

Miserable Comforters

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it is really good to be with you. I actually had the joy and the privilege of being down at the wedding last night. It was really good. The six o'clock start wasn't so great, but McDonald's made up for it on the way.

So it is good to be here, though, and it is good to be looking at the book of Job. And as I've been thinking about it and as I've been spending this time going through it, and as I've just been spending my time in this church, I've been thinking, and maybe you've had these questions yourself.

When you're faced with a loved one, like we've seen with Job, or someone you know who's suffering, how do we feel when we go to them and we try and speak? How do we feel when we try and find some words that have some meaning, that can matter or even reach into it?

We feel almost like we have nothing to say. It's almost our words are empty. But we feel like we should say something. And it sometimes just comes out with something as like a pat phrase, like, oh, don't worry, it'll all work out in the end.

Or, oh, just think how strong you're going to be when you overcome this. Or, don't worry, I'm praying for you. And I think I realize just how empty these words can be when I try and say them to myself.

[1 : 1 9] And I realize just how hard it is to really hold on to them. You know, you say them and it almost just vanishes in the moment of when you're feeling that weakness and that lostness.

We try and come up with hopeful words. And this is all throughout our culture. And actually, society as a large has very little to say about suffering.

And actually, it sounds quite a lot like what we'll see in the passage today. It's kind of karma or karma light of good things happen to good people, bad things happen to bad people. But we can't avoid the bad things happen to bad people.

And we say, well, just do good and good things come. We don't really know what to do with suffering. And that's hard. It's hard to know where to speak to our friends.

What do we speak into darkness? Where is the light for people? Well, these three friends of Job that we were hearing about think they have answers.

[2 : 2 6] But are they right? And I do think there is hope for us in this passage. But we need to dig a little to find it. There's actually quite a lot of it.

But I hope we'll just dip in. And actually, there's 28 chapters of conversation between these friends of Job and later. But you'll be thankful we're not going to spend all of them.

We're not going to look at all these verses. But we're going to look at this sermon just in two sections. First of all, looking at what is said by these men. And then learning, I think, how can we respond?

Not going to give you all the answers, unfortunately. And maybe you might need to stick around for the rest of Job and beyond. But hopefully we'll see some things we can see of how do we respond to suffering.

But before we get there, I think we need to stop and remember where we are in Job. For some of you, you might just be jumping into the series. You might be wondering what's going on. Who is Job? What is this all about?

[3 : 23] But we also, for those who've been here, we need to look back. Because this passage will not make sense without it. Because in the book of Job, we've seen that Job is righteous.

He is good. And he's a good man. And he lives his life in a really good way. But more than that, more than just being good, considered good by his friends, he is considered good by God.

God declares to him, have you considered my servant Job? There's none like him. He's righteous and blameless before God. It doesn't mean that he's perfect. But he trusts in God.

And he lives for him. And yet, even though we're introduced to Job like this, we see that suffering still comes into Job's life.

Suffering that's severe, almost unimaginable suffering. But we are told that this suffering has nothing to do with any sin in his life.

[4 : 25] But actually, this suffering has everything to do with the fact that he is faithful to God. We saw that the devil, the accuser, comes in in the first two chapters and cannot believe that someone would follow God and be faithful to him if God didn't protect them from all harm.

Saying essentially to God that they only love you because you protect them and give them a wonderful life and don't let any suffering come into it. And it's an attack on God's character.

What we see is Job loses lots of things in his life. Everything. Even there, though, we get this wonderful picture of Job doesn't understand, but he trusts God.

He still holds out that God is good and in control. And even in that anguish and that despair, commits his cause to God. It's important that we remember these facts, that Job is righteous and not suffering because of something he's done.

And we're told this by God. But while we know this, while we've been told this into an introduction, Job and his friends haven't. They're in the dark to why all this is happening.

[5 : 45] To this catastrophic change in Job's life. And this news of this change, this news of this suffering has spread. And we're introduced to three friends of him who come.

They come from a distance and they come to him. And they're called Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. We're introduced to this back in chapter 3. They come from different places.

And these are men who fear God and they come to comfort God. We're told they come with a purpose to bring him comfort. Like I said, this comfort comes in three cycles.

And each time these men speak to Job, they come with an appeal. And then Job responds. And then the next one steps up and he speaks his piece. And this goes on for 28 chapters.

And actually it is wonderful and it's great to go and look at. And we're going to be jumping into different places with Ali and looking at some of what Job says. But we're going to focus on what these comforters say.

[6 : 44] And because most of it covers similar themes, we don't really have to spend all of our time looking at it because they seem to only have one message. They seem to only have one thing to say in the face of this suffering.

And actually what they say gets shorter and shorter as it goes on until you come to the last guy and he only has like six lines. He doesn't really have anything to say. And their argument is simple enough.

They look at the world around them and they have come up with a nice, easy solution. Like many people around us, they believe that if you're good and you're just and you're kind and you do the right thing, then God will obviously reward you.

And if you do evil, then obviously bad things will happen. See, they hold this as a universal truth. This applies to everything.

And so what they do is they come to Job without knowing a situation and just hit him with it. It doesn't matter what he responds, but they come back. But Job, you must remember, good things happen to good people.

[7 : 49] And look at you, Job. Can't really say that. You must have done something bad, Job. And actually, when Job responds that he hasn't, nothing's changed.

He still loves God. He still serves him. And it almost makes them more and more angry and more and more indignant. Maybe angry's not the right word, but they come back at him. And they come back and they say, come on, Job. You must have done something.

What you see in Job's responses is anguish that is apparent loss in his relationship with God.

He believes somewhat that losing the gifts means he's lost the giver. But he doesn't look for restoration of these things. But he looks for restoration with God.

What you find as you go through these comforters isn't any comfort or compassion. And isn't any help to restore this distance.

[8 : 48] Actually, they make this distance almost seem greater for Job. But also, we get to help again. Not just in knowing the beginning. We also told at the end.

And I always like to jump to the end of the book. I've always done that since the days I was in school. And actually, if you jump to the end of Job, you get to see what God says on this matter. How God responds to it.

And in chapter 42, verse 7, you don't need to turn to it. I'll read it. The Lord said to Eliphaz, the guy that we were reading about today, the Temanite. My anger burns against you and against your two friends.

For you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has. So what we need to remember as we read through these men. Is though they say many things that have truth in them.

They say many things that sound holy and sound wonderful. They have many wise things to say. God says they do not speak rightly about me as my servant Job does.

[9 : 52] These men have lots to say. Many, many chapters. And one of the things we find hard about wisdom literature, it goes on. And there's many cycles and it goes round. But actually what you find is when you reach the end and God speaks.

These men are silent. They have nothing to say. But let's look at these men. They come from this long journey. And they finally see Job.

If you look at me, it says they do not even recognize him. And actually what we find is what they did back in chapter 3 is they just come to him. They tear their clothes.

They see the suffering in him. And they sit with him mourning and weeping for seven days and nights. And last week we saw Job speak.

We saw that with Ali. If you didn't see it, go back and listen to it. He speaks in anguish. But actually, the response of these friends when he starts speaking is somewhat.

[10 : 55] They're taken aback. They think, imagine this believing man in such despair. He claims to know God, yet he speaks like one in suffering.

And upon hearing this, if you turn with me to chapter 4, Eliphaz steps forward almost as this official spokesman.

He's almost uneasy in the face of Job's groaning. He says in verse 2, if one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient?

He attempts to speak a word into this despair, asking Job to listen. He goes on to say, yet who can keep from speaking in the face of such despair?

He says, he's compelled. If you look at me at 3 to 5, he says, Job, look, you taught others. You were there and you cared for other people when they suffered.

[11 : 52] You were strength to them. But now suffering's come to you and you can't handle it. You're dismayed. Pull yourself together, Job. You used to be wise.

And now you're speaking like a fool. And so he tries to remind Job of some facts he has. He says in verse 6, it's not the fear of God, your confidence and the integrity of your ways, your hope.

He says, look around you, Job. Look behind you. Can you ever remember who that was innocent that ever perished? Or where was the upright ever cut off?

Give me one example of one innocent person who has ever come to an untimely day. He says it's never happened. Never will. It's a fact, he says.

Simple, he says. If you live to a happy old age, you're righteous. You die young. You can't have been upright. It's an easy formula to understand the world. Puts it into nice easy boxes.

[12 : 54] And he comes to Job with that. And his view is based on his rock-solid experience of his life. He says, as I have seen it. As I look at the world in verse 8.

Those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. If you plant trouble, you will harvest trouble. In verse 7 he said that the good don't really suffer.

In verse 8 he says the opposite. The wicked get their just rewards. And he says in verse 9, it's God who does this. The wicked get their judgment.

He goes further and he says, Job, you believe you're right with God. Are you so sure? He jumped down with me to verse 17. He says, can mortal man be in the right before God?

Can a man be pure before his maker? The question is, is it even possible to be pure before God? Can it be possible to stand before God?

[13 : 57] To be pure in his presence? And to be raised. And this is something that will come up throughout these men as they speak. He says it himself in chapter 15, verse 14.

He says, what is man that he can be pure? Are he that is born a woman that can be righteous? And his other friend, Bildad, he jumps in in 25. How then can man be in the right before God?

How can he who is born of woman be pure? And if this answer is no. You can never have hope of being right before God. So if anything bad happens to you, it must be you've done something wrong.

This is the explanation for life. And it's almost foolish, he says, to expect to understand anything beyond this. Just accept it.

Don't cry out like Job does. And in chapter 5, in verse 1, he continues. Asking him, who would respond to you, speaking in such despair?

[14 : 58] Suffering so much and believing that you can still be right with God. He says to him, call now. Is there anyone who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn?

Is there any of the holy ones who will speak on your behalf? Come on, Job, where is your evidence for being righteous? Is there anyone who will intercede for you?

No? Not even one of the holy ones? He says this thinking, and he goes on, he says, Believing this way that you can be right before God and yet suffer is to be a fool.

That's a question that kills fools. He speaks in a matter-of-fact way or almost cruelly in verse 3. He says, I have seen the fool taking root, but suddenly I cursed his dwelling.

His children are far from safety. They are crushed in the gate and there is no one to deliver them. He cannot help but feel as he speaks to Job, that you feel Job's pain.

[16:01] As Job remembers that this is similar to his own situation. This is what happened to him. The point is, you're Job. No one can be right with God.

And this is what happens. This explains your suffering. And Elphaz almost goes into blind faith. He says, in verse 7, man is born to trouble as sparks fly upward.

This is just the way of the world. The way of living in a broken world. And it's only his vice. It's the same as those who come afterwards. The other two friends.

It's the job to do as he would do. In verse 8 he says, as for me, I would seek God. And I would commit to him my cause. If you sinned and you must have.

Seek God and live. And we must see that he is genuine. He comes to him as a genuine friend. You see this at the end. In chapter 5, verse 27.

[16:59] He says, behold, this we have searched out. And this is true. Hear it and know it's for your good. He wants him to see that this is what has accumulated his knowledge.

This is what he believes. And it believes. This is what's going to help Job. So listen up. And what we see in the rest of chapter 5.

Is that you could almost be reading it from any psalm. It sounds good. And it's almost a lovely picture of God. Except he says in verse 9 that the actions of God can't be known.

We can't understand and we shouldn't try to understand. He says in verse 17. It's actually Job's to be blessed if he's been corrected. And don't speak against it.

Don't weep, Job. This is for your good. Blessing is going to come. Actually, then he goes on to promise that God is going to protect him from all harm. In verse 19.

[17:56] From six troubles. And in seven, no evil will touch you. And God will give you abundantly children and land and security. But actually, what we see in what Eliphaz is trying to comfort and counsel in Job.

It's actually, it's a bit ironic. It's kind of what, exactly what Satan came and said. That God, they only love you because you protect them and you give them blessings.

Rather than saying God is worthy to be praised. It sounds just like what Satan said. That God, they'll only love you if you protect them.

But what we see and why these conversations go on for so long is Job doesn't roll over. He knows. And Ali will go on and look at these as we go through the next few weeks.

Job may be in despair. Job may be suffering. But he knows that these simple answers don't just work. These simple ways of the world, they don't answer the deep heart of suffering.

[19:03] It doesn't explain who God is. Job is so certain that God is God no matter what comes. And that God is good and in control.

He says, and it's a wonderful verse. He says, yet if he slays me, I will trust him. Job is certain on who God is and his life being safe with him.

Job rejects these men's counsel. Though it torments him. And this is why these speeches go on for so long. They believe they're right. And Job actually comes to them with a bit of sarcasm in chapter 12.

At one point he says, no doubt you are the people and wisdom will die with you. These people speak of what they don't know. They don't know that Job is unique.

They don't know of God's plans. And the starting assumption of all Job's friends that a job is not right with God. And God must be punishing him.

[20 : 10] But actually, the scale of Job's suffering and his righteous suffering is a declaration that people will and do trust God.

People who do trust God will suffer. Actually, Job shows a picture of a righteous sufferer to come. That these men just can't get their head around.

We see that Job's friends have believed there's no hope of being right with God and no hope of a mediator to come. They do not trust God for their righteousness. They want Job to do the work.

And I, for one, cannot wait until we make it to Job chapter 19. I don't want to steal all Ali's thunder from it. But Job gives us a wonderful glimpse of his hope.

Even in the midst of all these men trying to sway him from God's goodness. And it shatters their view on God. You see, Job asking his friends to have mercy on him.

[21 : 16] And then they're pursuing questions of him. And in all this confusion and despair, there's something he holds on to. And it's not in the prosperity and the removal of all harm that would come into his life.

He says in chapter 19, verse 25, he says, And it's almost like he goes on to saying he wants this to be written down.

He wants people to know this. He also says he faints at the picture of this. At this picture of what's to come. See, Job's a believer in God.

And actually, he has faith that God is going. He doesn't know what's going on, but he knows that God is righteous. And God is true. And God will mediate for him. He knows his Redeemer lives.

And it's this hope of Job that keeps him going. Even in the face of what they say to him. And actually, in the face of Job, we actually see in this suffering, there's only one man who ever suffered like Job.

[22 : 34] Job is unique. But there's one like him who suffered without cause. And one who fits this picture of the Redeemer. See, these friends ask in verse 17 of our passage today, Can mortal man be right before God?

Yes, Job will say. For this Redeemer to come. They ask, who is it that is innocent that ever perished? Well, we know.

We know. Jesus is innocent. And yet, he perished. It can't be true. They ask, is anyone who will answer you, Job? Is there anyone who will speak on your behalf? Job says, yes.

There is. Job is here to say that actually good people and people who trust in God do suffer. People who love God do suffer.

And actually, suffering doesn't disprove any of that. And actually, these men say, look around you at the world and see that this is true.

[23 : 39] But Job at one point says, well, actually, it's not. You say, actually, he says, look at the world. Evil people do live to a ripe old age. People who are good do die young.

Your answer doesn't work. Actually, if you look through the Bible, you see that God's people, the people who trust in God throughout it, suffer. Actually, this is what we see throughout the Bible.

This is what we see in the New Testament. This is what we see in all the followers of God's people. They say you will suffer. Being identified with God does bring suffering.

And true, we can suffer when we sin. When we do things that dishonor God, there's sometimes consequences. When you speed through a school zone, there will be consequences.

And if we never ask people about sin in their life, then we might be just as foolish as these friends. But if we condemn instead of weeping and seeing that suffering for a Christian especially is a lot more complex.

[24 : 55] But what is clear is actually if you trust in God and trust in him for your righteousness, you will suffer. But that suffering never has anything to do with your judgment.

It never comes to you as these men claim as something you've done wrong. How do we comfort? How do we comfort people?

What are we to say to people? Because actually the world doesn't have much to say. It doesn't have much to offer people. But a lot of it is just sitting and weeping with people.

Mourning with them. Helping them in practical ways. And there's times for truth. There's times for speaking. And the book of Job is not saying you should never speak in case you end up like one of these men saying something foolish.

But that we should speak rightly about who God is. There's much about God's plans that we don't know in people's lives. And this book is wisdom literature to help us to speak rightly, to think rightly.

[26 : 05] And wisdom is responding with the right words in the right situation. These men have shown themselves to be fools. They don't speak about God rightly.

They speak about God but not from God. They spoke only to Job but they don't speak to God on His behalf. But unlike them, there's much that we can say.

There's much that we do know and there's much that we have to say to people. We can be unsure of all the reasons why and why suffering is there. We don't have to have all the answers.

But we can have confidence that our Redeemer lives. We can have confidence that the people can be right with God and yet still suffer. And also it helps us to understand our own experience of this world.

As we suffer and as we feel the weight of the world. Wisdom is how do we apply the good news of Jesus to our own hearts as we feel that there's a distance between us and God.

[27 : 12] And how do we speak to others as they feel how could I ever come to God? One of the problems we have is we think this world is all there is.

And if God loves us then actually our world should be our lives should be full of everything that is good. And we think actually this life and all we have is everything.

And this is what the world tries to do. There is no hope so they try and say well, accumulate and enjoy. And actually there is comfort for those who are suffering.

And we are to comfort people who are hurting. God can and does heal and restore now. But it's promised that healing and comfort will come.

We do have abundant hope to offer people. And actually there will be a day when tears are wiped away. But that's not the world that we live in right now.

[28 : 16] Sometimes they are. And actually what we see is Paul can speak in the New Testament. He writes to the Corinthians and he says the sufferings that he faced serving Jesus and living for him led him to the point of where he despaired of life itself.

He was brought to the edge and felt he had no strength left. And he asked for these Corinthians to pray with him. To pray that God would strengthen him and then rejoice in seeing that strengthening come.

Paul corrects this idea that Christians should be these people who are always outwardly happy. We think we should always be people who have to smile even though we hurt. And actually this is the problem that these friends have with Job.

They hear his groanings and they think that's not right. But actually the genuine believer can weep and cry and does cry. That's what we see in Jesus as he wept bitterly at the tomb of Lazarus.

He was angry at death. And even though he would raise Lazarus moments later he still wept at the death of his friend.

[29 : 32] See Jesus himself became a man of sorrow. he became acquainted with grief facing death himself. See he identifies with us.

He felt our pain lived in this world. And so he can sympathize with us in our life. And so we like him become men and women who are acquainted with grief as we care and love and serve those around us.

It's not an easy task. It is hard. We can't do it on our own. We need Jesus and his church. But knowing this, knowing Jesus and his suffering actually encourages us as we spend time with those who suffer.

We don't try and simplify down people's suffering. We don't try and put it in neat boxes. We come with compassion and we come with Christ. We have a beautiful picture as you go through the Gospels and seeing how Jesus comes to those who suffer.

Sitting with them. We bring them Jesus' words. And so when you cry out in prayer, when you're faced with someone in the midst of their depth of suffering, or when you come to try and comfort yourself, and you cry out to God, what do I say?

[31 : 01] What do I give to someone? Well, God will give you that. He promises to. He promises that the response from heaven will be to give you more of Jesus to give to others.

Words of life to offer. See, we can know God cares. God isn't apart from our suffering and our suffering actually doesn't separate us from God. That's where these friends have it wrong.

Suffering doesn't separate us from God. God actually steps down into our suffering. That's how we do. Like Jesus, we step down into other suffering.

And we say to people, come see Jesus. Let us read his words together. Let us pray to him together. Let us cry and sing together. And hopefully we rejoice as this situation or the healing comes.

But also we pray and we long for him for that day when it all will be taken away. That one day when every tear will be wiped. Actually, Job teaches us that for him his longing wasn't to be freed from his trouble, but for God to be with him in his trouble.

[32 : 21] This is his great longing. This is our longing for those around us. And this is what Jesus says to all of us here. Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

He says, come. He doesn't say your suffering keeps you away from me. He says, come. I will take your suffering. I will take your pain. And we are to tell others to come.

Let's pray and ask God for his help. God, we struggle in the face of our own suffering and the suffering of this world.

And Lord, there's so much that tries to give us easy answers. But Lord, we thank you that you have answered suffering.

You have spoken to it and you said, I will take it on myself. You are the man of sorrows who became acquainted with grief. Who bore suffering upon himself.

[33 : 22] Lord, who sympathizes with those who are suffering. Lord, who grieves over the suffering of his people. Lord, who came into this world to save those who suffer so they might be with you in a place that is free from suffering, in a new world.

and Lord, help us to be a people who go out into this world as people put on brave faces and pretend that life is wonderful. Lord, help us to be people who are real, who weep, who cry, but are full of hope that our redeemer lives.

That actually our God knows suffering and our God knows the suffering of those we meet before we even go there. Lord, go with us. Help us in this day. Help us as we go through our week.

And Lord, would you be near any today who are suffering. Bless us and keep us in your mighty name. Amen. Thank you.