

January 30, 2022

WISDOM IN THE MIDST OF OUR SUFFERING

Job 28-31

(4 of 7 in a series through Job)

Thus far in the book of Job we've seen some ways to respond to suffering. In the first two chapters, Job mourned and worshiped. Clearly both are appropriate responses to the kind of great loss Job experienced in those chapters. In chapter 3, we then saw Job lament. And this too is an appropriate response. The Bible recognizes that there will be times in this life when we feel sorrow and despair, and in those moments it encourages us to unveil our hearts to the Lord, looking to him as our only hope. Then, in chapters 4-27, we saw Job in the fight of faith. Though his friends want him to confess something that is not true (that Job has been involved in hidden and heinous sins) in order to become prosperous again, Job is more concerned about his walk with the Lord. He'll make reference to those days before his suffering as a time when the "friendship of God was upon" him and "the Almighty was with" him (29:4-5). And yet in the midst of his suffering, it feels like the friendship of God is gone. God has left him. God has decided to act like Job is a terrible sinner and torment him accordingly, and none of it makes sense to Job. He feels like life and how he understands the world is crumbling all around him. And so he lets the rawness of his heart and his affection for the Lord spill out over a number of chapters as we see him accuse God of wrong, fantasize about walking in harmony with the Lord, tell God to leave him alone, wonder why God is so far away, and confess his deep trust in the Lord. It is a rollercoaster of emotions which anyone who has struggled to make sense of life and has begun to unveil his or her heart to the Lord can identify with. It's a picture of the fight of faith, and this too is appropriate and even necessary for the believer in this present age.

But that's not all that this book gives us in terms of guiding us through our response to suffering. In the chapters we're looking at this morning (28-31) we gain more insights in terms of things that Job says positively as well as lessons we can learn from a defense of himself that is built upon a wrong understanding of how the world works. What are these lessons we can learn from Job 28-31 about how to walk in a world filled with suffering? First, we need to realize we'll never have exhaustive wisdom and understanding.

We need to realize we'll never have exhaustive wisdom and understanding in this life

There is some debate as to whether Job 28 was written by the one who compiled the book or are the words of Job as he moves from hope to despair, and I don't think it's important for us to determine which. But for the sake of ease this morning, I'll treat it as the words of Job. Job 28 is a poem about the undiscoverable nature of wisdom. In verses 1-11 the poem focuses on the fact that mankind seeks out these difficult to find and obtain blessings from the earth. We read, for example, in verses 1-3, "Surely there is a mine for silver, and a place for gold that they refine. Iron is taken out of the earth, and copper is smelted from the ore. Man puts an end to darkness and searches out to the farthest limit the ore in gloom and deep darkness." And he continues in verses 8-11, "Man puts his hand to the flinty rock and overturns mountains by the roots. He cuts

out channels in the rocks, and his eye sees every precious thing. He dams up the streams so that they do not trickle, and the thing that is hidden he brings out to light.”

And we get this picture, don't we? It's amazing the lengths we will go to find and obtain resources that we know are hidden in the earth. As the poem mentions, we'll mine for silver, search out the farthest limit of the darkest cave to find copper and iron. We'll dam up rivers to access areas that would be unreachable otherwise just to bring out these precious resources. However, when we consider wisdom—which is far greater than these resources—it seems that mankind, in all his ingenuity, just can't find it. We read in 28:12 and 21, “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? . . . It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air.”

Now, the text will remind us that God of course is infinitely wise himself. The poem notes, “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place” (v. 23). And though we'll read more about what this means for us, we can acknowledge that on this side of the resurrection, we will not ever attain exhaustive wisdom and understanding. Deuteronomy 29:29 reminds us that there are things God has chosen to reveal to us, but there are also secret things that he alone knows and chooses not to reveal to us.

One of those bits of wisdom and understanding that will escape us this side of eternity is every purpose God has in allowing suffering into our lives. We, of course, know things like the fact that God will work it for good in our lives, will make us more like Jesus through it, and will use it to prepare us for the glory to come. But we'll never know this side of eternity the full and detailed purposes of God that he intends in our suffering. We no doubt wish we could. We tell ourselves we could handle it so much better if only we knew. As Job says, it seems more valuable to us than those resources that we mine the earth to get, and yet it will always lie just out of our reach.

I acknowledge that this might not be the most encouraging note if you're in the midst of suffering right now, but it is good for us to acknowledge. It's good for us to humble ourselves and realize we'll not have all the answers until we are with the Lord. But this doesn't mean that we have nothing to do but sit on our hands. Rather, the chapter ends by reminding us that there is a path of wisdom we can travel in this life. We simply need to fear, trust, and obey our infinitely wise God.

We must fear, trust, and obey our infinitely wise God

As I've noted, the poem declares that though man doesn't have exhaustive wisdom and understanding, God does. Job declares, “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he gave to the wind its weight and appointed the waters by measure, when he made a decree for the rain and a way for the lighting of the thunder, then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out” (28:23-27). The Lord infinitely wise. So though we may not have exhaustive wisdom and understanding ourselves—not knowing the full purposes of the details of our lives—

he does. And he gives us some insight as the poem notes, “And he said to man, “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding” (28:28).

Therefore, although we will never have exhaustive wisdom and understanding, we can exercise wisdom by recognizing God as he is, standing in awe of him, trusting him in everything we encounter, and obeying all that he commands. Perhaps the most obvious way to stress the goodness of this course (i.e. fearing, trusting, and obeying God) is by exploring the alternative. After all, how foolish would it be to know that there is one being who has all wisdom and understanding and for you to decide that you know better how to live your life?

Here is important path for us in suffering. We recognize God as the majestic, holy, infinitely glorious and wise God, seeing that he is worthy of worship. Then, we trust him. We know that we can trust the one who has numbered our days and watches over us so that not a hair on our head is affected apart from him. And we obey what he has commanded. In that, we walk in wisdom. And yet there’s another lesson we can learn as we walk through suffering—we must not let our suffering cloud us from what is true.

We should not let suffering cloud us from seeing what is true

In Job 29-30, Job reflects back on his life as it was before this suffering came, and what it is now. He notes in 29:11 that it used to be that when people heard his voice they felt blessed, when their eyes saw him, they approved of what they saw. And the reason is that Job “delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him” (29:12). He continues, “I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know” (29:15-16). Consequently, everyone looked to Job for wisdom and sat silently as he spoke. Again, he writes, “Men listened to me and waited and kept silence for my counsel. After I spoke they did not speak again, and my word dropped upon them. They waited for me as for the rain, and they opened their mouths as for the spring rain” (29:21-23). In Job’s eyes, these were the good old days. He did plenty of good, and people listened to him and respected him.

Now, however, as Job is in the midst of great suffering so that even his body bears the marks of sickness and disease, everything has changed. Job begins chapter 30 saying, “But now they laugh at me, men who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock” (v. 1). He continues, saying in verse 10, “They abhor me; they keep aloof from me; they do not hesitate to spit at the sight of me.” As Job notes, the contrast between what was and what is could not be more striking, and yet I don’t think that’s the most important thing we see in chapters 29-30. What’s most important is how Job interprets God’s stance toward Job in light of Job’s lot in life.

Here’s what I mean. Look in chapter 29 at how Job describes God toward him when everything in Job’s life was going well. He says in 29:2-5, “Oh, that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness, as I was in my prime, when the friendship of God was upon my tent, when the

Almighty was yet with me, when my children were all around me.” Now, listen to the contrast of how he thinks of God toward him as he walks in suffering. He says in 30:19-21, “God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me. You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me.”

Do you see what Job is doing here? In Job’s mind, the glorious events in Job’s life signaled that God was watching over him, was a friend to him, and was with him. Similarly, the suffering he is now facing he interprets as God being against him, torturing him, refusing to listen to him, and turning cruel toward him. Now, again, this is where Job 1-2 is so crucial for us. We know better. As we’ve noted in all of these sections, Job is the apple of God’s eye according to the opening chapters of this book. If we wanted to cast it in terms of a father toward his son, we might say that there is none of whom God is more proud. And we also know that God is listening to Job and indeed will ultimately answer Job.

Isn’t this a lesson for us? You and I can’t let our suffering become the interpretive grid for what is true. We can’t look at our suffering, make the judgment that it appears that God is against us, and then determine that must be true. It is most certainly not true if our faith is in Christ. Think about Romans 8:31-39. It’s no doubt one of the most beloved sections of Scripture for believers because it reminds us that nothing can separate us from God’s love for us. But notice the kinds of things that Paul brings up when he asks, “Shall this or that separate us from the love of Christ?” He writes, “Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” (Rom 8:35). Notice that he doesn’t ask, “Shall peace, ease, praise from our fellow man, having plenty to eat, having good clothing, being at rest, and having encouragement lavished on us separate us from Christ’s love for us?” Why? Is there a greater threat that danger separates us from God’s love than peace? No. Neither is a threat against God’s love for us. But no doubt the reason the Lord includes all of these elements of suffering is because he knows that it is in those moments in particular that we are tempted to *think* that God doesn’t love us. It is in suffering that people may ask, “Where is God?” In other words, no one is greatly tempted to question God’s presence or love for them when they get the girl, the great job, the perfect house, and inherit a bunch of money. It’s when things go wrong that we’re tempted to think wrongly of God’s stance toward us, right? And this is exactly what we see in Job. Therefore, let it be a reminder to us that we don’t need to let our suffering cloud us from seeing and remembering what is true.

I’ve shared before the story of Bill Mounce coming to speak at Union when I was a student there. And as he was speaking, he said something to the effect of, “You need to make sure you know what you believe about God before the days of darkness come and you lose your job right before Christmas and your wife has her second miscarriage.” A bit later, I read the dedication in the commentary he went on to publish on the Pastoral Epistles. It read, “To the women in my life: Robin, my wife and best friend; Rose and Rachel, who went on ahead to wait for me; and Kiersten, who stayed behind with her dad.” In other words, he wasn’t using some hypothetical example; he had lived through it. He had lost two daughters through miscarriage. And what he said was right. Know what you believe about God based on the Scripture because when the days

of darkness and suffering come, they can often cloud us from seeing what is true. And as I mentioned a few weeks back, that's why it's so crucial that we have a regular practice in our lives of gathering together on the Lord's Day and hearing the Word of God read and taught to us. Because there will be some days we can't see clearly and we need another to remind us of what is true. So, don't let suffering cloud you from seeing what is true. And finally, do not obey, thinking it will only bring blessing in this life.

We do not obey, thinking it will bring only blessing in this life

In chapter 31 Job makes his final appeal before the Lord. You can see that the chapter ends with the words, "The words of Job are ended" (v. 40). And what takes place in this chapter is that Job throws down the gauntlet. He demands that the Lord speak. He begins the chapter by noting his pursuit of holiness. He says, "I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I gaze at a virgin?" (31:1). He's been a man of purity. Then he repeats the principle of retribution that we noted last week, namely, that bad things happen when we do bad things and good things happen when we do good things. He says, "Is not calamity for the unrighteous, and disaster for the workers of iniquity?" (v. 3). Now, of course, we noted last week that this simplistic understanding of retribution cannot account for the world as we know it because those pursuing righteousness will indeed suffer at times while those pursuing wickedness will prosper. In other words, the principle simply isn't true in this simplistic form.

Yet Job is still holding to this principle, and he knows he's pursued righteousness, and so he makes his final appeal to God, which can basically be summed up as Job saying, "If I'd done bad things, my suffering would be just. But I haven't, so it isn't." We can see his argument with a thread of statements that begin with "if." He declares, "If I have walked with falsehood . . . if my step turned aside from the way . . . if my heart has been enticed toward a woman . . . if I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant . . . if I have withheld anything that the poor desired . . . if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing . . . if I have raised my hand against the fatherless . . . if I have rejoiced at the ruin of him who hated me . . . if I have concealed my transgressions" (31:5, 7, 9, 13, 16, 19, 21, 29, 33), then Job would think his suffering reasonable. But he hasn't done these things, and so in Job's mind his suffering is unjust. Therefore, he proclaims, "Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!" (31:35).

Job is saying that if God remains silent, then it is an admission that he agrees with Job. He would be agreeing that Job hasn't done these things, and therefore Job's suffering is unjust. In other words, Job is demanding that God speak if indeed he disagrees with Job's assessment of the situation.

Now, we know that God will show up and speak, and Job will feel ashamed of some of what he's spoken here. Nevertheless, the point I want us to see from this is the merit theology that forms the framework for Job's thinking. He's basically declaring that if he'd done bad, then it would be just that bad things happened to him, but because he's done good, good things should have happened to him. And my guess is that though you and I can hear that statement and know it's wrong, we're all still inclined to think just like Job. We're prone to thinking, "I've done good, and

so good should happen.” And this is reinforced even in Christian circles. We tell the young couple that if they remain virgins till they’re married, then the intimacy they experience in marriage will be outstanding. We tell those who are single that if they pursue godliness, the Lord will bring along the spouse they desire. And so on and so forth. And I am not denying that can and does happen on occasion. But it’s not a certainty. And seeing it as a certainty simply heaps guilt on top of the loneliness that single person feels when the spouse doesn’t come along because now she’s thinking, “What have I done wrong so that the Lord isn’t bringing along a godly husband?” It leaves the man who walked in purity wondering what did he miss in pursuing the Lord because his wife’s body is eaten up with cancer and is wasting away in front of him.

Brothers and sisters, we don’t obey the Lord because we know it will bring blessing in this life. We obey the Lord because we love him, and we love him because he first loved us. And we trust that if our obedience is followed by hardship, then the Lord will give us the grace to glorify him in those moments. And why would we not trust him to do so when he already met our greatest need when he sent his Son to die and be raised for the ungodly? So, as we walk through days of suffering, let’s realize that we’ll never have exhaustive wisdom or understanding, trust the Lord and obey him, hold on to what we know is true instead of letting our suffering blind us, and remember that we obey not because we know it’ll bring blessing in this life but because the one who lived, died, and was raised for us is worthy of our obedience. Amen.