

January 16, 2022

MISERABLE COMFORTERS AND THE FIGHT OF FAITH

Job 4-27

(3 of 7 in a series through Job)

This was the section of the book of Job that made me hesitant to preach it. First, it's long. The reason I'm taking up chapters 4-27 in one sermon is because this makes up one section of the book of Job. After Job breaks the seven-day silence by speaking his poem of lament in chapter 3—cursing the day he was born—Job's friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) decide to speak, and they take a long time doing it. The dialogue goes on in three rounds. In the first round (chs. 4-14) each of them speaks, and Job responds each time. Then, they take turns speaking again in round two (chs. 15-21), and again each time Job responds. And finally, in round three (chs. 22-27), only two of the three speak, but Job takes the time that wasn't used by his third friend (Zophar) and adds it to his response. And this three-round dialogue takes up twenty-four chapters of the book and seventeen pages in our pew Bibles.

Also, it can be confusing. We know by the time God shows up in the end of the book, he says to Eliphaz, "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" (42:7). Consequently, we know to look for the fault in the argument of Job's friends (and we'll see it), but this doesn't mean that every single thing Job says is precisely right either. After all, he'll admit at the end of the book, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (42:3). Job will feel a bit ashamed of some of his declarations to God by the end. And so the dialogue can be a bit confusing.

Nevertheless, I want to argue that if we'll take the time to sit with this text we'll see that the length, repetition, and even confusing nature of it is helpful for us. One reason for that is that we see Job in the fight of faith, but because of the length and difficulty of this section, not only do we get to see it but to feel it as we walk with him through it.

So here's how I want to tackle this section. I want to work through the arguments of the friends by looking at the first—Eliphaz—as a representative of the others. I think we can do this because their arguments are basically the same, and Eliphaz is treated in the book as a representative for the friends. Not only does he speak first and most, but when the Lord comes to address Job's friends, he speaks to Eliphaz only, saying, "My anger burns against you and your two friends." Working through Eliphaz's argument, we'll also look at Job's response to him, and then we'll try to draw a lesson from that. After working through that, I want us then to look at Job's arguments which he directs toward God. In other words, though Job's friends direct their arguments only toward Job, Job directs his arguments toward them but also toward God. And I want us to see how this develops and what we can learn from it. So, first, let's start by looking at the argument Eliphaz makes against Job.

Perhaps the easiest way to think through the dialogue Job has with his friends is to think in terms of three claims. The claims are: 1) God is just, 2) Job is righteous, and 3) the world operates under a principle of retribution.¹ By “principle of retribution,” I mean the understanding that in this life the “righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer, both in proportion to their respective righteousness and wickedness.”² So, you do something bad, something bad will happen to you. You do something really bad, and something really bad will happen to you (and vice-versa). Interestingly both Job and his friends seem to agree that point three is true. But Job’s friends want to discard the second claim. After all, if the retribution principle is true and terrible things are happening to Job, then they assume that Job must not be righteous, but actually pretty terrible. Job, on the other hand, wants to challenge the first claim—that God is just—because Job knows that he hasn’t done anything worthy of the suffering he’s receiving if indeed we live in a world where the retribution principle holds true (as outlined above). This is how we’ll see the argument playing out.

So let’s look at the argument. As Eliphaz starts out the argument in chapter 4, he seems gentle. He asks Job in verse 2 if he’ll hear a word from him. And he prepares Job to receive what he’s going to say, noting that there have been a number of times Job has been in Eliphaz’s shoes, telling others to turn from evil so that suffering will go away, but now that Job is about to hear that about himself, he seems a bit resistant. Eliphaz says, “But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you, and you are dismayed” (4:5). And then comes his point that it’s only the wicked who suffer greatly. Eliphaz says to Job in 4:7-9, “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. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.” In other words, he’s pointing out what Job should know. Innocent people don’t suffer. Wicked people do. And the reason they suffer is because God is meting out punishment on them. That’s how the world works.

But Eliphaz doesn’t want to be merely a downer. He provides hope for Job, saying that if he’ll see the truth of this and repent, then God will show mercy and bless him again with prosperity. 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. He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no evil shall touch you. In famine he will redeem you from death, and in war from the power of the sword” (5:17-20). It’s as if he’s pleading with Job to confess his (what has to be) grotesque sin, and all this suffering can go away.

But Job responds that his suffering is most certainly not just. First, he claims that if you weighed out his sufferings, anyone would see it’s far too extreme for anything he’s done (6:2). Then, he reiterates that he doesn’t have some grotesque, hidden sin, declaring in 6:10, “I have not denied the words of the Holy One.” And if Eliphaz is so sure that he has, then Job invites him to point it

¹ John Walton notes that these premises form the discussion with Job and his friends. *Job*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 185.

² *Ibid.*, 39.

out, saying, “Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone astray” (6:24). But clearly there is nothing Eliphaz is aware of. He just assumes that if Job’s suffering is so intense then there must be terrible sin in Job’s life. And this shouldn’t be altogether foreign to us. Remember when the disciples asked Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). That’s how everyone is thinking here. And so, like Eliphaz, Job’s other friends also jump in, saying the same thing, but for the sake of time, I’ll move on.³

I’ve mentioned these dialogues take place in rounds. So round one ends in chapter 14 after each friend speaks and Job responds. Then round two begins with Eliphaz again in chapter 15. Now Job’s responses have not only been to claim his integrity but to declare that he wants a hearing before God. He knows that God knows that he’s done nothing worthy of this suffering, and yet the suffering keeps coming. This is why Job is wondering aloud about whether God acts justly, because in his case, he doesn’t seem to be.

Well, you can imagine that the once patient Eliphaz is offended by this. So, he ups his tone a bit, saying, “Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge, and fill his belly with east wind? Should he argue in unprofitable talk, or in words with which he can do no good?” (15:2-3). In other words, “Job, if you were wise, you wouldn’t talk like this.” And he continues, “Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you” (15:6). Again, his argument is, “Listen to what you’re saying. You’re right. Your suffering is great, so bring it on home—so is your sin!”

Now, by this point, Job is quite frustrated with his friends, calling them miserable comforters (16:1), insisting again that there’s not some great sin he’s hiding. He answers, “My face is red with weeping, and on my eyelids is deep darkness, although there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure” (16:16-17). Job isn’t backing away from his claim to be pursuing holiness.

Therefore, when the third round begins (in ch. 22), the arguments are both waning and reaching a fever pitch. They’re waning in that they get shorter, and Zophar doesn’t even speak. But the frustration seems to be mounting as well. If Eliphaz began by calmly pointing out that Job just needs to repent and then ratcheted things up in calling him foolish, by the time round three begins, he’s just making up bad things that’s he’s confident Job must have done. He says, “Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities. For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. . . . You have sent widows away empty, and the arms of the fatherless were crushed” (22:5-7, 9).

³ Bildad speaks very straightforwardly, saying in 8:3-7, “Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert what is 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. And though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great.”

But again, Eliphaz holds out hope. Job just needs to confess and repent. He says to Job, “Agree with God, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you” (22:21).⁴ You can feel Eliphaz’s frustration, as if wanting to plead with Job, “You used to realize these things. Why don’t you see them anymore and speak to yourself the same way you’ve spoken to others?”

But Job won’t budge. Perhaps in his strongest defense of his integrity in the dialogues, Job responds, saying, “As God lives, who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter, as long as my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit. Far be it from me to say that you are right; till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days” (27:2-6).

And as much as Job might sound arrogant to us in this, he’s right. He’s not suffering because he lacks integrity and has sinned greatly. He’s actually suffering because he is a man *of* integrity and *has* walked in righteousness. Remember, the Lord said of Job that there is none like him on the face of the earth “who fears God and turns away from evil” (1:8).

So, if that’s a summary of the argument between Job and his friends, what do we learn? Well, though Job’s friends didn’t believe Job was righteous and Job struggled to believe God was acting just, *we should realize that the problem is actually with a simplistic understanding of the principle of retribution.* Yes, in the end the righteous will be blessed in eternity, and the wicked will be judged. But in this age it simply isn’t true that righteous people prosper and wicked people suffer, each in proportion to how righteous or wicked they are. We see terribly wicked people prosper at times. Likewise we see godly people suffer immensely. Moreover, it’s also true that God can take us through discipline when we’re in sin so that we might repent. And it’s true that sin produces consequences. Finally, it’s true that righteousness can breed blessing. But the problem is when we see the retribution principle as a definite, immediate, and proportional reality in this age. We simply can’t see the world that way, and if we do, we may well end up attacking our godly brothers and sisters when they’re in the midst of their greatest suffering, heaping unwarranted condemnation on those who need our comfort and encouragement.

But there’s a whole other thread to these chapters of dialogue between Job and his so-called “friends.” As much as Job’s friends accuse Job of sin and Job answers them by claiming his integrity, Job spends as much time (if not more!) arguing with God. Now, as Job begins his argument with the Lord, it seems that he’s at his worst in terms of how he speaks and thinks. He tells God to leave him alone (7:16), wondering the Lord sees Job as such a burden that must be dealt with (7:20), and he begins to say things of God for which he will later be ashamed. He says in 9:21-23, “I am blameless; I regard not myself; I loathe my life. It is all one; therefore I say, ‘He

⁴ “If you return to the Almighty you will be built up; if you remove injustice far from your tents . . . then the Almighty will be your gold and your precious silver. . . . You will make your prayer to him, and he will hear you, and you will pay your vows. . . . For when they are humbled you say, ‘It is because of pride’; but he saves the lowly” (22:23, 25, 27, 29).

destroys both the blameless and the wicked.’ When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.”

And though we know that the posture of the Lord isn’t one of being out-to-get the righteous, Job keeps up this line of argument. He says in 10:5-7, “Are your days as the days of man, or your years as a man’s years, that you seek out my iniquity and search for my sin, although you know that I am not guilty, and there is none to deliver out of your hand?” This is Job’s struggle. He knows he’s not been rebelling against God and yet he’s suffering as if he has. Therefore, he wants a hearing before God so that God will have to acknowledge Job’s suffering is unjust. But he knows God is so great he can’t get a hearing with God, so he imagines an arbiter—one to communicate between the two of them. Job declares, “For [God] 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” (9:32-33). And yet this is the irony: the Lord agrees with Job that Job is righteous. Again Job is suffering *because* of his integrity, not for the lack of it. But Job doesn’t know that. He’s ignorant of that heavenly conversation, and so he continues arguing.

Again, in 13:3, Job still demands to have a hearing before God, saying, “But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God.” He’ll continue, “Behold, I have prepared my case; I know that I shall be in the right” (13:18). He calls on God to declare his sins if he knows of any, much like he had with Eliphaz earlier, declaring, “Make me know my transgression and my sin. Why do you hide your face and count me as your enemy” (13:23-24). And yet right in the middle of this, Job confesses that God is his only hope, saying, “Though he will slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face” (13:15).⁵ He is oscillating between his hope and trust in the Lord and his frustration with God and demand for a hearing before him. And this is how it goes throughout these chapters.

In 14:14-17 Job fantasizes about walking in perfect harmony with God, which seems like a dream at this point since he feels that God is against him. He writes, “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.” And then right after this hopeful vision Job immediately turns to dwelling merely on the torments he’s known these past days.

In chapter 19 his hope of dwelling in righteousness before God reaches its height. As ancient Israel had a role for a redeemer—a next of kin who would represent the helpless in legal matters and such (remember Boaz in the book of Ruth)—so Job pictures a redeemer who would stand before God on his behalf and bring Job back into relationship with God that he so desperately desires. He says, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the

⁵ There are manuscript traditions that suggest this could be translated as “Behold, he will slay me; I have no hope,” rather than the ESV’s hopeful “I will hope in him.” However, the strongest argument for the positive text is verse 16 in which Job continues to speak of his hope of salvation resting in the fact that the righteous will stand before God.”

earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God” (19:25-26). Job may well die now, but he still holds onto the hope that he’ll stand before God and be declared righteous. And yet two chapters later Job is complaining that God isn’t just, saying of the wicked, “Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them” (21:9).

Finally, in chapter 23:3-7, Job envisions this hearing before God once more, believing that if God would only hear him, he’d declare Job as righteous.⁶ And yet as soon as Job declares this hope of reconciliation with God—this one whom he has worshiped and one who seemed to love Job as well—Job notes, “I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me” (23:15-16). He reminds us once again that he utterly feels as if God is against him.

Now, what do we do with this? Is this just the ranting of a man who is losing it, coming apart at the seams? I mean, how can he go from dreaming of standing in a good place with God one minute to charging him with injustice in the next? How can he demand that God listen to him plead his case one second only to bemoan that God would ignore him the next—all the while complaining that God won’t leave him alone? What’s going on? I think what’s going on is the fight of faith. In other words, Job is showing us another lesson from this text—sometimes holding fast to our faith can manifest itself in wrestling before (and with) God.

Yes, the picture of Job is ugly at times. Yes, he says some things for which he will be ashamed. But notice that he isn’t running from God. He’s not cursing God and saying, “I’m done with you.” Rather, he’s showing that there’s nothing that he wants more than God. His life has been wrecked. His understanding of how life works has crumbled around him. But none of that has led him to abandon God as his only hope. It doesn’t make sense to him. The pieces don’t fit together. But nothing matters more to him than walking in harmony with the Lord.

Notice that Job’s friends constantly present a means of prospering—repent and you’ll prosper again. But Job never once mentions his prosperity. He’s not seeking it. He just wants God. The most important thing in his life has been shaken—his relationship with God. It’s like the boat is sinking fast, and Job is fighting to hold on to it as it capsizes because he just can’t abandon ship.

Brothers and sisters, some of you know what I’m talking about. You’ve walked through times where you’ve felt like life is crumbling around you. You’ve wailed before God. You’ve wrestled with him. You’ve told him you don’t understand. You’ve told him you’ve felt like he’s attacking you. And you’ve wept, saying, “Just please show me you love me.” And you’ve wrestled before him in your tears because you desperately know you need him. For you, there’s nothing that matters more than knowing he’s smiling upon you. But everything in your life makes you feel

⁶ He says, “Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know that he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would pay attention to me. There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge” (23:3-7).

like that's not true. This side of the resurrection, sometimes the fight for faith in those moments when life feels like it's crashing in around us really will look like a fight. We'll fight before God and lament before him and wrestle with him because what our hearts desperately long for and what we need feel as if they couldn't be more opposed. But it's a road we'll travel in those moments of overwhelming sorrow and despair if we're wise. We'll fight like Job. And we'll fight with sure hope that the one whom we're fighting to cling to won't let go of us because he sent his Son to be our redeemer, to be our arbiter, so that we might know we can stand in righteousness before God. And he ultimately gave himself over to death and walked out alive on the other side so that by faith in him, we might know our hope is sure. Amen.