**WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER**

**THE MISERY OF BAD COUNSEL**

**Job 15-17**

**INTRODUCTION**

At this point in the book of Job, each of Job’s three friends has had a chance to talk to their friend about why he’s suffering, and what he can do to relieve himself of his suffering. Although each of their speeches has been slightly different, their message has largely been the same: “Job, you’re suffering because of your sin, and the only way to escape your suffering is if you repent.”

Job has not responded well to their assertions. He rejects their premise by maintaining his innocence, and he laments the fact that his friends have not brought him the comfort he desired. The only thing that their conversations have accomplished is create an awkward tension in their friendship. As the readers, we may well be wondering, “Are they finally done? Can we move on to something that’s actually going to help Job?”

The answer is “no”. It turns out that this was only round one. Round two is about to begin in what has become a verbal boxing match between Job and his three friends as they try to convince him to repent, and he tries to convince them that he is innocent. The result is utter misery. Misery for Job, and misery for his three friends. What started as a desire to bring comfort has only brought misery for all involved.

There are lessons here for us about how to avoid this misery when we suffer, or when those we love suffer. There are lessons about what to say, and there are lessons about what not to say. There are lessons about the hope that good counsel can bring, and there are lessons about the misery that bad counsel can bring. And most importantly, there are lessons about the gospel truths that can replace our misery with hope.

The title of this sermon is **The Misery of Bad Counsel.**

We will have three points today:

1. Misery for the Counsellor
2. Misery for the Sufferer
3. Hope for All Who Need It

(1) **MISERY FOR THE COUNSELLOR**

Round two begins with a return to Eliphaz, the senior member of Job’s three friends. Remember that this was the man who spoke to Job with the most sensitivity and patience. He asks questions. He makes suggestions. He speaks with compassion.

But as his second speech begins, we detect a shift in his tone as he responds to what Job has said:

**1**Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said:

**2**“Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge,  
    and fill his belly with the east wind?  
**3**Should he argue in unprofitable talk,  
    or in words with which he can do no good?

Eliphaz is trying to be diplomatic. He calls Job a “wise man” in verse 2, but he also accuses Job of answering with “windy knowledge” and “unprofitable talk”. That’s an ancient way of calling him a “windbag”, a person who has a lot to say but not a lot of substance.

He continues:

**4**But you are doing away with the fear of God  
    and hindering meditation before God.

According to Eliphaz, Job’s words are spiritually dangerous. His views of God and suffering are going to do away with the fear of God and hinder meditation before God, because people are going to believe things about God that aren’t true. Eliphaz believes that Job has not only become a danger to himself, but to others, because he’s trying to make people believe that God has brought all this suffering and affliction upon an innocent man.

For Eliphaz, this is enough to prove that Job is guilty. He doesn’t know what Job has done, but he does know what Job has said, and with his words he has incriminated himself:

**5**For your iniquity teaches your mouth,  
    and you choose the tongue of the crafty.  
**6**Your own mouth condemns you, and not I;  
    your own lips testify against you.

Then in verses 7-11, things start getting personal for Eliphaz:

**7**“Are you the first man who was born?  
    Or were you brought forth before the hills?  
**8**Have you listened in the council of God?  
    And do you limit wisdom to yourself?  
**9**What do you know that we do not know?  
    What do you understand that is not clear to us?  
**10**Both the gray-haired and the aged are among us,  
    older than your father.

Eliphaz is asking, “Who do you think you are? Do you think you’re Adam, the first man, who walked with God himself? Have you been around since the dawn of time? Do you think you’re wiser than your elders?” Ironically, Eliphaz even asks, “Have you listened in the council of God?” Job hasn’t, but neither has Eliphaz. The only ones here who have listened in the council of God are the readers. We listened in Chapters 1 and 2 as God addressed his heavenly cabinet and identified Job as his finest man and his most faithful servant, and in so doing revealed that Job was not suffering because of his guilt. He was suffering because of his righteousness.

This is the irony that runs throughout the entire book of Job. While Job wonders what’s in God’s mind, his friends believe they know, but the only ones who actually know are the readers. And what we know confirms that Job was right, and his friends were wrong.

But Eliphaz doesn’t know this. Not yet. He’s still convinced that he is right, and he can’t understand why Job doesn’t get it. He even asks in verse 11:

**11**Are the comforts of God too small for you,  
    or the word that deals gently with you?

He’s saying, “Why are we not enough for you, Job? God has sent us to comfort you, but you’ve rejected us.” We all know what it’s like to have our advice rejected. It feels like we’re being rejected. It hurts when our friends or loved ones don’t listen to us. That’s how Eliphaz felt. He’s having a miserable time as he talks to his suffering friend.

But he’s not about to give up. Eliphaz tries again to convince Job that his sin has led to his suffering. He tries to do that by saying that everyone’s a sinner, so Job should just repent even if he’s not aware of what he’s done. But in doing so, Eliphaz shows us something very important about his views of God:

**14**What is man, that he can be pure?  
    Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?  
**15**Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones,  
    and the heavens are not pure in his sight;  
**16**how much less one who is abominable and corrupt,  
    a man who drinks injustice like water!

Do you see what this reveals about what he believed about God? It reveals that he saw God as suspicious. His God was a constantly disappointed God. He doesn’t trust anyone. He doesn’t even trust in the angels, his holy ones. Even the heavens aren’t good enough for him! Eliphaz believed in a God who looks around at his creation with disgust and not delight. And so, Eliphaz asks, how much more does he look with disgust on abominable and corrupt human beings like us?

This helps us understand why the three friends kept telling Job that he just needed to do better. They believed in a God who was quick to anger and slow to forgive. He wasn’t a God who gave generously to those who didn’t deserve it. He was a God who only gave to those who worked for it, those who pleased him, those who earned it by living up to his standards. There was no room in their theology for grace, mercy, compassion. There was no room for *love*. Love was the furthest thing that came to their minds when they thought about God.

As Christians, we know that love is at the essence of God’s nature. God doesn’t just love. He *is* love, and he has shared his love between the persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – long before he had any creation to rule.

But Eliphaz didn’t believe this. He didn’t believe in a God who was slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but in a God who was harsh, irritable, and annoyed, and that informed everything that he said to Job. Eliphaz’s bad counsel didn’t come from a bad heart. It came from bad theology. He came with the best of intentions, but even the best of intentions will produce the worst counsel when it comes from bad theology.

A.W. Tozer famously wrote:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. ...

What comes into your mind when you think about God? Is it that God is annoyed, irritated, or disappointed? Is it that God is just barely tolerating you? If so, you’re going to live under a constant feeling of guilt. You’re going to treat other people harshly. You’re going to tell those who suffer to “pull up their boot straps and stop whining.”

But if you think about God as the one who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, if you think of him as the God who sent his only Son to die for our sins so that we could be forgiven and welcomed into his presence forever, you’re going to live in freedom. You’re going to live in joy. And you’re going to tell those who suffer that God knows, God cares, and God will restore, not because we’re good enough, but because he is supremely good and loves to give good gifts to his children.

Eliphaz ends this chapter with a description of what happens to the wicked:

**20**The wicked man writhes in pain all his days,  
    through all the years that are laid up for the ruthless.  
**21**Dreadful sounds are in his ears;  
    in prosperity the destroyer will come upon him.

**29**he will not be rich, and his wealth will not endure,  
    nor will his possessions spread over the earth;   
**30**he will not depart from darkness;  
    the flame will dry up his shoots,  
    and by the breath of his mouth he will depart.

If you compare this speech with his first speech, you’ll notice a striking difference. In his first speech, you’ll find a promise of restoration, hope for a brighter future. But not here. Here there’s only a list of the painful consequences for Job’s continued wickedness. Eliphaz is done trying to be kind to Job. He’s done trying to entice Job with promises of sweet reward. All he has left are the terrifying warnings of what will happen to him if he doesn’t repent.

(2) **MISERY FOR THE SUFFERER**

How does Job respond to Eliphaz’s miserable counsel? With more misery. This leads to our second point.

**1**Then Job answered and said:

**2**“I have heard many such things;  
    miserable comforters are you all.

Remember Job called his friends “worthless physicians”. Now he adds insult to injury by calling them “miserable comforters”. Their attempts at comfort have only aggravated his soul and produced more misery than he had before.

He asks in verse 3:

**3**Shall windy words have an end?  
    Or what provokes you that you answer?

He’s saying, “I’m probably not going to stop talking here, but that doesn’t mean that you have to do the same.” There is a time for well-meaning friends to stop talking, to not feel that everything that’s said requires a response. Not every conversation needs to continue until you’ve convinced someone to adopt your position. That doesn’t bring any comfort. It brings misery.

Job then reflects on what he would do if he were in their shoes and they were in his:

**4**I also could speak as you do,  
    if you were in my place;  
I could join words together against you  
    and shake my head at you.  
**5**I could strengthen you with my mouth,  
    and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.

He could do as they have done by directing their words at him and shaking their heads. Or he could choose a better course. He could strengthen them with his mouth and use the solace of his lips to assuage their pain.

Job has a better idea of how to comfort those who suffer than they do. He knows from personal experience that when someone is in deep anguish and suffering, the priority shouldn’t be to diagnose the problem or to provide a solution. The priority is to assuage the pain. Someone who’s just been in a horrific car accident doesn’t not fingers wagging in their faces about how he should have been more careful or how he’s going to need to retake their driving lessons. He needs morphine to soften the pain.

It’s hard for someone to understand that unless they’ve experienced deep suffering. That’s why Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:4:

“(God) comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

Have you ever wondered why God has allowed so much suffering in your life? You may not know the purpose, but you do know the effect. The effect is that God is shaping you into an instrument of his comfort, a skilled surgeon of the soul who knows when to speak and when to listen. He is training you to be a friend who counsels and comforts with deep compassion and empathy, a friend who will be present even when there’s nothing to say, no advice to give, no solutions to offer. That’s what those who are in deep suffering need, and only those who have experienced deep suffering can understand it.

But according to verse 6, Job’s pain is not assuaged. Why? Because it is God who has done this to him. It is the God whom he feared and served, the God whom he worshipped and adored, the God whom he trusted and hoped in, who has brought about all this pain:

**7**Surely now God has worn me out;  
    he has made desolate all my company.  
**8**And he has shriveled me up,  
    which is a witness against me,  
and my leanness has risen up against me;  
    it testifies to my face.  
**9**He has torn me in his wrath and hated me;  
    he has gnashed his teeth at me;  
    my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.

This is one of those moments when we wish that Job knew what we knew. God has not torn him in his wrath and hated him. God delighted in him and upheld him as the shining example of a true believer. God isn’t Job’s adversary. Satan, which literally means “adversary”, is the one who is opposed to him and wants to destroy him.

But Job is speaking out of the abundance of his pain and the darkness of his ignorance, and the only one he could think of blaming was God. He continues:

**12**I was at ease, and he broke me apart;  
    he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;  
he set me up as his target;  
**13**    his archers surround me.  
He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare;  
    he pours out my gall on the ground.  
**14**He breaks me with breach upon breach;  
    he runs upon me like a warrior.

This was why Job was so miserable. He had to wrestle with the conclusion that if God has done this to him, God must hate him. That was the greatest pain in his life. Yes, he laments the loss of his possessions, his health, and his children. But above all else, he laments the loss of his God.

Job longs for comfort from that terrifying reality, that the God of the universe has turned against him, but his friends offer him no comfort. They offer him only misery as they confirm that he deserves what he has received.

But Job maintains his integrity:

**16**My face is red with weeping,  
    and on my eyelids is deep darkness,  
**17**although there is no violence in my hands,  
    and my prayer is pure.

Job comes to God with clean hands and a pure heart, and nothing that his friends have said has convinced him otherwise.

(3) **HOPE FOR ALL WHO NEED IT**

Job wants someone to agree with him. His great hope is that someone would confirm that he’s right. He’s waiting for someone to stand up and speak on his behalf and declare that he is innocent. That is what he turns to next, which leads to our third point.

In verse 18, Job alludes to another innocent man who died:

**18**“O earth, cover not my blood,  
    and let my cry find no resting place.

This is an allusion to Abel after he was murdered by his older brother Cain. Abel’s blood cried from the ground for justice. But to whom? Genesis 4:10:

“And the LORD said, ‘What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to *me* from the ground.”

Job is asking for the same. He is asking that his blood would cry out for justice and vindication, not just to anyone, but to God himself. He’s appealing to God to declare that he is indeed innocent, and that his suffering was not a result of his sin.

This is when we see Job’s faith on full display. He has said things about God, and about God’s views of him that just aren’t true, but at the end of the day, he still hoped in the Lord:

**19**Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven,  
    and he who testifies for me is on high.

Job speaks of a witness he has in heaven. He speaks of a witness on high who will testify, not against him, but for him. This witness will speak on Job’s behalf. He will testify to his innocence. And he will finally prove to his friends who scorn him that he followed the Lord faithfully.

Who is this witness? The answer is in verses 20-21:

**20**My friends scorn me;  
    my eye pours out tears to God,  
**21**that he would argue the case of a man with God,  
    as a son of man does with his neighbor.

Somehow, in some way, Job is hoping that God himself will be his witness. The God who has broken him apart and dashed him to pieces is the same God who will testify for him from on high.

Job didn’t know how this would be possible, which is why he descends back into despair in Chapter 17, a despair that is mostly brought about by the accusations of his friends:

**1**“My spirit is broken; my days are extinct;  
    the graveyard is ready for me.  
**2**Surely there are mockers about me,  
    and my eye dwells on their provocation.

**6**“He has made me a byword of the peoples,  
    and I am one before whom men spit.  
**7**My eye has grown dim from vexation,  
    and all my members are like a shadow.

**10**But you, come on again, all of you,  
    and I shall not find a wise man among you.  
**11**My days are past; my plans are broken off,  
    the desires of my heart.

Job ends his speech with another series of questions:

**13**If I hope for Sheol as my house,  
    if I make my bed in darkness,  
**14**if I say to the pit, ‘You are my father,’  
    and to the worm, ‘My mother,’ or ‘My sister,’  
**15**where then is my hope?  
    Who will see my hope?  
**16**Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?  
    Shall we descend together into the dust?”

Job is wondering what will become of him if he decides to give up. If he makes death his hope, if he calls the pit his father and the worm his mother and sister, if death becomes the only thing he looks forward to for relief, then what will happen to his true hope, the hope of his witness in heaven?

He asks because he doesn’t know the answer. But we know, because we know who the witness is. The witness is Jesus. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is our witness on high, who testifies for us before God and man. In Christ, God the Son testifies to God the Father that those who belong to him are indeed innocent, not because of what we have done, but because of what he has done. He argues our case by pleading his merits – our sin, for his righteousness – so that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

This is our hope. Our hope is not in death. We don’t call the pit our father. We call God our Father, because Jesus has rescued us from the pit of sin, and death, and hell, and brought us to himself forever.

This is good news for all who would put their trust in Christ. We have a witness in heaven, one who testifies for us on high. His name is Jesus, and he testifies before God and man that we are innocent because he died on the cross for our sins and clothed us with his righteousness.

Don’t put your hope in man. Don’t trust in your righteousness, or your efforts, or your good works to deliver you from your sin. Put your hope in Christ, and he will deliver you from all your darkness.

**CONCLUSION**

Do you want to know how to counsel the suffering without causing them more misery? Don’t just attend a class, or listen to a TED talk, or do what feels right. Put your hope in Christ. Know his love, receive his grace, taste his mercy, because without it, we’ll either have nothing to say or the wrong things to say. We’ll try to offer solutions rather than empathy; correction rather than comfort; judgment rather than compassion.

But the gospel changes us. It changes how we suffer, and it changes how we help those who suffer. It changes the first things that come to our minds when we think about God. We no longer think of him as responding to us with judgment, condemnation, irritation, and disappointment. We think of him as responding to us with tenderness, compassion, mercy, and love.

That is what God felt towards Job, and that is what God feels towards those who belong to Christ. So come, put your trust in him. Let the cross be the lens through which we see the Father’s heart. And let the gospel equip and empower you to offer not misery to those who suffer, but hope – a hope that is found in Christ alone.