



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

Job, Part 2: “What Are Friends For?—Struggling to Figure It Out” Job 2:11-5:27 (37:24)

Janice Walsh, of Navarre, Ohio, wrote in: My pastor-husband Scott has a sweet tooth, so I knew the chocolate chip cookies I'd just baked might disappear before I returned from running errands. To discourage him, I taped a verse on the wrapped goodies: "Everything is permissible for me—but not everything is beneficial .. " (1 Cor. 6:12). When I returned I found half the cookies gone and another verse attached: "The righteous eat to their heart's content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry" (Prov. 13:25).

And here Scott's wife was just trying to be a good friend.

Last week, we began a series of Bible investigations of the book of Job, in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament). We looked on as this righteous man was shredded by disasters, one upon another. All he had was taken from him, and even his health was attached with an outbreak of running sores all over his body, that made it painful even to walk, and made every moment a torment. Job is in a world of hurt.

Today we grab hold of the big middle of the book, as some of Job's many friends come and sit with him. Job's friends include Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Bildad was the shortest guy in the Bible, did you know that? He was from Shua, so that made him, "Bildad, the Shuhite". Another friend named Elihu shows up at the end, to make his own contribution. In a series of exchanges, they try to comfort Job. But it's pretty cold comfort.

I'll be reading from chapter 2, verse 11 through chapter 5, to give us a sample of all that follows through chapter 37. I cannot do justice to this book in such a summary fashion, for it's the boxing ring in which ideas are duke-ing it out. Is conventional religion's picture of God correct, where God rewards the good and punishes evil people? Or, is that picture inadequate, especially when we are confronted by what seems like morally blind human suffering? These are big ideas, and I hope you will read much more of this mid-section of Job.

But I'm hoping for more than you just reading the book, or wrestling with ideas. I hope we'll learn something this morning about how to care for our friends, and what real caring looks like. Because that is what friends are for.

Listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. [2:11-5:27]

Word gets out—you know how our media today love to cover disasters—and three of Job's friends come to console and comfort him. As they get close to Job's home, they see him out in front, on a heap of dung drying in the sun. But he is dressed so differently, and with his shaven head and skin eruptions, his friends don't even recognize him. As they draw closer, suddenly they catch their breath--this IS Job! Overcome by their shock and grief, they sit around him, so at least he senses their presence and support. For seven days and seven nights, no one says anything.

But as Chapter 3 begins, Job's speaks, and his words have turned bitter. Until this moment, the calamities that have befallen him have not broken his faith; he still praises God though God let "The Accuser" steal and destroy virtually everything he had, including his children, and also afflict him with skin sores even on his feet that make him repulsive to others and give him much pain. His own wife had suffered with him to a great degree, and at last, she had urged him to curse God and be killed; at least his suffering would end. But Job had held firm. Now, after days when perhaps the shock and grief have subsided, Job is full of mental and spiritual pain. He curses the day he was born, wishing he had died right out of the womb.

In response to Job's wail of pain, the friends make speeches. Eliphaz goes first, beginning with words of praise for Job. Then he comes to the central assumption of all he and the other friends will say—for the universe to make sense, we live by the assurance that God rewards the righteous, and punishes those who sin. Think, Job, says Eliphaz. All people sin. God punishes in order to motivate repentance and restoration. You should be glad that God is punishing you, for that means you really matter to Him.

What an awful thing to say! But Eliphaz and Bildad and Zophar are driven by the logic of their world view to this trite advice that gives Job cold comfort. Job maintains that his suffering is without cause. Tell me where I'm wrong, he says. I want to die. Would that God would finish this crushing destruction He has begun!

Bildad takes a turn, and his words are even sharper. "You windbag," he says to Job. "Will God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right?" Confess your sin, he says, in chapter 8, and God will restore you. And he adds several lines from some of the wisdom Psalms to buttress his points about the righteous thriving and the wicked perishing.

Job replies, (9:21-24) "I am blameless; I do not know myself; I loathe my life. It is all one; therefore I say, [God] destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges—if it is not He, who then is it?" (NRSV)

Zophar speaks: "You say, 'My conduct is pure, and I am clean in God's sight.' But oh, that God would speak, and open his lips to you, and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For wisdom is many-sided. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves." (11:4-6)

And this is Job's friend??

It's as though all their sympathy for Job has been exhausted by those first seven days of silence. Perhaps their pain at Job's situation has overcome them, and they are doing all they can to distance themselves from this poor soul. They used to see him as a friend. Now these three see him as a stubborn, arrogant victim of his own wrongdoing. He doesn't listen to their counsel. And when people don't listen to what we're saying, we tend to TALK LOUDER, don't we?!

But Job replies, "I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you. Who does not know such things as these?" (12:3, NRSV) Job is really tired of these untested wishes from people who have not suffered much in their lives. Job uses parody and sarcasm freely. These platitudes, clichés, and banalities are a waste of my time, he says; they're an attack upon my character without evidence. Is this what friends are for?

Job's several speeches embrace his death and defy death, in turn. He begins to lean toward a desperate cry—it becomes a demand—that God come down and get into the witness box in a courtroom, and answer questions to explain what seems like sheer persecution—punishment without cause. Job imagines himself as the prosecuting attorney, bringing accusations against God.

In a second similar round of speeches from his friends and speeches from Job, the friends start attacking Job because he is undermining conventional religion.

Then, there's a third round of speeches. The positions of the three friends start sounding more and more alike, clinging to—and harping on--this mechanical concept of God's justice.

After the third round, there comes another friend named Elihu—perhaps he rolled up with the offers but because he is much younger than Job's old buddies, he's kept his silence. When the three have become convinced Job is not going to listen, and they stop trying to change him, at last Elihu feels driven to speak.

Elihu's perspective is a bit different. First, in chapter 32, he rebukes Job's friends, for-- here he agrees with Job--their speeches have not provided any help; they have not answered Job's question. So now, even though he is younger, he will take a turn.

Elihu sort-of agrees with the other guys when they argue that God must be in the right; God does not do wrong; there is a connection between sin and suffering. But his new point is, God is trying to teach you something here, Job. And Job, you aren't getting it because you are holding on to your righteousness so tightly that you cannot grasp anything else. This stubborn, arrogant assertion of your innocence is sin right now, Job, because instead of putting yourself in a position to learn from God, you have already decided what is right and wrong, and you are demanding God submit to your verdict; you, Job, want to convict God of gross incompetence in running the world.

But then, there's a sudden break in the book. God speaks, almost interrupting Elihu. God's speech is decisive, but not in the way we might want. We'll take that up next week.

What to make of these speeches? Job's friends seem more interested in being right than they are in supporting Job. Just as Job can be accused of stubborn arrogance in holding on to his righteousness before God, so these friends are stubbornly arrogant in holding on to their paradigm of how God works. (We'll say more about that next week, also.) The friends' words hardly mention Job's positions; they talk past him. In the end, they are poor friends.

What are friends for? Friends stick with you, even when it gives them pain to see you in pain. It's painful to see someone you love, suffer. When someone is in pain, pain also rises up in us. Say, a friend is depressed; we have been depressed. Somewhere inside us, we remember the awful feeling of hopelessness that seemed overwhelming—rather like Job, who was sure his life was over, that things would never change. It's hard to bear that for very long. So most of us—especially us men—start trying to “fix” the other person. We go into problem-solving mode. And we're pretty intent on it, because that's *doing something*, and it helps us medicate the sympathetic pain that WE are feeling over the other person's depression. (See, it's really about us; it's about our discomfort at the other person's pain.)

You've probably heard the story about a wife who was becoming quite worried because her husband had not arrived home on time from his regular Saturday afternoon golf game. As

the hours passed she became more and more nervous. Finally, at about 8 p.m., her husband's golfing partner, Bob, pulled into the driveway. "What happened? You guys should have been back hours ago! Where's Frank?" asked the wife. "Well, you see," replied Bob, "Frank had a heart attack at the third hole. Now don't worry, I took him to the hospital and he's going to be fine." "Oh, my goodness, that's terrible, my poor Frank, to think about how he must have been suffering through all that pain," sobbed the wife. "Oh," Bob responded, "you think HE had it bad? What about me? How do you think I feel? Do you think I had it easy? All day long it was... hit the ball, drag Frank, hit the ball, drag Frank."

We sure can make things "all about us", can't we?

Yes, it's hard to just "be there" for another. And yet, that's often what a friendship demands—being there, showing your support without having to fix the other person. Trying to talk them out of their pain, or solve their problem for them, is often NOT HELPFUL. If they ask, then perhaps it's OK. But they must take responsibility for their lives, and our role is to be there to cheer them on.

Parents, you know it's hard to see your kid hurt. But you also learn that your child has to skin some knees or suffer some social pain in order to learn some life lessons. We parents do our best work when they help our children clarify the lessons that life is teaching them, so they have new tools to apply in future situations.

Hanging out with someone in pain is like hearing a 7th chord; it's incomplete. Many of us want to get up, go to the piano, and play the resolved chord. (We don't like unfinished business.) Can we put our drive for order and tranquility aside, and just sit with a friend who is in a world of hurt?

Friends support you, but that does not mean they must agree with you. Sometimes we are confused about this, but the classic definition of friendship includes, "helping you be a better person, helping you be the best that you can be." That means a friend will challenge you, spur you on, and let you know when you've crossed a line. They will encourage, AND challenge, as well.

But we don't usually think of friendship that way, do we? My father had a very strong value of loyalty. When he divorced my mother, his sister and her family did their best to stay in contact with both my dad and my mom, and not "play favorites". But that made my dad furious. They were "consorting with the enemy"; they were "being disloyal". So he cut them off. He forbade my brother and me to contact them in Ohio. They no longer existed. Period.

This version of loyalty contradicts one of the things that friends are for. Being a friend is no small thing. Friendship includes—but is more than—simply being with someone. It is a commitment to mutual maturity-making. Do you have any friends like that? ARE YOU a friend like that? Or, have you cut off someone because they offered a criticism or seemed disloyal, so you never learned what you might have learned from them? What will you allow from your friends?

Many men have virtually no friends. They have acquaintances, they have colleagues in their field. They don't have friends. They don't play together, or bond with others. Our job demands do not help. Of all the industrialized nations, we have no national health insurance, and we work more hours. Of course, we are the most productive of nations--because economic pressures prevent companies from adding more to their workforce to ease excessive work loads.

Managers face these pressures even more than workers. Men need friends, but we hesitate to make the commitment of time in order to nurture deep friendships. We have to make space in our lives—make time, really—for friendships. Friendships can be costly. But what’s the alternative? We have proven that loneliness can kill. So, which do you want?

Want to be a good friend? Invest some time in another person. Be with them when they have things to celebrate with their family or at work, and invite them into your life, too. Be ready to hang with them without “fixing” them or their problems. But don’t let them get away with destructive behaviors; insist that they become the best they can be, and take responsibility for their lives. Then you’ll show what friends are for.

Job’s story to this point is tragic. His friends are not good friends at all. Friends support us in tough times. But life can be fun, too. Indeed, building fun into a friendship fuels it so that you have a desire to help someone who is already your friend, instead of being helpful because it’s the thing you “should” do. With whom are you having fun? Men—have you forgotten how? Remember, like we said a few weeks ago, it’s your responsibility (men or women) to “fill your bucket” so that you have something to give, when there is a need.

Will you add this depth to your friendships—both the ability to suffer with someone, and the courage to challenge a friend’s errors and weaknesses with your faith in their virtues and their strengths? Then you’ll show what friends are for.

CROP Walk Sunday

HEALING MINISTRY

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on October 14, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]