

## **Series Job**

### **This Message Please Understand Me**

#### **Scripture Various**

We are far enough into the story to recognize that Job felt himself under attack from two directions at once. From his perspective, both his friends and God had unjustifiably turned against him.

Job's friends were no consolation to him. In reality, they added to his burdens. Job needed friends to show compassion and empathy, to listen as he vented his pain and emotions, to offer practical help. The friends, however, did not show compassion. After listening to Job's lament in chapter 3, his personal needs ceased to be their primary concern. They began to offer their opinions about how God worked in His relationships with humans.

The friends had strong beliefs about God's justice. They claimed to know the reasons for Job's sufferings. What launched the friends into their declarations was the insistence of Job that he was innocent of any wrongdoing that would warrant the imposition of such excruciating grief and pain that he was experiencing. Upon hearing these words, the friends took it on themselves to give him instruction based on their theological understanding.

The friends held to be unassailable certain truths about God and how He had ordered human life. In their view God maintained a cause-and-effect relationship with people, that He rewarded righteous people with health and prosperity and punished evildoers with trouble and affliction. When Job challenged these assumptions, the friends felt obligated to defend the honor of God. For them, there was more at stake than Job's suffering. They thought that Job needed to deal with the question "What have I done to deserve my sufferings?" For Job the key question was "Why is God doing this to me?"

Up until Job was hit with the devastating losses of his property, family members, and health, he undoubtedly shared the perspective of his friends. However, with the onset of his afflictions, the foundations of his previous faith were shaken. He could not make sense of his situation. The assumptions associated with the old way were no longer valid, and he was left struggling to figure out the new reality.

That can happen to us as well. Sometimes our experience conflicts with assumptions we have long held to be true. When that happens, we find ourselves lost in the confusion between beliefs which are no longer valid and realities which will eventually be understood. We let go of past views only with reluctance, and we go through a state of disequilibrium as we stretch toward the new perspective.

Job was in such a transition. He desperately wanted to understand the purposes behind his suffering. He did not want to accept the fact that God was capable of acting capriciously and malevolently toward humans. He wanted to discover the way back to relationship with God, but for many days the pathway was hidden to him. All he could deduce was that his relationship with God had been severed and that God was treating him as an enemy. And he knew that he had done nothing that justified these actions by God.

At first Job tried to focus on his thoughts and not to become involved in the opinions of the friends, but all too soon, he was drawn into a heated debate with them. Job became hostile to the efforts of the friends to change his thinking, and his combativeness only confirmed their convictions about him. Job made eight speeches in all, responding immediately after each of his friends spoke. By the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle, Job and the friends were locked in an irreconcilable discussion about the fate of the wicked. Although he needed encouragement and consolation, Job received nothing but chastisement and reprimand, and he was forced to defend himself.

Today we will concentrate on Job's responses to the friends. In the next message we will focus on what Job said to and about God.

### **Read Job 6:1-3**

1 Then Job replied: 2 "If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! 3 It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas. No wonder my words have been impetuous."

In this first response, Job began by being somewhat apologetic for the way he spoke in chapter 3. His appeal was for a sympathetic understanding of his very emotional words. His first words can be paraphrased "If you understood the extent of my anguish and misery, perhaps you would be willing to forgive my impetuous words." However, Job recognized a hardness in the attitudes of his friends, and he chided them for their belligerent demeanor.

### **Read Job 6:14-17**

14 “A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty. 15 But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams, as the streams that overflow 16 when darkened by thawing ice and swollen with melting snow, 17 but that cease to flow in the dry season, and in the heat vanish from their channels.”

Job recognized very early in their dialogues that the friends were not proving to be the kind of friends that he needed in his time of distress. When they blatantly accused Job of not understanding the ways of God, he responded with sarcasm:

### **Read Job 12:1-3**

1 Then Job replied: 2 “Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you! 3 But I have a mind as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know all these things?”

Then he accused the friends of preaching falsehoods and fabrications.

### **Read Job 13:1-12**

1 “My eyes have seen all this, my ears have heard and understood it. 2 What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you. 3 But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God. 4 You, however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! 5 If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom! 6 Hear now my argument; listen to the plea of my lips. 7 Will you speak wickedly on God’s behalf? Will you speak deceitfully for him? 8 Will you show him partiality? Will you argue the case for God? 9 Would it turn out well if he examined you? Could you deceive him as you might deceive men? 10 He would surely rebuke you if you secretly showed partiality. 11 Would not his splendor terrify you? Would not the dread of him fall on you? 12 Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay.”

There is no reason to think that Job was less knowledgeable about God than his counselors. In fact, we know that he had a better relationship with God than any of his peers. That was made clear in chapters 1 and 2. Perhaps in previous years Job had held beliefs which were similar to those of his friends, but his current troublesome experience was forcing him to revise his thinking. He was emotionally and mentally dealing with a situation which was beyond the conceptual thinking of the friends. They assumed that God always acted in predictable ways. Job had concluded that God did not follow a consistent pattern. He wanted to have a discussion about the reasons for this, but his friends were hung-up on their fixed opinions.

Job wanted to know why they automatically blamed humans for adversities, why they so adamantly defended their cause-and-effect theology about God's actions toward people. Job wanted to know why the friends resorted to lies and deceitful statements in order to argue their case for God.

In verse 4, Job described his friends as "worthless physicians." That was an appropriate term because they were misdiagnosing Job's situation. Their prescription was for Job to acknowledge and repent of his sin. Then, they predicted, God would restore status and material blessings to Job. In Job's opinion, these pronouncements were "proverbs of ashes" and "defenses of clay," worthless. According to Job, the friends would best display their wisdom by being "altogether silent."

In another passage, Job explains what he would do if the friends were in his shoes and their circumstances were reversed:

### **Read Job 16:1-5**

1 Then Job replied: 2 "I have heard many things like these; miserable comforters are you all! 3 Will your long-winded speeches never end? What ails you that you keep on arguing? 4 I also could speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you. 5 But my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief."

Perhaps I can comment here on spiritual counseling. Too often, when a person who is suffering seeks comfort and advice, the counselor draws on his/her personal experiences and from the wisdom and traditions of other believers, just like the friends did with Job. The counselor often rushes in with advice about how to get right with God. All too often, there is the assumption by the counselor that the sufferer has done something to bring on trouble. The tendency is to urge people to be strong, pray more, be more submissive, complain less, and to praise and thank God no matter what is happening. The ability to offer genuine comfort and encouragement is sometimes missing.

Generalized explanations, such as may be taught in the classroom, or preached from the pulpit, or spoken in the office of a counselor can be logical and potentially helpful, but when shared with a person who is deeply grieving and in pain, the words are usually not very helpful. The “words of comfort” that would have been welcomed by Job would be words that did not condemn, did not presume guilt, and were not judgmental. Job did not need lecturing and condemnation, especially since he was trying to sort out his new theology. According to Job, he was dealing with two discouraging problems:

### **Read Job 16:9-12**

9 “God assails me and tears me in his anger and gnashes his teeth at me; my opponent fastens on me his piercing eyes. 10 Men open their mouths to jeer at me; they strike my cheek in scorn and unite together against me. 11 God has turned me over to evil men and thrown me into the clutches of the wicked. 12 All was well with me, but he shattered me; he seized me by the neck and crushed me. He has made me his target.”

The friends accused him of evil behavior and Job was resentful and angry about what they were saying. However, the friends were nothing more than an irritating distraction because, in Job’s mind, the far greater issue was why God was treating him unjustly. It seemed as if God was using the friends to add to his pain and misery. His reference to “evil men” undoubtedly included the friends.

Many other verses follow this theme.

### **Read Job 19:1-6**

1 Then Job replied: 2 “How long will you torment me and crush me with words? 3 Ten times now you have reproached me; shamelessly you attack me. 4 If it is true that I have gone astray, my error remains my concern alone. 5 If indeed you would exalt yourselves above me and use my humiliation against me, 6 then know that God has wronged me and drawn his net around me.”

Bildad had begun his speeches with the question “How long will you continue to speak in windy and impious words?” In his response to Bildad, Job used the same expression, wondering “How long his counselors would torment him with their multiple attempts at bringing comfort.” The expression “ten times” was a figurative way of saying “many times.” Job had been the target of condemnation and reproof repeatedly.

Job pleaded with his friends to stop their personal attacks on him. From Job's standpoint, it was not the place of people to be judging him. Job pointed out that if, in fact, he had sinned, it was a sin before God alone, and that it was not appropriate for the friends to "play God" in their judgments, especially since their evidence against him was merely circumstantial, based on the premise that he was suffering because he was a sinner. The friends had not actually seen Job commit a sin. Their assumptions could not be proved. Therefore he pleaded for mercy.

### **Read Job 19:21-22**

21 "Have pity on me, my friends, have pity, for the hand of God has struck me.

22 Why do you pursue me as God does? Will you never get enough of my flesh?"

As we have previously discussed, the friends could only assume that Job's suffering was the result of some sinful activity by him. That was the only explanation that fit their theological understanding. The only solution they could suggest was the way of repentance. They encouraged Job to repent so that he would be released from his grief and pain and be restored to his position of blessing, to once more be in favor with God. Ironically, in urging this repentance upon Job, they were really tempting him to use God for personal benefit.

Do you recognize the peril in this? If Job had followed their counsel, and confessed some undefined and, to him, unknown fault, then his action would have confirmed the original proposition of the Accuser, that human beings are totally self-serving, and are interested in God only for God-given benefits. We thought about this in chapters 1 and 2. The solution of the friends was, in actuality, a hidden and crafty bidding that played into the hands of the Accuser. I hope you recognize the critical position in which Job found himself. Of course, Job had no idea of the deep, deep issues which were at stake here, but they were eternal principles related to the integrity of God.

Fortunately, Job continued to insist on his innocence and, to his credit, he did not consider it necessary to make up a confession. Instead, Job began to think about vindication. He believed that if he would be able to appear before God in a court of law, he would be acquitted of any wrongdoing and be granted relief from his pain and misery. This will be the subject of the message next week. I mention it here only to emphasize that Job did not compromise himself or God. The potential victory of the Accuser was again thwarted.

Job was certain that it was God Himself who was the source of his problems, and that the friends were not accurately representing God. Several times he appealed to them to listen carefully to what he was saying.

### **Read Job 21:1-3**

1 Then Job replied: 2 “Listen carefully to my words; let this be the consolation you give me. 3 Bear with me while I speak, and after I have spoken, mock on.”

In the following verses Job summarized his position once again.

### **Read Job 21:4-16**

4 “Is my complaint directed to man? Why should I not be impatient? 5 Look at me and be astonished; clap your hand over your mouth. 6 When I think about this, I am terrified; trembling seizes my body. 7 Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? 8 They see their children established around them, their offspring before their eyes. 9 Their homes are safe and free from fear; the rod of God is not upon them. 10 Their bulls never fail to breed; their cows calve and do not miscarry. 11 They send forth their children as a flock; their little ones dance about. 12 They sing to the music of tambourine and harp; they make merry to the sound of the flute. 13 They spend their years in prosperity and go down to the grave in peace. 14 Yet they say to God, ‘Leave us alone! We have no desire to know your ways. 15 Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him? What would we gain by praying to him? 16 But their prosperity is not in their own hands, so I stand aloof from the counsel of the wicked.”

Job wanted the friends to know that his dispute was not with them, but rather with God. Job recognized that he was not going to get his friends to understand his feelings and beliefs. Besides, his real desire was to interact with God. Job had been moving toward this position since the first round of speeches.

Job was aware that he was thinking radical thoughts, and was articulating some shocking ideas. He knew that the friends would put their hands over their mouths and raise their eye brows in surprise; “I can’t believe you said that!” There were significant theological implications in what Job was saying. He described the morally upside-down situation in which the righteous sometimes suffer and the wicked often prosper.

The friends ignored the fact that the wicked grow old, have children who are comfortable and established, whose homes are safe and the judgment of God is absent, who are prosperous, who enjoy life, who live without anything to bother them. Job pointed out that this is the situation even though the wicked have no desire to know God and have no respect for God. Job wanted to know why God allowed this. Job knew that God was in control, and he did not understand why the sovereign God allowed the wicked to be successful in life. From the standpoint of the righteous, life seemed unfair.

In their speeches, the friends insisted that the fate of the wicked was different than described by Job (see 8:11-19; 15:20-35; 18:5-21; etc.), but Job insisted that they were wrong and that if the friends would only use their observation skills, they would realize that their theological assumptions were incorrect. This was the reason Job rejected the opinions of his friends.

Job reasserted his innocence over and over. The friends needed to understand that the circumstances of a person's life were not necessarily an indication of that person's relationship to God. I don't know how Job managed to do it, but at no time did he deny his faith because of adversity and negative circumstances. He explained his determination at the beginning of his final speech.

### **Job 27:1-6**

1 Job continued his discourse: 2 "As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, the Almighty, who has made me taste bitterness of soul, 3 as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils, 4 my lips will not speak wickedness, and my tongue will utter no deceit. 5 I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. 6 I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live."

My prayer is that we will all have a testimony like Job's, and be steadfast in trusting God, that we will maintain our righteousness and never let go of it.