

Sunday February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Job 15:1-6; 16:6-17  
“Is There Meaning in Pain?”

A man went to a barbershop to have his hair cut and his beard trimmed. As the barber began to work, they began to have a good conversation. They talked about so many things and various subjects. When they eventually touched on the subject of God, the barber said: “I don’t believe that God exists.” “Why do you say that?” asked the customer. “Well, you just have to go out in the street to realize that God doesn’t exist.

Tell me, if God exists, would there be so many sick people? Would there be abandoned children? If God existed, there would be neither suffering nor pain. I can’t imagine a loving God who would allow all of these things.” The customer thought for a moment, but didn’t respond because he didn’t want to start an argument. The barber finished his job and the customer left the shop.

Just after he left the barbershop, he saw a man in the street with long, stringy, dirty hair and an untrimmed beard. He looked dirty and unkempt. The customer turned back and entered the barber shop again and he said to the barber: “You know what? Barbers do not exist.” “How can you say that?” asked the surprised barber. “I am here, and I am a barber. And I just worked on you!”

“No!” the customer exclaimed. “Barbers don’t exist, because if they did, there would be no people with dirty long hair and untrimmed beards, like that man outside.” “Ah, but barbers DO exist! That’s what happens when people do not come to me.” “Exactly!” affirmed the customer. “That’s the point! God, too, DOES exist! That’s what happens when people do not go to Him and don’t look to Him for help. That’s why there’s so much pain and suffering in the world.”

This is certainly true that much of the world’s ills are related to an ignorance of God, or the downright hostility towards God. The system, as we have already examined, is built on the idea that sins are punished, and some of that punishment is suffering. However, Job reveals in his experience, the fact that often our suffering is not because of something we did, but rather we suffer because of someone else’s sin. We are substitutes for the suffering.

Job is pointing at the fact that Jesus, who was sinless, suffered for our transgressions. His suffering was redemptive. Job places much hope in this idea of redemptive suffering, but his friends do not. Therefore, Eliphaz takes the stage for his second speech, and admits outright that redemptive suffering is a disgraceful idea. Eliphaz says at least six things about Job’s idea of redemptive suffering.

First, he reiterates that Job’s words are nothing but hot air. He is achieving nothing by saying what he is saying. The “east wind” refers to the hot sirocco winds blowing off the desert. It is uncomfortable and unfruitful as a wind. The idea of underserved suffering has no place in the reality of the universe. But worse than this, Job’s words are dangerous. In saying such things Job is not giving proper reverence to God. Job is undermining proper religion and piety.

If Job’s ideas caught on, no one would be motivated to live a virtuous life.

Eliphaz then accuses Job of using words in a crafty and self-serving way. Job's motives are not pure. He accuses Job of saying these things because he knows he is guilty, but will not admit it. Eliphaz concludes that Job is only talking about redemptive suffering to mask a guilty conscience. Eliphaz says of God, "he catches the wise in their own craftiness". (v.5) But how does Eliphaz know this about Job. Can he know the inner workings of Job's mind and heart?

Eliphaz goes on to say Job's words are arrogant. He says Job sees himself as being in the council of God from the very beginning of everything. Job is claiming a monopoly on wisdom. Job is like a soldier accusing other soldiers of being out of step when he himself is the one out of step. Eliphaz kind of pulls rank on Job speaking of the fact that he is older and therefore wiser. The word "know" appears seventy times in Job, and it refers to the over riding question. How do we know what we know, or claim to know?

Next, he says Job's words are hurtful. The three friends have come to comfort Job. They have tried to apply the system to Job's wounds as gently as they can, but Job is not grateful for their effort. Why is Job so angry? So unappreciative of how the system works. Then Eliphaz finishes off by saying that Job's words are unrealistic. Eliphaz reminds Job that no human can ever be pure or right before God.

This is not a new accusation. We've heard it before. Job, you are a normal man, born of a woman. Even the angels are not pure before God, so how can you be? It is natural to do injustice as much as it is natural to drink water. You have to do wrong. There is no way around it. No way to avoid it.

It is interesting that the same accusations Eliphaz makes, eventually are also leveled at the meaning of undeserved grace brought by Jesus. So many people struggle to accept that God's grace is unmerited, undeserved, but it is still offered to us. Some may even feel that if grace is given freely, this undermines the whole system of checks and balances of the morality of the universe. This was the objection raised to Paul's presentation of the gospel in Romans 3:8.

"And why not do evil that good may come." Free grace is always leaking away from churches today. The "religious" mind set hates free grace. Many see grace as a crutch, a flimsy shield to avoid personal responsibility. Free grace sounds good, but is it realistic? This is something the world has always struggled with. The book of Job is about undeserved suffering, but it is also about undeserved grace.

To strengthen his point, Eliphaz paints a detailed description of a wicked man. Although the man is unnamed, there are hints that he is referring to Job in a back handed way. A wicked man lives a terrible life. Writhing in pain. The phrase in verse 23 "where is it" may refer to a scavenger searching for food. Like a vulture. Then Eliphaz describes the fate of a wicked man in rather graphic terms.

A wicked man foolishly challenges God like Don Quixote tilting at windmills. This is what Job is doing by insisting on an audience with God. You can read the full picture for yourself, but the conclusion of Eliphaz is that the fate of a wicked man closely mirrors Job's own situation. It is clear from Eliphaz's words, that when grace is denied to someone, cruelty inevitably follows.

Job's response to Eliphaz's words links to a story in Mark 10 when James and John come and ask for the seats of honour when Jesus ushers in his kingdom. Jesus' response may puzzle us at first. "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?" They foolishly say they can, and then Jesus promises them, "The cup that I drink you will drink". Jesus' point is that as his disciples, they will taste the wrath against sin as he did.

Job is holding this cup, and his experience points to Jesus on the cross. Job begins his response with two deep longings of his heart. The speeches of his friends are depressing and cruel upon Job. "Oh, I have heard this kind of thing many times before", he says. Job knows the religious system, but its effect on him is misery. It is of no comfort to him. In fact, Job uses his famous words to describe his friends, "Miserable comforters".

Eliphaz insisted they have offered Job the comfort of God, but nothing can be further from the truth. Just think of some of the things they have accused him of, or described about Job. Why must they continue to harp on Job. Just think how things would be if our roles were reversed. How would you feel if I came and fed you the religious system to try and comfort you? But Job has another desire here. He longs to be comforted by someone, anyone; but he also longs to comfort others in pain.

It is not clear how he would do this, but the Apostle Paul had a similar idea. "Comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God". (2 Cor. 1:4) As for now, speeches or words are of no help to him. I almost get the sense that in their speeches to Job, they are trying to convince themselves as much as Job. We need remember that no religious system, or philosophy, that is without grace, can ever comfort anyone.

In verses 7-14 of Job's speeches, he clearly identifies God as the hostile agent against him. Job says that God has worn him out, or debilitated him. God has made desolate all my company; that is, my social world. God has shriveled him up. The hedge he used to enjoy is from God and now the wrath of God is squeezing the life out of him. Job is a wretched man, living in wretched circumstances, and no one seems to be able to bring him any solace, not even God.

Jesus' life was like this. He had nowhere to lay his head. His family thought he was crazy. His disciples abandoned him. One even betrayed him, and on the cross, he felt God had forsaken him. Job sees God's treatment of him as personal, as was Jesus' experience bearing our sin. God has knocked him down so far that now evil people, like scavengers, are trying to take whatever is left of him. They have struck me on my cheek.

In the Middle East, such a slap would be of a grave insult. No wonder Jesus says for us to turn the other cheek. Job is terribly lonely, as Jesus was as the Roman soldiers mocked him. Even sworn enemies, the Jews and Romans, banded together to destroy him. They can do this to Jesus, because the Father has forsaken the Son, and abandoned him to the mocking crowds. This attack on Job is also unceasing.

Job states that he was at ease enjoying the blessings of God, then God bashed me to pieces. God set me up as a target to be used for archers to practice. His blood left to flow over the ground. Then Job speaks of his experience as a city under siege.

“Breach upon breach”, upon that hedge that he enjoyed so much. Like a siege, God’s hostility to Job is unceasing. Again, we see this in Jesus, where God said of him at his baptism that Jesus was God’s son in whom he was well pleased. And still at the end of the gospel, Jesus is God-forsaken. This the template from which we can all be sustained when we experience God forsakenness. It is these moments when we participate in Christ’s suffering.

We drink from his cup. Again, Job insists he has a clear conscience. All this terrible experience, and yet Job insists he has done nothing to deserve it. Job is not claiming to be sinless, but rather he is claiming that whatever sins he has had, have been forgiven. It is at this moment in Job’s speech that a new hope begins to arise. Job’s hope is that as he cries out with a clear conscience God will hear him and respond.

Then Job introduces a new idea that is of great importance for us. He speaks of a witness who intercede on his behalf before God. Job knows of no one, not even angels that can carry out this task, so he calls on God to speak to God on his behalf. This clearly foreshadows the role Christ has in interceding for us. Job has no other helper. No other defender or advocate. His friends are useless in this regard.

Job is appealing to the only one who has status before God, and that is God himself. “My eyes pour out tears to God that he would argue the case of a man with God.” (v. 21) Yet, despite his hope in this mediator, Job is still facing his greatest enemy. He talks about the graveyard that awaits him. What lies ahead of him, regardless of anything else is death. “My spirit is broken. My days are cut short. The grave awaits me.

Job’s final words are directed back at his friends. “But you, come on again, all of you.” Its almost as Job is daring them to attack him again. There is not a scrap of wisdom among them. They offer no hope at all and “without hope people perish”. And any hope he does possess, will go with him to “Sheol” and be locked up forever.

However, in this section, there begins to be a ray of hope. Why else would Job ruminate about what will happen to his hope, and he mentions a mediator to speak on his behalf. Why does Job keep talking if he hasn’t got any hope? People who have no hope often fall into silence. Even though Job despairs deeply, he also holds onto hope. This is truly an amazing revelation. He cannot accept that someone, like him who has a clear conscience, will not ultimately be vindicated.

One of the places on earth I always thought would be great to visit is New Zealand. It is a beautiful country with lush green hills. The conditions are ideal for raising sheep and New Zealand has them in abundance. During the annual lambing season, thousands of lambs are born. Unfortunately, some lambs die at birth. Many ewes also die while giving birth. What then is to be done with these orphaned lambs so they will survive.

The solution seems simple enough and that is to pair the orphan lambs with a ewe that lost her baby. However, that is not as easy as it sounds. A mother lamb will not accept and nurse a lamb that is not hers. They can tell by the scent of the lamb. What shepherds do is a very old technique which sounds rough, but it saves lambs.

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They take the skin off the dead lamb, and secure it to the orphaned lamb, and thus the mother thinks it is her sheep by the scent, thus accepting the lamb and nursing it. Otherwise, many lambs would not survive. Lambing season in New Zealand reminds us of what Jesus did for us on the cross. In Revelation 7:14 and 12:11 it speaks of our being saved “by the blood of the lamb”. This phrase had a greater meaning for the people of agrarian societies.

The Apostle Paul wrote, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he...has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...” (Eph. 2:13-14) Because of Christ’s blood, God now accepts us as his own. Once we were orphans but now, we are God’s adopted children. This is our hope. A hope Job longs for.

So, Job deduces in a real act of faith, that God will ultimately, intercede with himself for Job. For Christians it is in Jesus that we experience an echo of Job’s trials, and we long to be comforted and comfort others. Unlike Job we know we have a mediator, who speaks for us before almighty God. We know when we finally gaze into the very jaws of death, our hope is assured because we will be raised with Christ.

**BENEDICTION:** O Christ, help us to be your disciples in deed and in truth. Grant us the grace to bless those who curse us, to forgive those who condemn us, to receive those who judge us, and to love those who hate us. Thus, do we pray, that all your people might be one in the Spirit. Amen.