**WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER**

**QUESTIONING GOD’S JUSTICE**

**Job 8:1-10:22**

**INTRODUCTION**

What is the book of Job about? At this point in our series, we might say it’s a book about suffering and about how to grieve your way through it. That’s true to some extent, but not completely, because there are many different causes of our suffering. There’s suffering that results from our sin. There’s suffering that arises as the natural consequences of our foolishness. There’s suffering that comes from living in a fallen world where people get old and die.

Job isn’t about those kinds of suffering, though I’m sure you can learn things about them from this book. But at the heart of Job is a more specific kind of suffering, what you could call *innocent* suffering, where there is no causal connection between what you’ve done, and what you’ve received. A good Samaritan is killed while helping others. A precious child dies at a young age. A faithful employee is fired for refusing to do something unethical. That’s the kind of suffering that the book of Job addresses.

The book of Job is also about God’s sovereignty. From the beginning of the book to the very end, Job holds God up as the sovereign ruler of good and evil, prosperity and adversity, health and sickness, life and death. It presents God as one who is completely in control of everything that happens in your life, including the evil that the devil inflicts upon you.

But if God is sovereign and the innocent suffer, the question, then, is what do we do with God’s justice? If God has ordained innocent suffering in our lives, can we still say that he is just? Or do we have to say that he is arbitrary, capricious, and cruel?

Divine justice is one of the central themes of this divinely-inspired book, and it is the theme that Job wrestles with in our text today.

The title of this sermon is **Questioning God’s Justice.** We will have three points today:

1. A Friend’s Rebuke
2. A Hopeless Courtroom
3. A Bitter Complaint

(1) **A FRIEND’S REBUKE**

Chapter 8 contains the first speech of the second of Job’s friends, Bildad the Shuhite. Unlike Eliphaz before him, whom we met last week, Bildad doesn’t waste any time trying to be sensitive and careful. He gets directly to the point. This is reflected in the relative length of his first speech which is less than half the length of Eliphaz’s first speech.

Bildad is also frustrated with Job. He says in verse 2:

**1**Then Bildad the Shuhite answered and said:

**2**“How long will you say these things,
    and the words of your mouth be a great wind?

Job hasn’t spoken much for a man who has lost so much, but Bildad has already heard enough. He calls Job’s words a “great wind” because they lack substance. They’re just empty words without any lasting value. And the reason why is because of what Job has asserted about God’s justice.

“I’m innocent”, Job has said, “Yet God has taken everything away from me without cause or justification.” Bildad won’t have it. He challenges Job in verse 3:

**3**Does God pervert justice?
    Or does the Almighty pervert the right?

Bildad is accusing Job of blasphemy against God. According to Bildad, Job’s assertion that he has suffered as an innocent man is a perversion of justice, a false claim that God has wronged him, because Bildad believes that people only get what they deserve. He says in verse 4:

**4**If your children have sinned against him,
    he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression.

Bildad doesn’t outrightly say that Job’s children are dead because they deserved it, but he’s clearly suggesting it. “Job, those who sin are delivered into the hand of their transgression, and that includes your children!”

Like Eliphaz, Bildad lives in a black and white world, a world without nuance, mystery, or unanswered questions about why God does what he does. He knows exactly why things happen. The righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. It’s as simple as that. There’s no room for Satan and his diabolical work in our lives. There’s no room for the sinful effects of the Fall leaving us to live in a broken world. There’s not even room for God’s forgiveness. If you sin, God will deliver you into the hand of your transgression.

That’s one of the reasons why he doesn’t ask if Job offered sacrifices for his children (which he did). He just doesn’t care. In his world, there is no atonement, no forgiveness, no unmerited favour. God only helps those who help themselves, so you need to earn it to enjoy it.

That is why he urges Job to change his life around in verses 5-7:

**5**If you will seek God
    and plead with the Almighty for mercy,
**6**if you are pure and upright,
    surely then he will rouse himself for you
    and restore your rightful habitation.
**7**And though your beginning was small,
    your latter days will be very great.

It’s very simple for Bildad. Job needs to beg for mercy, then he needs to turn and live a “pure and upright” life. *Then* God will restore him. *Then* God will even bless him beyond his wildest dreams. What he once had as the greatest of all the people of the East would seem small compared to what God was going to give him.

It sounds attractive, but it’s really demonic. Bildad is tempting Job the same way that Eliphaz tempted him. He’s tempting Job to go to God to get what he wants, to love the gifts and not the Giver. He’s tempting Job to become the man Satan accused him of being: a man who only blessed God for his blessings, who lived piously to gain God’s protection, who submitted to God in order to be free from suffering.

But God is so much more than his gifts. Even if all his gifts were taken away, he is enough. Job knew that on the terrible day when he lost his wealth and all ten of his children but he still fell on his face and worshipped. But now, in the midst of his deepest sorrow, he is being tempted by his friends to abandon God as the one who is enough for him.

Bildad tries to strengthen his case in verses 8-10. Whereas Eliphaz appealed to his mystical experience, Bildad appeals to the wisdom of tradition.

**8**“For inquire, please, of bygone ages,
    and consider what the fathers have searched out.
**9**For we are but of yesterday and know nothing,
    for our days on earth are a shadow.
**10**Will they not teach you and tell you
    and utter words out of their understanding?

This is good advice. It’s good advice to consider the wisdom of the ages. Bildad is warning Job about the dangers of what C.S. Lewis called “chronological snobbery”, when those who live now think they’re smarter than those who lived before simply because of where we are on the timeline of history.

But the problem here is that Bildad only appeals to the tradition that confirms his beliefs. If he had the benefit of the tradition contained in Scripture, he would see that the righteous do indeed suffer, and that Job was not wrong to say that God had afflicted him without cause.

Bildad then uses a number of word pictures in verses 11-19 to describe the person who doesn’t trust the Lord. He’s like a plant trying to grow without water. He is like a man who is leaning on a spider’s web, or on a house that does not stand. He is like a lush plant that seems to be growing and fruitful, but its “roots entwine the stone heap”. They don’t go deep. When he perishes, he is forgotten. Even the place he lived denies him saying, “I have never seen you.”

Bildad’s last word to Job is:

**20**“Behold, God will not reject a blameless man,
    nor take the hand of evildoers.
**21**He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,
    and your lips with shouting.
**22**Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,
    and the tent of the wicked will be no more.”

Bildad is trying to be a good friend. He wants a better life for Job. He wants him to laugh again. He wants his enemies to be clothed with shame. But all his advice comes from a flawed view of suffering, a flawed view of Job, and a flawed view of God. He’s urging Job to be a “blameless man” so that God will restore him, but God already declared him to be blameless in Chapters 1 and 2.

Job’s sin isn’t the problem, which means that Job’s repentance isn’t the solution. Job’s afflictions have indeed come upon him without divine explanation or reason, which is why this is so difficult for him.

Derek Kidner writes,

“To them, the issue he should be facing is ‘What have I done?’ – but to him it is ‘What has *God* done?’” – Derek Kidner

(2) **A HOPELESS COURTROOM**

That is where we turn next, leading to our second point.

Job begins his reply with a question:

**1**Then Job answered and said:

**2**“Truly I know that it is so:
    But how can a man be in the right before God?

Job’s saying, “I know that I should be right with God, Bildad. But how is it possible? How is it possible to stand before God as one who is blameless and upright?” As believers, we can relate. We know that it’s impossible to be righteous before God. We know we can’t justify ourselves, because we’re sinners.

The difference between us and Job, however, is that we say that we can’t be right before God because of our sin. Job says that he can’t be right before God because of *his* injustice.

Job begins his argument with a poem about God’s power, but notice how he chooses to focus on how God’s power brings *dis*order rather than order:

**3**If one wished to contend with him,
    one could not answer him once in a thousand times.
**4**He is wise in heart and mighty in strength
    —who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?—
**5**he who removes mountains, and they know it not,
    when he overturns them in his anger,
**6**who shakes the earth out of its place,
    and its pillars tremble;
**7**who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
    who seals up the stars;

Job is saying, “If I were to take God to court, it wouldn’t be a fair fight. Look at what God can do. Look at how he holds all creation in his hands. Look at how he does whatever he wants, removing mountains, shaking the earth, sealing up the stars. I don’t stand a chance against this all-powerful God.”

Once again, Job is right. He’s right that God is in the heavens and he does all that he pleases. But how Job imagines God using this power is fundamentally flawed.

Verses 14-19:

**14**How then can I answer him,
    choosing my words with him?
**15**Though I am in the right, I cannot answer him;
    I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.
**16**If I summoned him and he answered me,
    I would not believe that he was listening to my voice.
**17**For he crushes me with a tempest
    and multiplies my wounds without cause;
**18**he will not let me get my breath,
    but fills me with bitterness.
**19**If it is a contest of strength, behold, he is mighty!
    If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?

Job is saying that this all-powerful God doesn’t play by the rules of the courtroom. Even if Job says, “I am in the right”, he has no answer for the Lord. Job could summon the Lord to testify, but he wouldn’t listen to his voice. Job could try to match his wits with God, but he would overwhelm him with his might. There is no way that Job can answer God, and therefore there’s no way for him to prove himself to be blameless.

It’s not that Job is trying to convince himself. He believes himself to be blameless. He says that in verse 15, twice in verse 20, and again in verse 21. “I am in the right; I am blameless.” But he’s still upset, because he doesn’t believe that God will give him the chance to prove that he is indeed blameless: blameless before his friends, blameless before a watching world, and blameless before his God.

This is one thing Job wants more than anything else. It stands above his desire to be wealthy again, or to be healthy again, or to have his family again. His central desire and the cry of his heart is to be vindicated before God. But that just doesn’t seem possible to him, because he doesn’t believe in God’s justice anymore. He doesn’t believe that he’ll get his day in court to prove his case. And that makes him a bitter man: bitter about his life, and bitter about his God.

Verses 21-24:

**21**I am blameless; I regard not myself;
    I loathe my life.
**22**It is all one; therefore I say,
    ‘He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.’
**23**When disaster brings sudden death,
    he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.
**24**The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;
    he covers the faces of its judges—
    if it is not he, who then is it?

It is important to note here that Job is saying things about God that just aren’t true. God doesn’t mock at the calamity of the innocent. He’s not sitting on his throne in heaven and laughing at our pain. He may laugh at his enemies as they plot and rage against him, but he doesn’t laugh at his beloved people.

Lamentations 3:31-33:

For the Lord will not
    cast off forever,
but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
    according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
for he does not afflict from his heart
    or grieve the children of men.

Job has lost sight of this. He has lost sight of the God of compassion, the God of mercy, the God who does not afflict or grieve the children of men from his heart. And that is why he says these bitter things about God.

C.S. Lewis wrote about this after the death of his wife. He wrote:

“Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.” – C.S. Lewis

The same was true for Job. Job wasn’t tempted to believe that God didn’t exist. He was tempted to believe that this is what God was really like, that God is unjust, unfair, and uncaring. And in so doing, Job said things that were sinful. Job’s sin didn’t produce his suffering, but his suffering did produce sin. But God demonstrates his steadfast love and mercy, not by rebuking him or crushing him even more, but by listening and waiting for the right time to speak to his faithful servant.

Chapter 9 ends with Job speaking to God in verses 25-31 (addressing God as “you” in verses 28 and 31), and then speaking about God in verses 32-35 (addressing God as “he” and “him”).

If you could say one thing about Job’s prayers, it’s that they’re relatable. They’re *human* in their vulnerability and honesty. He talks about trying to move on from his pain in verse 27, but being afraid of the next thing God will do to him instead. He talks about labouring in vain in verse 29 because it seems like God will end up punishing him anyways.

And then he returns to his hopeless courtroom in verses 32-33:

**32**For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him,
    that we should come to trial together.
**33**There is no arbiter between us,
    who might lay his hand on us both.

Job wants an arbiter between him and God, someone to stand before God’s wrath and Job’s weakness. He wants a mediator, one who will lay his hand on them both and bring them back together. But as far as he knew, there was no mediator. There was no arbiter between them, which is why his case seemed so hopeless.

(3) **A BITTER COMPLAINT**

Job ends his speech with another bitter complaint poured out from his heart to God, leading to our third point.

This prayer is just as dark as the ones that came before it. He tells God that he loathes his life in verse 1. He asks God why he contends with him in verse 2. He challenges God with a rhetorical question in verse 3 that suggests that God favours the wicked over the righteous.

In verses 4-7 he accuses God of nitpicking when it comes to Job’s sin. He even says that God knows that he is not guilty, but he still seeks out his iniquity and searches for his sin like a man who is committed to digging up dirt about his neighbours.

Then in verses 8-13, Job finally expresses his sense of betrayal:

**8**Your hands fashioned and made me,
    and now you have destroyed me altogether.
**9**Remember that you have made me like clay;
    and will you return me to the dust?
**10**Did you not pour me out like milk
    and curdle me like cheese?
**11**You clothed me with skin and flesh,
    and knit me together with bones and sinews.
**12**You have granted me life and steadfast love,
    and your care has preserved my spirit.
**13**Yet these things you hid in your heart;
    I know that this was your purpose.

He’s saying, “God, you made me. You fashioned me like clay. You clothed me with skin and flesh. You even granted me life and steadfast love. But now I see who you truly are. I see what was hidden in your heart: *hatred* for me, injustice, and unceasing affliction.”

Job feels betrayed by God. He feels that God set him up to believe all these good things about him only to turn around and stab him in the back. He has lost all sense of God’s goodness, and with it, he has lost his hope.

Verse 15:

**15**If I am guilty, woe to me!
    If I am in the right, I cannot lift up my head,
for I am filled with disgrace
    and look on my affliction.

Job has lost all sense of purpose. To him, it doesn’t matter anymore if he’s guilty or if he’s innocent. “Woe to me”, he cries. “Guilty or innocent, I lose. There is no escaping my disgrace. There is no looking away from my affliction, because God is just going to bring more witnesses against me. He’s going to bring fresh troops against me. There is just no escape.”

And so, Job questions the purpose of his life again:

**18**“Why did you bring me out from the womb?
    Would that I had died before any eye had seen me
**19**and were as though I had not been,
    carried from the womb to the grave.

And he begs God to just leave him alone:

**20**Are not my days few?
    Then cease, and leave me alone, that I may find a little cheer
**21**before I go—and I shall not return—
    to the land of darkness and deep shadow,
**22**the land of gloom like thick darkness,
    like deep shadow without any order,
    where light is as thick darkness.”

Job has come to believe that happiness can only be found in the absence of God. It’s only if God leaves him alone that he will find some relief. His only hope has become that in the last days of his life, he might “find a little cheer” without God in his life instead of returning to the darkness of having God in it.

**CONCLUSION**

So what do we take away from these three chapters of Job? Let me suggest two things.

1. **Pray Honestly**

Job wasn’t a perfect man, but he is presented to us as the exemplary believer. This is not a man who was weak in faith, but strong. He was a man of integrity, a man who believed the truth, a man who put his hope in the Lord. And yet, this is how he prayed. He prayed with an almost embarrassing level of honesty, pouring out his bitterness to his friends, and more importantly to his God.

When we find ourselves in a dark season of the soul, we may say, “I’m not going to pray, because I don’t have anything good to say to God.” But if the book of Job tells us anything, it’s that it is better to pour out your bitterness to God than to not say anything to him at all.

In his book on lament, Pastor Mark Vroegop writes,

“Many people are afraid of lament. They find it too honest, too open, or too risky. But there’s something far worse: silent despair. Giving God the silent treatment is the ultimate manifestation of unbelief. Despair lives under the hopeless resignation that God doesn’t care, he doesn’t hear, and nothing is ever going to change. People who believe this stop praying. They give up… This silence is a soul killer.” (p. 32)

It is far better to pray like Job than to not pray at all, because bitter prayer is still prayer. Bitter prayer is still the fruit of genuine faith. But when faith disappears, prayer disappears. Don’t let that happen.

If you feel like your soul is empty, or that your faith is withering, or that your vision of God has faded, that’s precisely when you should be spending the most time in prayer. It may not be flowery or biblically accurate, but it will be genuine, and that’s what matters. A little faith is better than no faith at all. When prayer seems hardest, pour out your heart to God. Tell him how you feel. Ask him *why* he has done this. And he will listen, he will wait, and he will answer in his own timing.

2. **Trust in the Arbiter**

This sermon began as a message about God’s justice, and it will end as a message about God’s justice. Job lamented the fact that there was no arbiter between him and God, who might lay his hand on them both. He lamented that there was no one to bridge the gap between a Holy God and sinful man.

But we celebrate the fact that there *is* an arbiter. There is a mediator who came and laid his hand on both God and man by being both God and man. Jesus Christ is that mediator, the one mediator between God and man, who gave himself as a ransom for all. He sacrificed himself on the cross for sinners, not because of God’s injustice, but because of God’s perfect justice and mercy.

Job was looking for an arbiter to save him from God’s wrath but he found none. We look for an arbiter and find him in God’s own Son. God himself has provide the arbiter that we need in Jesus Christ, who would not just mediate through negotiation, but through crucifixion.

That is how we know that God is just. It’s not by looking at our circumstances. It’s not by looking at what we have lost, or what we have suffered, or what trouble we have in our lives. It’s by looking at the cross. It is at the cross where God satisfied his just wrath against us, and it is at the cross where God demonstrated the full extent of his love for us.

And so I urge you: trust in him. Trust in the arbiter who has come to save us. Trust in Jesus Christ, sent by God to us for our everlasting joy and salvation. Let him be your confidence and hope. Let him be the light in your darkness. Let him be your Saviour.