**WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER**

**THREE ERRORS IN OUR RESPONSE TO SUFFERING**

**Job 20-26**

**INTRODUCTION**

One of the greatest challenges of the Christian life is regular Bible reading. Every Christian knows how important it is to read the Bible every day, but we also know how difficult it is to do it. We’re too exhausted when we wake up in the morning and when we settle in for the evening. We get distracted by ongoing work responsibilities or the countless entertainment options out there. And when we finally do sit down and open up God’s Word, it doesn’t always feel like we get much out of it.

That’s because not many of us were taught how to read the Bible well. We think that we can just pick it up like a novel or a textbook and benefit from it right away, but it doesn’t work like that. We need to learn how to read the Bible well if we are to feast on the rich fruit of God’s Word.

One of the most important lessons is learning how to find ourselves within the text. We must find Christ in the text, and we must find ourselves in the text. We don’t just read God’s Word to learn about what it says about “those people out there”. We read to learn about what it says about *us*.

The problem is that when we read ourselves in the text, we tend to identify with the hero of the story when we’re not. We think that we’re Moses boldly leading God’s people to the Promised Land when we’re actually the grumblers and complainers. We think we’re David taking on Goliath when we’re actually the Israelite army cowering away in fear. We think we’re Jesus who humbly served others and boldly proclaimed the gospel when we’re actually the apostles who squabbled over who was the greatest.

Of course, there are times when we are like Jesus, because the Spirit of Jesus is at work in us making us more like Jesus. We can and should identify with Jesus and see him as our example to follow. But as we do, we must also remember that we’re not ultimately the hero of the story. In fact, we’re often the villain.

We need to remember that as we read the book of Job. Yes, we can read ourselves into Job, the righteous sufferer who maintained his integrity, but we must also read ourselves into Job’s friends, the miserable comforters who tried to make Job feel better but failed. We can be miserable comforters as well, because we have distorted views of suffering and of God just like they did. They made many errors, but today we’re going to focus on three of the biggest ones as we look at the final three speeches from Job’s friends.

The title of this sermon is **Three Errors in Our Response to Suffering.**

Those three errors are:

1. Error #1: Expecting Perfect Justice in this World
2. Error #2: Assuming the Worst about People
3. Error #3: Projecting Ourselves onto God

(1) **Error #1: Expecting Perfect Justice in this World**

Our text today begins with Zophar’s second and final speech. His speech captures what the three friends have been saying to Job all along, that what has happened to Job only happens to the wicked. This is because Zophar believes in a world of perfect justice. Sure, the righteous may go through some seasons of suffering, and the wicked may go through some seasons of prosperity, but it won’t last long. God will move quickly to restore balance so that only the righteous truly prosper and only the wicked truly suffer.

He says this in verse 4:

**4**Do you not know this from of old,
    since man was placed on earth,
**5**that the exulting of the wicked is short,
    and the joy of the godless but for a moment?

He’s not talking about the afterlife. He’s talking about *this* life. For example, verse 10:

**10**His children will seek the favor of the poor,
    and his hands will give back his wealth.

Zophar believes that the fortunes of the wicked will be reversed in their lifetime. One doesn’t have to wait long for the wicked to receive their just desserts. In just a moment, the joy of the godless will end, and the exulting of the wicked will be cut short.

And in its place will be suffering, shame, and wrath. Zophar describes this in detail:

**7**he will perish forever like his own dung;

**8**He will fly away like a dream and not be found;
    he will be chased away like a vision of the night.

**16**He will suck the poison of cobras;
    the tongue of a viper will kill him.

**23**God will send his burning anger against him
    and rain it upon him into his body.

Zophar’s implication here is that Job must be one of the wicked, because his life resembles the life of the wicked. His prosperity was fleeting but his suffering endures.

This is because Zophar believed in a world of perfect justice, a world where people only get what they deserve, and that led him to conclude that Job has received what he deserved. The loss of his wealth, the death of his children, the painful boils that covered his body – they were all signs of Job’s wickedness. So if Job wants life to get better, he needs to turn his wicked life around and become one of the righteous.

There’s nothing wrong with wanting a world of perfect justice. It’s part of our God-given, God-imprinted human nature, because God is a God of justice. He *does* reward the righteous. He *does* punish the wicked. But that kind of justice is reserved, not for this life, but for the life to come. It is reserved for the great Day of Judgment, when those who are clothed with the righteousness of Christ by grace through faith are welcomed into eternal, joyful fellowship with God, and those who trusted in themselves and lived for their own desires will be cast out into the eternal gloom of hell.

Zophar’s problem is that he had what theologians call an “over realized eschatology”. Eschatology is the Doctrine of the End Times, including Final Judgment and the ultimate establishment of perfect justice. To have an “over realized eschatology” is to import what is going to happen *then* into what we expect to happen *now*. God’s justice should happen *now*. God-fearing governments should be established *now*. God’s moral standards should be reflected in society *now*. God’s people should be in positions of influence and power *now*.

But that’s not what we see in the Bible, and that’s not what we see in the world. That’s the essence of Job’s response to Zophar in Chapter 21. If Zophar would just look around, he would see that the exalting of the wicked isn’t cut short. The joy of the godless isn’t just for a moment. In fact, it’s the opposite:

**7**Why do the wicked live,
    reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
**8**Their offspring are established in their presence,
    and their descendants before their eyes.
**9**Their houses are safe from fear,
    and no rod of God is upon them.
**10**Their bull breeds without fail;
    their cow calves and does not miscarry.
**11**They send out their little boys like a flock,
    and their children dance.
**12**They sing to the tambourine and the lyre
    and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.
**13**They spend their days in prosperity,
    and in peace they go down to Sheol.

This is a picture of paradise, and it’s the wicked who enjoy it, not those who fear God and turn away from evil but those who embrace it. Job knows that this world isn’t just. It isn’t fair. It isn’t the place where people only get what they deserve. He illustrates this powerfully in verses 23-25:

**23**One dies in his full vigor,
    being wholly at ease and secure,
**24**his pails full of milk
    and the marrow of his bones moist.
**25**Another dies in bitterness of soul,
    never having tasted of prosperity.

This is not a world where everyone gets a fair shot. It’s not a land of equal opportunity. It’s a place where the wicked often die in peace, and the righteous often die in poverty.

Zophar didn’t like this view of the world, and neither do we, because we don’t like the idea that bad things happen to good people. We don’t like the idea that we can do everything right and still suffer, or that we can live in the fear of the Lord and still feel that he has abandoned us, or that we can raise up our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord only to see them walk away from the faith or die when they’re young. We don’t like it because it makes us lose control: the belief that if we play our cards right, we can avoid suffering.

But that’s not how the world works. Jesus told his followers that we would have trouble in this world. Paul said that it was only through many tribulations that we would enter the Kingdom of God. Peter said that we would be grieved by various trials. James said that we must learn to rejoice in our suffering because it’s bound to come.

The mark of a true, godly, mature believer isn’t the absence of suffering. It’s how we endure the suffering that is bound to come into our lives. And the only way that we will endure the suffering well, and help those around us endure their suffering well, is to abandon our over-realized eschatology and accept the fact that this world is broken, and perfect justice will not come until Christ makes all things new.

(2) **Error #2: Assuming the Worst about People**

The second error that we can make in our response to suffering is assuming the worst about people.

In Chapter 22 we read Eliphaz’s third and final speech. We know Eliphaz as the kind, elder-statesman of the group. He’s more sensitive than the others. He offers more hope than the others. In fact, he offers Job some beautiful promises in verses 21-30 about the good that God will bring to him if he repents.

But before he does, he confronts Job with what he believes he’s done wrong. Up until now, the three friends have avoided making specific accusations, but that changes here. Eliphaz is sensing that his gentler appeals to repent haven’t worked, so he changes strategies and chooses to be more direct:

**5**Is not your evil abundant?
    There is no end to your iniquities.
**6**For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing
    and stripped the naked of their clothing.
**7**You have given no water to the weary to drink,
    and you have withheld bread from the hungry.
**8**The man with power possessed the land,
    and the favored man lived in it.
**9**You have sent widows away empty,
    and the arms of the fatherless were crushed.
**10**Therefore snares are all around you,
    and sudden terror overwhelms you,
**11**or darkness, so that you cannot see,
    and a flood of water covers you.

The problem here is that Eliphaz hasn’t seen Job do any of this. Nor has Job confessed doing any of this. But Eliphaz still believes that Job must be guilty of these offences. He exploited the poor. He ignored the hungry. He was heartless towards widows and orphans. “Therefore”, he says in verse 10, “as a result of your wickedness, snares are all around you, sudden terror overwhelms you, and a flood of water covers you.”

Eliphaz doesn’t come to Job with questions. He comes with conclusions, and his conclusions assume the worst. “You hurt people really badly, Job, and now God is paying you back. God is giving you a taste of your own medicine, because if you mistreat people, you’ll hear from God, and he’ll make you feel what it’s like.”

But Job knows that this isn’t true. He knows that these are all false accusations and unjust conclusions. He is so confident of this that he says in Chapter 23 that he wouldn’t be afraid to appear before God and attest to his innocence:

**3**Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
    that I might come even to his seat!
**4**I would lay my case before him
    and fill my mouth with arguments.
**5**I would know what he would answer me
    and understand what he would say to me.
**6**Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
    No; he would pay attention to me.
**7**There an upright man could argue with him,
    and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.

Job isn’t running away from God as his judge. But the problem is that Job can’t find him:

**8**“Behold, I go forward, but he is not there,
    and backward, but I do not perceive him;
**9**on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him;
    he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him.

Job isn’t afraid of being judged by God. In fact, he cries out for God’s judgment to come into the world in Chapter 24 so that those who are truly wicked will be held to account. The only thing Job is afraid of is being abandoned by God. He fears being opposed by God for some unknown reason.

But at the same time, he knows that whatever God brings his way, he won’t give up on his faith:

**10**But he knows the way that I take;
    when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.

Where does he get such confidence? Verse 12:

**12**I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
    I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.

Job loves God’s Word. He treasures God’s commandments more than food. And he knows that under the standard of Scripture, he will be found blameless. That doesn’t mean that he thought he was perfect, but it does mean that he was committed to obeying God’s law. It meant that when he sinned, he repented and atoned for his sin through sacrifice. Job is a man who measured himself by the standard of Scripture and not by the opinions of man, and nothing Eliphaz or the others said could change that.

Eliphaz would have done well to do the same, but instead he speculated about Job and assumed the worst. When we do this, the result is always going to be unfair judgment. In the private courtrooms of our own minds, we function as prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner without giving the person being judged their day in court.

A young Christian woman gets sick and we think, “Oh, she must have been sleeping around.” A well-known pastor gets cancer and we think, “Oh, Christian celebrity culture must have gotten to his head.” A faithful brother loses his job and we think, “Oh, he must not have worked very hard.” That’s not fair. That’s not just. That doesn’t glorify God.

This is why Jesus told us not to *judge* other people. That doesn’t mean that we never say that people are doing what’s wrong. But it does mean that we don’t walk around with a judgmental attitude thinking that we’re the gold standard of godliness that everyone else has fallen short of.

To not judge one another is to take the log out of our own eye before we see clearly enough to take the speck out of our brother’s eye. It means being more aware of our own sin than anyone else’s sin. It means assuming the worst of ourselves and not the worst of others. Job’s friends didn’t do that. Not once did Eliphaz, Bildad or Zophar reflect on their own sin before they called Job out for his. Not once did they stop and reflect on how they deserved God’s judgment before they judged Job themselves.

Do you want to know why Jesus tells us not to judge? It’s because we’re not very good judges. We presume guilt and not innocence. We show partiality because of our emotions. We jump to conclusions rather than asking questions. We judge people in the courtrooms of our minds without giving them their day in court. We are more like Job’s friends than we would like to admit.

Tremper Longman reminds us that:

“Job serves as an example to warn against judging others on the basis of their situation in life.” – Tremper Longman III

Let us not judge others on the basis of their situation in life. Let us not judge them assuming the worst. Let us leave judgment to God, so that we can start to really help people.

(3) **Error #3: Projecting Ourselves onto God**

Lastly, the third error: projecting ourselves onto God.

It’s no secret that Job’s three friends are exasperated with him. They’re frustrated, they feel insulted, and they’re fed up with his stubborn insistence on his innocence and refusal to accept their counsel. They’re angry with him, and that anger has come out more than once since they began talking to him.

That anger comes out again in Bildad’s third speech, which is the final speech of the three friends and the shortest among them all. It’s like a parting kick as Bildad tries one last time to prick Job’s conscience. He says,

**4**How then can man be in the right before God?
    How can he who is born of woman be pure?
**5**Behold, even the moon is not bright,
    and the stars are not pure in his eyes;
**6**how much less man, who is a maggot,
    and the son of man, who is a worm!”

Bildad is saying, “Job, stop insisting that you’re innocent. Stop insisting that God will vindicate you. God is so holy, so perfect, so infinite that even the moon is not bright in his eyes. Even the stars aren’t pure in his eyes. How much less a man like you, a maggot, a worm, a puny little thing that doesn’t deserve a second of God’s time?”

There is truth to what Bildad has said here. He’s not the first to call human beings worms. David called himself a worm in Psalm 22. God calls Israel a worm in Isaiah 41. But the difference between Bildad and God is that God affirms his love for this worm called Israel:

Fear not, you worm Jacob,
    you men of Israel!
I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord;
    your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. (Isaiah 41:14)

What Bildad has done is he’s projecting how he feels about Job onto how God must feel about Job. Since he’s angry with Job, he assumes that God must be angry as well. He assumes that God can barely tolerate Job.

But he’s missed one crucial point: God isn’t like us. We are made in the image of God, but God isn’t made in the image of man. We share similarities, yes. We are made to long for justice. We are made to love and be loved. We are made to reason, think, and pursue wisdom. But we have sin, and God doesn’t, and that changes everything.

Sin makes us pursue justice with a judgmental, self-righteous attitude. Sin makes us pursue love with a self-centered, me-first mentality. Sin makes us use our ability to reason to manipulate people and control them. But thanks be to God, that He isn’t like us.

John Calvin wrote:

“There is nothing that troubles our consciences more than when we think that God is like ourselves.” – John Calvin

If your conscience has been troubled by the thought that God is like us in our anger, irritation, and bitterness, then be troubled no more. God doesn’t just look at Job and condemn him for being a maggot of a man. God looks at him, despite his weaknesses, his frailties, and his sins, and he promises to redeem him.

Job shows that he’s beginning to become aware of this in Chapter 26. He is aware of the infinite distance separating God and man. He speaks of God as the sovereign ruler of the living and the dead, the creator and sustainer of the earth and the seas, the conquering king whose hand pierces the fleeing serpent. And then Job pauses in wonder and says:

**14**Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways,
    and how small a whisper do we hear of him!
    But the thunder of his power who can understand?”

It’s a powerful verse. It’s one that we liked so much that we put it up on our wall in the sanctuary. We treasure this verse so much because it speaks to how little we truly understand God. Job may never understand why he lost all his wealth, why all his children died, why his body had to be covered in loathsome sores. But he’s beginning to accept the fact that God is God, and he is not. Neither are Job’s friends. Neither are we, and we cannot presume to project who we are and what we feel on God.

This is good news for us. It is good news because if God were like us, if God were merely angry and annoyed at us for being maggots and worms, he would have consumed us in his wrath. His righteous justice would have fallen on us just like the friends predicted for Job. But thanks be to God, that he is not like us.

God is merciful towards sinners. God wins us over with his kindness. God calls us to himself with his faithfulness. God redeemed us by sending Christ to die on the cross for our sins, so that his enemies could become his friends.

**CONCLUSION**

When it feels like God is angry with you; when you come to believe that he could never love you, accept you, forgive you, or redeem you; when you look at your circumstances and you think that you must be under God’s punishment; then remember that “these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?”

God reveals the thunder of his power not in your pain, but in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He doesn’t just demand justice like we do, but he satisfies it through the death of his Son, so that if you trust in him as your Saviour and Lord, you will be redeemed. You will be saved. You will be reconciled to God as one of his beloved children.

And when you are, your views of suffering will fundamentally change. You won’t expect perfect justice in this world anymore or become bitter when it doesn’t come to you, or self-righteous when others suffer. You’ll wait for perfect justice to come. You won’t assume the worst of people, because you’ll be aware of how God treated a sinner like you with mercy. And you’ll no longer project yourself onto God, but let the vision of Christ hanging on the cross for our sins transform you to become more like Jesus.

The gospel empowers and equips us to help the suffering without pride or judgment, and that is what we need. So let us look to Christ for mercy, so that we would be merciful to others.