17, says, "Now, then, seeing that by nature we are rebels against God, that as soon as He touches us with His little finger we are offended, seeing also that we have such pride in us that it seems to us that God does us wrong when He chastises us; when, I say, we have these two such great vices it is very difficult to purge us of them. All the more ought we to meditate on the doctrine which is here shown us: namely, that our God by afflicting us wills to bring us under Himself, yea, for our benefit and for our salvation."⁴ This is an important truth, and one that should bring us great comfort in our

⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons from Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pg. 41.

suffering. God means to sanctify us and refine us as He puts us through the fire of trials.

But Eliphaz declares this truth with the assumption that Job must have committed a particular sin for which God is disciplining him. And since we've read chapters 1-2, we know this is not the case. Eliphaz concludes that Job has sinned in some way that has brought on this suffering. But if Job were to seek God (5:8), then the suffering should soon be over.

The same basic sentiment is expressed by Bildad in chapter 8, although in harsher terms. He says in 8:3-6, "Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression. If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation." What an insensitive and untrue statement for Bildad to make to Job. He says, your children died because of some sin. It was punishment, pure and simple.

Finally, we see this in the words of Zophar as well. He says very harshly in 11:6, "Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves." It's easy to see how the tension is building between Job and his friends, for he is receiving no compassion from them, and instead only accusations. Zophar looks into the intense suffering that Job is going through, and tells him, you deserve even worse. Again, there's truth in the statement, in that we all deserve eternal punishment for our sin. But Zophar is speaking from his simplistic and self-righteous understanding of God's justice. He must assume that he, himself, is doing well because he is not suffering. And Job must be sinning horribly because God is punishing him so severely, and he deserves even worse.

Then in 11:13-16 he tells Job, "If you prepare your heart, you will stretch out your hands toward him. If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and let not injustice dwell in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure and will not fear. You will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away." Zophar is calling Job to repent of his sin. He says, if you will only repent of whatever hidden and unconfessed sin you have in your life, then everything will go well for you again. It's all because of your sin that you are suffering. Just repent and everything will turn around for you.

That's the theology of the three friends. God is just, and He rewards righteousness and punishes wickedness. And since Job is clearly being afflicted, it must be because of some wickedness in his life. Therefore instead of sympathizing with him or seeking to

comfort him in any way, they rebuke him and call him to repent of his sin. There are elements of truth to what they are saying, but they are approaching the situation in entirely the wrong way. And the thing that keeps them from understanding Job's situation is the fact that they cannot conceive of a righteous sufferer. They don't have a category for someone who is suffering under God's hand, not because they have been living a wicked life, but simply as part of God's plan to bless His children and glorify His own Name. That's what is happening in Job's life. He's not suffering because he is wicked. He is suffering because he is blameless and upright, one who fears God and turns away from evil. Thus, the outcome of his suffering proves Satan to be wrong and magnifies the glory and worth of God. The purpose of this is to show that Job loves God for who He is and not just for the gifts He has given.

Job's suffering, in this way, points forward to the ultimate righteous sufferer, Jesus Christ, who was completely without sin and did not deserve to suffer in any way. And yet He was tortured and ridiculed and crucified in order to crush the head of the evil one and in order to demonstrate the grace and glory of God.

Job Responds to His Friends and Addresses God

Let's look now at how Job responds to these three men. His response is one of anger and defensiveness. He does agree with them that God is just. He agrees that God blesses the righteous and afflicts the wicked. But Job believes himself to be in that first category. He believes that he is blameless, and therefore he can't understand why God would be causing him to suffer in this way. In his response to Eliphaz, Job says in 6:28-30, "But now, be pleased to look at me, for I will not lie to your face. Please turn; let no injustice be done. Turn now; my vindication is at stake. Is there any injustice on my tongue? Cannot my palate discern the cause of calamity?" Job is defending himself, and he is pleading with his friends to recognize his innocence. He longs to be vindicated. Based on the theology of his friends, there is only one explanation for Job's suffering, and that is the accusation of wrongdoing. Job must be a wicked man to deserve this. And Job finds himself trapped between a rock and a hard place. He is trapped between the justice of God and the simplistic reasoning of his friends. He's confused and frustrated. So he simply pleads with his friends to recognize his integrity.

Then in 7:12ff Job directs his words to God. And in 7:20-21 he voices his complaint with God. "If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind? Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth; you will seek me, but I shall not be." Job knows that he is a

sinner. But he believes that he has been walking with the Lord in an upright way and receiving forgiveness for his sins. The mention of sacrifices in chapter 1 shows that he was a man who recognized his need for God's grace, and he was concerned to live a life of repentance and faith, and to lead his family in doing the same.

What Job does not understand is why God would be targeting him. What does God have against him? Why won't God forgive him? In his despair and confusion he can only look to the grave as the end of his suffering. D. A. Carson comments, "Job does not claim sinless perfection. He simply argues that any conceivable sin he may have committed does not justify being made a target of the Almighty."⁵ According to the friends, either Job is guilty, or God is unjust. Either Job's guilt has prompted these trials, or God is unjust to send the trials. And, of course, since they are unwilling to question God's justice, the conclusion is that Job must be guilty. Job essentially agrees with much of what they're saying about God, although he maintains that he is not guilty. Therefore he's confused and frustrated and without an advocate as he pleads his case.

In chapter 9, following the speech by Bildad, Job says in his response to him in 9:32-35 (speaking of God), "For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both. Let him take his rod away from me, and let not dread of him terrify me. Then I would speak without fear of him, for I am not so in myself." Job, in the midst of his struggles, recognizes something very important here. He comes to a realization that I hope every person here will come to, if you haven't already. It's the realization, first of all, that God is not a man and that we cannot answer Him or debate with Him. A second important aspect of this realization is that we need an arbiter. We need a mediator—Someone who will bridge the gap between us and God, Someone who will erase the enmity and bring peace. Job certainly did not find this in the counsel of his friends. They were of no help in reconciling Job's relationship with God.

But there was One to come, who would be our mediator. As Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:5-6, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time." Jesus Christ is the arbiter that Job was yearning for. Jesus Christ is our only hope of escaping God's rod, as Job hoped to do. It's because of Jesus that we don't have to dread and be terrified of God. In a better moment, Job would later confess his belief that this mediator, this Redeemer, would one day

⁵ D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), pg. 163.

come. In 19:25, where he testifies, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.”

But that is not the main theme of Job’s sentiment throughout these chapters of discourse with the three friends. He is mostly in emotional turmoil, trying to figure out why all of this would be happening to him even though he was a man of integrity.

At various points Job’s disdain for his friends comes across with the same intensity with which they have rebuked him. He feels cornered by their accusations, and as Derek Thomas says, “he lashes out like a wounded animal, biting and snarling because his own survival is at stake.”⁶ You can see this in 12:2, where Job says sarcastically, “No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you.” Or in 13:4-5 where he complains, “As for you, you whitewash with lies; worthless physicians are you all. Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom!”

A key point in Job’s rebuttal is the observation that the wicked are not always confronted with trials. The friends portray things in such a black-and-white fashion that they miss reality. Job says in 12:6, “The tents of robbers are at peace, and those who provoke God are secure, who bring their god in their hand.” Job is saying to his friends, wait a minute. I’ve been around awhile myself, and I’ve observed life, and I’ll tell you what, it’s not as simple as you make it seem. Job makes the important point here that there are many wicked individuals who have very nice comfortable lives. So it can’t be correct for the three friends to assume that Job’s suffering is punishment for sin. Because you look around and you see wicked individuals who prosper, and you see godly people who suffer. The assumptions of the friends just don’t fit with reality. There are devout Christ-followers suffer in extraordinary ways, and at the same time there are others who continue in hard-hearted rebellion against God and slander the Name of Christ, and it seems like they’re living the good life. They have health and riches and power and fame. It doesn’t seem to add up. Unless God’s providential control over all things has a mysterious element to it that is bigger than simply rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked *in this life*.

This is what Job is yearning to understand. He knows that God is sovereign and that He is just. Job is also convinced of his own integrity. He acknowledges that he is a sinner, but he believes himself to be a man who loves God and has sought to live a blameless life before God. So he is left with this mystery of why this is happening to him.

At the end of this cycle of conversations, Job in ways sounds like he did in chapter 3. He muses over death, and expects it to come soon. And then he questions what will happen after

⁶ Sermon on Job 8-9, www.fpcjackson.org

death. In chapter 14:7-9 he observes that a tree has hope, because even after it is cut down it will grow back. Then he contrasts that with mankind in verse 10, “But a man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?” But even in the midst of this despair there are glimmers of hope that shine through. In 13:15 he says, “Though he slays me, I will hope in him.” He anticipates death, but there is a pinprick of hope that shines into a deep darkness. Then in 14:14-17 he says, “If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my renewal should come. You would call, and I would answer you; you would long for the work of your hands. For then you would number my steps; you would not keep watch over my sin; my transgression would be sealed up in a bag, and you would cover over my iniquity.” Job here is longing for a day when God might cover over his sin and remember it no more. He has hope that that day may eventually come.

If you are in the depths of despair, or if you can remember a time when you were, then you can probably identify with the ups and downs of Job’s journey. What we are so fortunate to have that Job did not have, is the full revelation of God’s Word, showing us what Christ has done for us on the cross and the amazing promises that are ours because of Christ. We don’t have to wrestle with the questions of God’s justice and our sin in the same way that Job did, because we can look back to the cross where our transgressions were sealed up in a bag, where our iniquity was covered over, so that God is not keeping watch over our sin. For those who are repenting of sin and trusting in Christ, God has forgiven our sin through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Christ took the punishment for our sin. And now we can face each new trial with the assurance that God has ordained it for our good. Even though it may hurt a great deal, it is for our eternal good.

I’ll close with another quote from C. S. Lewis, again from *A Grief Observed*. He writes, “The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe that there is any use in begging for tenderness. . . . suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless.”⁷ This may be a difficult word for us to hear, but it should ultimately give us great hope. It is really no use to beg for tenderness from God. It is no use to request an easy and comfortable life. He is the surgeon who must cut us in order to heal us. He must cut away the cancer of sin that is killing us and stealing our joy. The operations will be painful. But the

⁷ Pg. 35-6.

wonderful news is that we will live, and we will be forever with Him in paradise. So press on, brothers and sisters, in whatever hardships you are facing or will face, for God is, indeed, blessing you. It may seem that He is hurting you, but it is only so that He might heal you.