**WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER**

**COMFORT FOR THE SUFFERING**

**Job 11-14**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we come to the first speech of Zophar the Naamathite. Like Eliphaz and Bildad before him, Zophar desires to bring comfort to Job. He has heard of his friend’s suffering. He has seen his boil-infested body with his own eyes. He has raised his voice in agony as he wept with his friend.

But after spending several days with Job, Zophar is troubled. He is troubled by what he has heard from Job. He believes that Job has spoken falsely about God and about himself. Job has claimed innocence, and that God has brought all these afflictions on him despite his innocence. For Zophar, this was not only wrong. It was blasphemous. And so, even as he tries to comfort Job, he rebukes and scolds him as well.

In doing so, Zophar’s worldview is exposed as having no comfort to offer to the suffering. He believes in a world where only the righteous prosper and the wicked suffer. That may be easy to believe when life is good, but not so much when life is not so good. In those times, we need a better way of seeing the world, a biblical way, if we are to find comfort for ourselves and for those around us.

The title of this sermon is **Comfort for the Suffering.** We will have three points today:

1. False Comfort
2. Desired Comfort
3. Ultimate Comfort

(1) **FALSE COMFORT**

Zophar’s speech begins with his rebuke:

**1**Then Zophar the Naamathite answered and said:

**2**“Should a multitude of words go unanswered,  
    and a man full of talk be judged right?  
**3**Should your babble silence men,  
    and when you mock, shall no one shame you?

Zophar is accusing Job of using a “multitude of words” and being “full of talk” that begs to be answered. According to Zophar, Job’s “babble” needs to be shamed, and Zophar identifies himself as the right man to do it.

**4**For you say, ‘My doctrine is pure,  
    and I am clean in God's eyes.’  
**5**But oh, that God would speak  
    and open his lips to you,  
**6**and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!  
    For he is manifold in understanding.

The reason why is that Job claims that “my doctrine is pure, and I am clean in God’s eyes.” Job is claiming innocence, but Zophar knows better. He knows that Job is a sinner who deserves all this suffering, and he’s so convinced of it that he wishes that God himself would “open his lips” and tell him.

But since God is silent, Zophar will speak for God instead. Verse 6:

**6**…Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.

He’s saying, “You think you have it bad, Job? Well, it could be worse. It could be *a lot worse*, especially if God gave you what you deserved. That’s how guilty you are. That’s what your sin deserves.”

As believers, we know that this is technically true. Yes, it could be worse for Job. He could be suffering an eternity of torment in hell. But it’s hard to imagine something worse to say to someone who is suffering like Job.

Christian counsellor and author Ed Welch writes:

“Such a comment is utterly thoughtless. God himself would never say or sanction it. God does not compare our present suffering to anyone else’s or to worst-case scenarios….God is not dismissive of our hardships, and neither should we be.”

Zophar’s problem is that he is trying to comfort without compassion. He’s trying to make Job feel better while standing in self-righteous judgment of how he’s processing his pain. That will never work. The only way to comfort someone like Job is to enter into their pain, to take the time to listen and feel their sorrow, even if you could never understand it fully.

Zophar then launches into a poem about God’s inscrutability. He waxes eloquent about how human beings can’t understand the ways of God:

**7**“Can you find out the deep things of God?  
    Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?  
**8**It is higher than heaven—what can you do?  
    Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?

This would be a beautiful poem if not for the insulting punchline at the end:

**12**But a stupid man will get understanding  
    when a wild donkey's colt is born a man!

Job is the stupid man here, and the chances of him understanding God’s ways are about the same as a wild donkey giving birth to a man. It’s impossible. But Zophar, on the other hand, is in a different class. Zophar doesn’t believe himself to be stupid like Job. Unlike Job, he can understand the deep things of God, and so he tells Job exactly what’s on God’s mind. “God is exacting of you less than your guilt deserves, Job. I know, because I know God and you don’t, so trust me.”

Zophar has made himself God’s spokesman, and he presumes to speak on God’s behalf again in verses 13-20:

**13**“If you prepare your heart,  
    you will stretch out your hands toward him.  
**14**If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away,  
    and let not injustice dwell in your tents.  
**15**Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;  
    you will be secure and will not fear.  
**16**You will forget your misery;  
    you will remember it as waters that have passed away.  
**17**And your life will be brighter than the noonday;  
    its darkness will be like the morning.  
**18**And you will feel secure, because there is hope;  
    you will look around and take your rest in security.

Zophar is saying, “Job, I know what you need to do. Repent of your sins. Stop practicing injustice. Turn your life around, and you’ll forget all your misery. You’ll have security and hope. You’ll have a future. That’s what God wants you to know.”

Zophar is trying to comfort his friend by making him an offer: Job’s repentance for God’s restoration. He thinks that he’s making this offer on God’s behalf. If only Job puts away his iniquity and injustice and turns his life around, then he’ll forget all his misery. Then he’ll have security and hope.

But Zophar doesn’t speak on God’s behalf, because he doesn’t understand the mind of God at all. He doesn’t understand that God has already pronounced Job to be blameless and upright. The problem here isn’t Job’s sin, which means that the solution here isn’t Job’s repentance.

But Zophar doesn’t understand this. His moralistic framework only allows him to offer Job false comfort. “Everything is going to be fine, Job, if you give God what he wants.” But life doesn’t work that way, and God doesn’t operate that way. If anyone says to you that you can get what you want by giving God what he wants, they’re dead wrong. It doesn’t matter if it’s your closest friend or the prosperity gospel teacher on TV. If anyone says that you can manipulate God to give you the life you’ve always wanted, they don’t know God at all.

God is not a machine. We can’t control him if we just pull the right levers. That is an offer of false comfort, because God doesn’t operate that way. Zophar was right when he said that we can’t understand the deep things of God, but he was wrong to make himself an exception.

God will not be manipulated or controlled. He will not be put in a box, and he will not be explained away, because he is holy and eternal, the all-wise God of the heavens and the earth, who knows the end from the beginning, whose ways are higher than our ways, and whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and that means that he will do things that we do not understand.

We must never presume like Zophar to know the thoughts of God, because we’ll end up offering people false comfort and do more harm than good.

(2) **DESIRED COMFORT**

That’s how Job felt. He identifies Zophar as offering false comfort in Chapters 12-13. But as he does, he also tells us about what would actually bring him comfort, which leads to our second point.

Job begins his reply in verse 2:

**1**Then Job answered and said:

**2**“No doubt you are the people,  
    and wisdom will die with you.

Job is speaking with sarcasm. We often speak with sarcasm when we’re frustrated or upset with someone. That’s Job. He’s being sarcastic as he replies not only to Zophar, but to Eliphaz and Bildad as well. “Surely, *you* are the people, the elite intellectuals of the world. You are so wise that when you die, there will be no wisdom left in the world.” Job is really getting fed up with his friends. He’s tired of their self-righteous, pompous views of themselves and of God, and he’s ready to give them a piece of his mind.

He tells them in verse 3:

**3**But I have understanding as well as you;  
    I am not inferior to you.  
    Who does not know such things as these?

Job already knows what his friends are telling him. He knows that suffering follows sin, and that God blesses those who repent. He doesn’t need them to remind him of that. What he needs is someone to tell him why a man like him, who fears the Lord and turns away from evil, has nonetheless suffered so much.

But rather than giving him the answers he wants, his friends only give him contempt:

**4**I am a laughingstock to my friends;  
    I, who called to God and he answered me,  
    a just and blameless man, am a laughingstock.  
**5**In the thought of one who is at ease there is contempt for misfortune;  
    it is ready for those whose feet slip.

It’s easy to look down on those who suffer when life is going just fine. We shake our heads and think, “Oh, they must have done something really bad to deserve that.” That’s what Job’s friends were doing to him.

And so, Job states his case yet again to prove that he is innocent.

**7**“But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;  
    the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you;  
**8**or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you;   
    and the fish of the sea will declare to you.  
**9**Who among all these does not know  
    that the hand of the Lord has done this?

He calls on the beasts to bear witness to what God has done. The “birds of the heavens”, the “bushes of the earth”, and the “fish of the sea” can tell his friends that the Lord has done all this to an innocent man.

Job knows that God is wise and mighty. He affirms this in verses 13 and 16. But he also says that God wields his wisdom and might in such a way that the mighty fall without explanation or reason:

**17**He leads counselors away stripped,  
    and judges he makes fools.  
**18**He looses the bonds of kings  
    and binds a waistcloth on their hips.  
**19**He leads priests away stripped  
    and overthrows the mighty.  
**20**He deprives of speech those who are trusted  
    and takes away the discernment of the elders.  
**21**He pours contempt on princes  
    and loosens the belt of the strong.  
**22**He uncovers the deeps out of darkness  
    and brings deep darkness to light.  
**23**He makes nations great, and he destroys them;  
    he enlarges nations, and leads them away.

Job is right. Job knows that God is ultimately the one who is behind his afflictions, just as he is the one who is behind the tearing down of princes, priests, and nations. And so, he says in Chapter 13:1-2:

**1**“Behold, my eye has seen all this,  
    my ear has heard and understood it.  
**2**What you know, I also know;  
    I am not inferior to you.

It brings Job no comfort to know that God is sovereign, because if he is, how could he allow these things to happen to him?

At this point, Job begins talking about the kind of comfort he truly desires. It’s not the false comfort of believing that everything’s going to be alright if he just lives the right way. It’s the comfort of hearing God confirm that he is innocent.

**3**But I would speak to the Almighty,  
    and I desire to argue my case with God.

In order to do that, he needs his friends to stop talking:

**4**As for you, you whitewash with lies;  
    worthless physicians are you all.  
**5**Oh that you would keep silent,  
    and it would be your wisdom!

He calls them “worthless physicians”. They’re trying to heal him, but they’re completely ineffective. They don’t have the right solution, because they haven’t diagnosed the right problem. And they haven’t diagnosed the right problem because they don’t have the right knowledge of God.

Job wants them to be silent, so that he can finally do business with God:

**13**“Let me have silence, and I will speak,  
    and let come on me what may.

Job wants to speak with God, but he’s very aware of the danger. He’s aware that this Holy God could consume him at any moment, but that won’t deter him. He will speak to his God regardless of the cost. He even says in verse 15:

**15**Though he slay me, I will hope in him;   
    yet I will argue my ways to his face.

Job is willing to risk his life in order to have an audience with God, because he knows that God is the only one who can bring him comfort. God is the only one who can give him the answers he’s looking for and the comfort he desires. God is the only one who can vindicate him as one who was truly innocent. It doesn’t matter if God consumes him. “Though he slay me”, he says, “I will hope in him.” Job will seek the Lord even if it costs him his life.   
  
Job is showing us the power of a weakened faith. Job’s faith is weak right now as it’s being tested and brought through the fires of God’s affliction, but there is power in weak faith, power enough to bring him before the throne of God even if it meant losing his life. It was powerful enough to make Job hope in God even though it was God who took away his wealth and his children; God who inflicted his body with boils from the sole of his feet to the crown of his head; God who sent Job his wife and his friends who would not comfort him but tempt him. Jesus said that if you have faith like a mustard seed, you can move mountains, and here we see Job moving the mountains of his fear and doubts to approach the throne of God.

Job is showing us that there is no such thing as weak faith so long as your faith leads you to prayer. You can have doubts. You can have complaints against God. You can have moments of sarcasm. But if your faith still leads you to bring all of it to the Lord, you have all the faith you need in that moment.

David Clines writes:

“A truly religious attitude is not passive resignation to misfortune, but includes the courage to enter into dispute with God.” – David Clines

(3) **ULTIMATE COMFORT**

Job has the courage to “enter into dispute with God”, and as he does, he reveals that there is something else he’s looking for, something that God could give him that would bring him ultimate comfort, which leads to our final point.

Job begins his dispute with God in verse 20. This prayer stretches until the end of Chapter 14. In this prayer, he’s not so much asking God for things as he is telling God how he feels. In verses 23-24, he asks:

**23**How many are my iniquities and my sins?  
    Make me know my transgression and my sin.  
**24**Why do you hide your face  
    and count me as your enemy?

Job wants to know if he has sinned. He wants to know if he has done something wrong to deserve all this pain.

And then he tells God how he feels about the life that God has given to mankind:

**28**Man wastes away like a rotten thing,  
    like a garment that is moth-eaten.

Job imagines life to be nothing more than an inevitable march towards death, a gradual process of rotting and wasting away. He continues in Chapter 14:

**1**“Man who is born of a woman  
    is few of days and full of trouble.  
**2**He comes out like a flower and withers;  
    he flees like a shadow and continues not.

Job contrasts this with the tree in verses 7-9:

**7**“For there is hope for a tree,  
    if it be cut down, that it will sprout again,  
    and that its shoots will not cease.

Trees can live again. You can cut them down, and you can dry them out. But if you give them water and time, they’ll sprout again. But not man. Death is the end of man. Verses 10-12:

**10**But a man dies and is laid low;  
    man breathes his last, and where is he?  
**11**As waters fail from a lake  
    and a river wastes away and dries up,  
**12**so a man lies down and rises not again;  
    till the heavens are no more he will not awake  
    or be roused out of his sleep.

Job believes that this life is all he has. He has one life to live, and then he’s gone. No fresh buds are coming out of this stump. Once his flesh is rotten and eaten up, he’s gone for good. He will live, he will die, and then he will sleep forever.

This is why Job was so hopeless. His hope didn’t reach beyond his lifetime. He had no children to carry on his legacy. He had no wealth to invest in worthwhile causes. All he had was his broken body in an ash heap as he sat there covered in worms and dirt.

But Job wonders. He wonders if there might be more to life than he knows, a life that stretches beyond his present wretched existence. He says in verse 13,

**13**Oh that you would hide me in Sheol,  
    that you would conceal me until your wrath be past,  
    that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!

Could that be possible? Could it be possible that Sheol – the place of the dead – wasn’t in fact the final resting place for those who have passed from this life? Could God somehow hide him in Sheol until his wrath passed by, and then bring him back up? Or as he asks in verse 14:

**14**If a man dies, shall he live again?  
    All the days of my service I would wait,  
    till my renewal should come.

This is what would sustain Job in his suffering. This is what would bring him ultimate hope: life after death. If there were such a thing, Job would be willing to wait. He would be willing to wait all the days of his hard service on earth till his renewal should come.

Job imagines what that would be like in verses 15-17:

**15**You would call, and I would answer you;  
    you would long for the work of your hands.  
**16**For then you would number my steps;  
    you would not keep watch over my sin;  
**17**my transgression would be sealed up in a bag,  
    and you would cover over my iniquity.

Job is imagining life in fellowship with God, a life when God would call, and Job would answer; a life when God would number his steps without numbering his sins; a life when all of Job’s transgressions would be sealed up and thrown away, and all his iniquities covered up and never seen again.

Job isn’t just imagining restoration. He’s imagining *resurrection*. He is longing for a day when God’s wrath has finally passed him by, when there’s no more punishment, no more condemnation, no more terrors from God to fear. If there were a day like that, then he would have hope. Then he would have reason to persevere for the rest of his wretched life with patience and hope until that glorious day when he rises again.

But for Job, this was nothing but a fleeting fancy, because for him, there was no resurrection:

**18**“But the mountain falls and crumbles away,  
    and the rock is removed from its place;  
**19**the waters wear away the stones;  
    the torrents wash away the soil of the earth;  
    so you destroy the hope of man.  
**20**You prevail forever against him, and he passes;  
    you change his countenance, and send him away.  
**21**His sons come to honor, and he does not know it;  
    they are brought low, and he perceives it not.  
**22**He feels only the pain of his own body,  
    and he mourns only for himself.”

For Job, there was no day of resurrection to look forward to. All he had to look forward to was his pain. He was so consumed by it that he couldn’t spare any sorrow for anyone else but himself. His world was a world of pain, and as far as he knew, nothing would change that.

**CONCLUSION**

But for the Christian, we know something that Job didn’t. We know that there is such a thing as resurrection. There is a life to come, a glorious life made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christ is the reason why we have hope. Christ is the reason why God conceals us from his wrath. God’s wrath doesn’t just dissipate and dissolve. It must be satisfied either by us, or by our substitute. That’s what Christ came to do. He came to die as the Lamb of God, so that God’s wrath would pass over us and onto him instead.

This is the hope of all who trust in Christ. We have hope because Christ died for the sins of all who trust in him, so that all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. We will be saved from the wrath and justice of God as our transgressions are sealed up in a bag and thrown into the sea of God’s mercy, so that when God calls us, we won’t shrink away in terror. We will answer him with confidence, clothed with Christ’s righteousness, sealed with his Spirit, and forgiven of all our sin.

And the good news is that this same crucified Christ is now the risen Christ. He has died, and he has risen again, so that all who belong to him will also rise again, not to eternal punishment, but to eternal life.

That is the hope that Job longed for, and that is the hope that we have in Christ. We have hope that this life isn’t the sum total of our existence. We don’t need to be defined by our present sorrows, because a better day is coming, a glorious day of resurrection when those who die shall live again in blessed fellowship with God.

Are you suffering today? Are you like Job, consumed by your pain and despairing of life itself? Then put your hope in the risen Christ. Look to the day of resurrection, when all your tears are wiped away, and death shall be no more, and there shall be no mourning, nor crying, nor pain, for the former things have passed away.

That day is coming. It is coming as certain as the sunrise. So let us wait for that day. For all the days of our hard service in this life, let us wait for that day when our renewal should come, and we stand in the presence of God forgiven, restored, and beloved, for days upon days without end.