Miserable Comforters, Windy Words

You know… I think I have been looking for the big meaning of Job. And I think that actually there are layers of meaning. There are MEANINGS. This is what makes the book so challenging and yet so rich. Everywhere you look you want to pick up a nugget and explore it… until you are attracted by another nugget.

This story is about the extremities of suffering. This was never going to be an easy topic.

In Job we walk alongside this man who loses **everything**; possessions, family, physical health. It is the test of loyalty few of us will ever know, although I believe some Christians do know of it.

And the question posed by the *satan* in chapter one is: Does not Job really just serve God for his own self-interest? Is his loyalty and piety genuine and based on the holiness of the character and essence of God? Doesn’t he just want to prosper, so he humors you.

This is the question Job’s life and experience answers for us ultimately. And even though we are in week two of a five-week study, we have read the ending. We know that Job retains his integrity and keeps faith with God.

**In the Text**

So we have Job’s wife, his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar in chapters 2-27 and a fellow named Elihu, in chapters 32-37.

As for Job’s wife, she says famously right off the hop, Just curse God and die Job (2:9). Not a lot of help. It is sort of a case like Rodney Dangerfield used to say, “For example, take my wife…. No, really, take my wife.” ‘She is right over here *satan*¸ I think you forgot her*.* And *satan* said,’ Ya… I know.’

As for his friends, to their credit they all wait seven days in silence. Laudable. The rest of it doesn’t go very well.

The structure of chapters 4-27 informs our reading of their advice. There are three cycles of advice from these friends. Eliphaz speaks, Job responds, Bildad speaks, Job responds, Zophar speaks, Job responds. This happens not once but **three** times. It is kind of a call response format, repeated three times.

And you sort of get the impression as you read it that the sameness, their negativity, their low opinion of Job as a sinner, their tedious loquacity is part of the emotional experience of consuming the story. How very tiresome the hearing of well-intended but misguided advice really is. As Job describes them, miserable comforters… full of windy words (16:2-3).

Miserable comforters are you all! (16:2) Job calls them!

Let’s take the speech of Eliphaz in chapter 4 as our example because it is pretty representative of the arguments of Job’s friends. The views of the four differ in subtle ways, but not a lot.

We know what Job’s friends do not (because the narrator has privileged us with the knowledge). Job is, in fact, a righteous man. Job is innocent.

That their perception of the situation is flawed because of the gap of knowledge. We said last week that among the several things we will learn from the book is that our perception of what is going in heaven is highly imperfect.

Eliphaz says…

“Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
    Or where were the upright cut off?
8 As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
    and sow trouble reap the same.
9 By the breath of God they perish,
    and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. (Job 4:7-9)

**From the Text**

Let’s look for some meaning from all of this. I have three of the nuggets I found lying about.

**First.** Job agrees for the most part, but he falters because he knows himself to be blameless. He despairs of his felt reality of his unjust treatment.

If you have ever had the wind knocked out of you, this is the theological equivalent of that. There is nothing worse than not being able to draw a breath. I think with sympathy of those who are suffering from the virus – this is its curse.

Job’s despair (9:21, 23-4 The Message):

“Believe me, I’m blameless.
    I don’t understand what’s going on.
    I hate my life!... he folds his arms, aloof from the despair of the innocent.
He lets the wicked take over running the world,
    he installs judges who can’t tell right from wrong.
    If he’s not responsible, who is?

What a message for these days! Yes, it is a good time to read Job.

That is how reality is felt. Sometimes we just can’t separate what we are experiencing and feeling from our understanding of God. Job feels betrayed… but one of the many lessons of the book is that his feelings are not the reality of God’s person.

What we feel is a challenge for people of faith.[[1]](#endnote-1)

    I don’t understand what’s going on!
    I hate my life!

I said last week that we are going to learn that our perception of what is going in heaven is highly imperfect.

This is Job’s existential crisis and sometimes our own. “Is God not just?” we ask.[[2]](#endnote-2) This is a key question for all those who live and love and suffer.

But when we are in this place of doubt that the book speaks to us. Because it tells us so clearly that our perception is not the reality of God’s character. He does not fold his arms, aloof from the despair of the innocent.***[[3]](#endnote-3)***

This is Job’s test of piety. Will he keep faith with God when his soul is filled with doubt? And it is our test of piety. Will we keep faith with God when our souls are filled with doubt?

The meaning of having faith is not a question of how hard I can believe; how effective I am at supressing my felt reality of disappointment and betrayal. That’s not faith!

The meaning of faith resides in the One in whom we have faith. That is the rock on which we stand. And when our perception falters… still we must stand with God in faith in his character.

Even though we may feel our world is falling in on us… God is faithful and loving. He remains the God of **creation** we know and love, the God of **covenant** with whom we hold promise and the God of **resurrection** on whom we rely for the gift of life.

When we doubt let us keep faith **with** the God.

Second. The arguments of his mates are compelling. Each time I read Eliphaz or Bildad or Zophar I say, ‘yes… that’s right!’ Its biblical.

They are toeing the standard line of the Torah. They are Torah toting Deuteronomists. Totally orthodox for their time and place.[[4]](#endnote-4)

They use the standard wisdom of retribution theology to assess the situation - that you suffer if you sin, if you are suffering you must have sinned. Conversely, if you are righteous you are blessed, if you are blessed you are righteous. The world makes sense this way.

These guys are the PhDs of their day, the rabbis, the intellectuals of their time. They are nothing if not learned in experience, tradition and reason.

That’s my gig. My life’s work has been helping young university age Christians ***think***. To me there has been nothing more important than the nurturing of the Christian mind.

But ultimately, their wisdom in inadequate to the project of walking through life in faith with God.

One of the meanings of the book is that there is, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar (and Dave!), something ***more important*** that learning, reason, experience and tradition….

This book tells us that just because you know stuff, just because you are eloquent or clever, it doesn’t mean you know God.

And that something more is keeping faith with God. I suffer, I doubt, but I keep faith with my God.

You can call it faith, you can call it loyalty, the Bible calls it *hupōmonē*. Patient endurance. It is the theme of Hebrews and it really resonates with Job.

There is only one line about Job in the NT. It is James 5:11.

Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. (James 5:11)

For the third point of application I want to turn to some of our folks for some help.

Job calls these friends miserable comforters, full of windy words… I sometimes like to do this with my reading: how do we wish they would have responded. If Job’s friends had been truly loyal what would they have done? How would this story have been different?[[5]](#endnote-5)

So here is the question we posed: What is a true friend in your mind?

1. For one thing, it is certainly a warning against judging others as though we had the knowledge of God at our disposal. Remember chapters 38, 39! [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. As Tremper Longman puts it: “Sometimes sin does lead to negative consequences, but not always. Similarly, sometimes proper behaviour leads to positive outcomes, but not always (*Job*, Longman, p. 67). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Talk about the difference between our *perception* of reality, I was at ease and he broke me in two; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he has set me up as a target (16:12). What Job feels and the reality of God’s love are not at all the same. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. One commentator noted that, “Eliphaz gives most weight to **personal experiences**, Bildad relies on the **wisdom of the ages** and Zophar is most inclined to find understanding in **a system of thinking** in which everything is black and white.” (HRJ p. 67, bold type mine) I thought that this was an interesting alignment with our four bases for knowing: Scripture, tradition experience and reason. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Michel de Montaigne writes in his *Essays* that he had one true friend in life, Etienne La Boétie. The Essays are sort of know for his chapter *On Friendship*.

“In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find them again.” You can see why he said a person is fortunate to have one friend in life of this kind.

Benediction:

And now, as you search for the purpose of the Lord in your life, may you behold how the Lord is compassionate and full of mercy, and may you be blessed in your patient endurance; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen [↑](#endnote-ref-5)