

## ***Miserable Comforters***

**Job 2:11-31:40**

We are continuing in our sermon series through the Old Testament book of Job this morning. For those who haven't followed along or are unfamiliar with the story of Job, it is a story of innocent suffering and God who reigns over it all.

To briefly summarize where we have gotten so far in Job's story: Job is a righteous man who loved and followed the Lord. Satan gets permission to afflict Job with incredible suffering as a test of his loyalty to God. Job loses his children, his wealth, and eventually his health. He lost everything. And yet, as of chapter 2, Job refuses to curse God. Though he is in real mourning, as we saw in chapter 3 last week, he remains faithful to the Lord.

And so far through chapter 3, we have mainly wrestled with what we might call the *vertical* perspective in suffering: What is God's role in our suffering? How do we relate to him in our suffering? This is important and the overall theme of the book, however, a major portion of the book of Job is given towards the *horizontal* aspect of our suffering: How do we relate to one another in our suffering? How do we comfort each other? How do we interact with those who try to comfort us but end up causing more pain than comfort?

### **NT passages on call to comfort one another**

This is really important because it is tempting to think that the only relationship we need in life is that vertical relationship, our relationship with God. That as long as we have a healthy relationship there, then we are set. Obviously, that is the most important relationship we could have. However, we were created for more.

Think about Adam in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2, God has created everything and everything he has created was good. Adam is placed in paradise and has an unbroken relationship with God. However, God still looks at Adam and says it is not good for man to be alone. Again, this is before the fall, and Adam and the Lord are good with one another. And yet, there was a horizontal need for relationships that was unmet by his vertical relationship with the Lord. So, God creates Eve.

Again, our relationship with the Lord is the most relationship we have, but still, we need one another. And if that was true of Adam before the fall, it is true for us all the more after the fall.

Because after the fall, needless to say, life is tough. It isn't the paradise that it once was. Every life now experiences pain, sickness, trials, conflict, and death. Every life now lives with unexpected suffering lurking around the corner.

And with the realization of life in a fallen world, we are called now to bring comfort to one another. We are not called to walk through painful or joyful seasons on our own.

For example, this is how Paul instructs the church at Corinth...

**2 Corinthians 1:3-5**

**3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, **4** who 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. **5** For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

In other words, part of God's purpose in comforting us in our afflictions is so that we can comfort others in their afflictions. It is this opportunity to say, I'm sorry you're going through this, God comforted me and he will comfort you. And in so doing, we bring comfort.

Paul outright instructs them to comfort each other...

**2 Corinthians 13:11**

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

**Romans 12:15**

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Ultimately life within the body of Christ means that we celebrate the joys of life with one another as well as mourn the losses of life with one another. The problem is, we are oftentimes much better at one than the other. Unless we are driven by envy or jealousy, celebrating comes much easier for most—I think. At least it is for me. I struggle a bit more in knowing how to comfort others well. My guess is, that is true for many if not most.

Well, if that is you, you are not alone. Job's next experience is with a few guys who aren't that great at comforting him in his suffering, which we will try to see this morning as we focus in on Job's three friends.

## 2:11-13 - INTRO OF FRIENDS

Again, this is a major portion of the book, in fact, my task this morning and next week is to cover chapters 2 to 31, so we obviously can't read it all, I'll try to give the highlights and the main ideas...but let's start in chapter 2, starting in verse 11...

### **Job 2:11-13**

**11** Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. **12** And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. **13** And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

So, Job's friends come and mourn with Job in his affliction. They sat in silence for seven days, just being a comforting presence with him. Then in chapter 3, Job finally breaks his silence and puts his incredible pain into words. We saw that last week.

## THE FRIENDS SPEAK

Chapters 4 through 31 describe three rounds of speeches with Job answering his friends. Again, we are not going to read everything this morning, but I want to give the overview of what the friends say, next week we will give more attention to Job's replies.

But starting in chapter 4, the friends speak up and begin offering their diagnosis of the situation, and basically, their diagnosis is this: Only sinners suffer. Job, you are suffering, therefore you are a sinner. You deserved it. And because you suffered greatly, you must have been a really big sinner.

Their theology has been described as "retribution theology." Again, it's the idea that all suffering is due to our sin. That God punishes us for our sinfulness and rewards us for our righteousness. Suffering is a sign of our sin; prosperity is a sign of our righteousness.

This is laid out right away by the first friend, **Eliphaz...**

### **Job 4:7-11**

**7** "Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? **8** As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. **9** By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed. **10** The

roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion, the teeth of the young lions are broken.  
**11** The strong lion perishes for lack of prey, and the cubs of the lioness are scattered.

Again, the innocent don't perish, those who plow iniquity reap what they sow.

**Job 5:1-2**

**1** "Call now; is there anyone who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn? **2** Surely vexation kills the fool, and jealousy slays the simple.

In other words, he asks him this hypothetical question, where are you going to turn? No one is going to help you because you are an unrepentant sinner. And because you are unrepentant, you are a fool.

**Job 15:4-6**

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

So, Job, you don't fear God the way you should and you are paying the price for it. Again with Eliphaz, this time turning up the heat of his accusation...

**Job 22:5-11**

**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.

Eliphaz, says, Job you're a terrible sinner. That is why you are suffering terribly.

The second friend, **Bildad**, agrees...

**Job 8:3-4**

**3** Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? **4** If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression.

So, not only does Bildad accuse Job of sin, he actually accuses Job's children of sin, which is why they died. Not only are you a sinner Job, but so are your kids. You can imagine how painful those words would have been in this time of grief for Job.

Bildad, again...

**Job 8:20**

Behold, God will not reject a blameless man, nor take the hand of evildoers.

And then the third friend, **Zophar**, agrees as well...

**Job 11:11**

For he knows worthless men; when he sees iniquity, will he not consider it?

In other words, do you think God overlooks sin? No, when he sees it, he deals with it. In Zophar's second speech, he talks about the consequences of the wicked and he summarizes by saying...

**Job 20:27-29**

**27** The heavens will reveal his iniquity, and the earth will rise up against him. **28** The possessions of his house will be carried away, dragged off in the day of God's wrath. **29** This is the wicked man's portion from God, the heritage decreed for him by God."

Again, there is a lot more than what we just read, but it all pretty much says the same thing: Job, your suffering is clearly due to your sin. God is just, so he has seen your sin and has punished you.

Now, to help in times of confusion and suffering, we need more than a diagnosis, we need a solution. When we go to the doctor they don't just say here's the problem and then send you on the way, they say, here is the problem, so here is the solution. Here is the prescription or procedure that you need.

So, for Job's friends who hold this retribution theology, if the diagnosis is sin, then **the only remedy available is repentance**. It is to confess your sin and turn back to God because clearly you haven't done that.

**Job 5:8 (Eliphaz)**

As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause,

"If it were me, I wouldn't be like you, I'd actually turn back to God."

**Job 22:21-23 (Eliphaz)**

**21** “Agree with God, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you. **22** Receive instruction from his mouth, and lay up his words in your heart. **23** If you return to the Almighty you will be built up; if you remove injustice far from your tents

Again, if you repent good things will happen for you.

**Job 8:5-7 (Bildad)**

**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.

**Job 11:13-17 (Zophar)**

**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.

This is the thrust of Job’s friends’ conversation. Job you’ve clearly sinned, so repent.

Now, we read statements like the ones they made and shake our heads. I mean I can’t imagine walking through what Job endured and someone I considered a friend coming to me and saying, “Cody, it’s all your fault.” I can’t imagine the pain that would be heaped on the pain I would already be feeling. It’s hard for us I think to understand why these friends would hold this theology of retribution, but it was a common idea and belief. In fact, **it was common in Jesus’ day.**

There is a scene in John’s gospel where Jesus and his disciples are traveling around preaching the gospel and performing miracles and at one point the disciples express this exact theology...

**John 9:1-3**

**1** As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. **2** And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” **3** Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.

It was common in Jesus’ day, but it is **common in our day as well, maybe not to the same degree, but the sentiments do exist.**

For example, have you ever in your suffering, or even just during a difficult day, say or think, “What did I do to deserve this?” Whether or not we actually believe this theology, that is an expression of it.

What is commonly called the “prosperity gospel” propagates this theology as well. Sickness, poverty, and broken relationships are the result of your lack of belief. If you had the right amount of faith, then you would be physically and financially healthy. Again, you are the cause of your own suffering, but you could be the cause of your own thriving.

And, even if we don’t judge *our* life circumstances this way, we are often tempted to judge others this way when we make assumptions about their situation in life. We think or say, “They’ve put themselves in this situation. Their trial is their own doing. They could make things better if they wanted and put forth some effort, straightened themselves out, were better people,” and so on.

The truth is oftentimes we actually *want* to believe this about life. We want to believe that if we are good then good things will happen and suffering will only come when I do something to deserve it. We want that to be true because to depart from this idea can feel scary, because to do so means we are letting go of control. If retribution theology was true, then at least we are in control.

Now, it’s possible to proof-text an argument for this theology from the Bible, for example, we really do reap what we sow, that is a true, *general* principle of life, but this is part of the point of Job as wisdom literature, to show that what we experience is *always* our own doing isn’t a hard and fast principle of life. The truth is sometimes the wicked prosper. Sometimes the righteous suffer.

This is wisdom literature in the Bible. Proverbs gives us general principles of life, Ecclesiastes and Job come along and say yes, but here are some exceptions. For Job, sometimes, the innocent suffer and this is not their own doing.

Now, we are going to talk much more about this in weeks to come, especially as we get to the end of the book, but for now, let’s consider Job’s friends again this morning. They come to mourn with their friend, they come to specifically comfort him, but end up heaping more and more pain on him.

### **Evaluating the friends**

Listen to Job’s evaluation of them...

#### **Job 16:2**

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

"Guys, you're pretty terrible at this." Earlier in chapter thirteen, he says...

**Job 13:5**

Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom!

He's like, "you guys were better when you didn't say anything. You were helpful then, but now, not so much."

Even God rebukes the friends...

**Job 42:7-9**

**7** After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. **8** Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has." **9** So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the Lord had told them, and the Lord accepted Job's prayer.

All in all, Job's three friends truly were "miserable comforters."

**Now, as members of the body of Christ, called to comfort one another, I think it would be helpful to consider for ourselves, what makes a miserable comforter and how we can become better comforters.**

There is a big difference between giving someone a hug and putting them in a chokehold. Even though we have good intentions, our careless words and actions can feel more like a chokehold to those who are grieving.

I want to recommend a good little book on this topic. It's a book we read as a staff during Covid. It's a book written by Nancy Guthrie, who we've had here to speak for one of our women's conferences, but it is a book titled *What Grieving People Wish You Knew about What Really Helps (and What Really Hurts)*.

She offers great insight into the hearts and minds of those who are walking through suffering, specifically those grieving the loss of a loved one, and she offers really practical suggestions about how to relate to one another in our grief.

There really are some do's and don'ts in our attempt to comfort the grieving. For example, some don'ts:



**Don't assume things.** Grief is complex and those who grieve are likely to experience other emotions as well. For example, someone might experience relief because their loved one died after an extended sickness or intense suffering. Others might feel anger towards a doctor or a negligent family member. Others might be experiencing a deep sense of dread because they feel like life will never be good again. All of that to say, we shouldn't assume things about the grieving person or situation, because when we do that, it will cause us to say things that aren't helpful and can even be hurtful.

**Don't compare.** In an effort to comfort we tend to compare suffering with statements like, "I know how you feel." Again, we mean well, and maybe you have walked through a similar situation, but comparing loss and grief really just diminishes the other person's loss. It unintentionally says that their loss isn't unique or special.

**Don't try to fix their grief.** Again, we mean well but oftentimes our encouragement hurts more than it helps. We feel like we need to fix the situation so we say things we think might help. But when we say things like, "You'll be fine," "the grieving person hears us say that the person who died didn't really matter enough for his or her absence to matter."<sup>1</sup> Or when someone tries to comfort parents grieving a miscarriage, "You can have more children," we diminish the lost life that can't be replaced. Similarly, someone might try to comfort a widower by saying, "You're young and can get married again," but again it diminishes the person who was lost. In effect, we are saying, "Don't be sad, because your loss isn't worth the emotions."

**Don't be in a hurry.** There is longevity to grief. Even if the pain isn't as sharp or distinct after some time, grief never really goes away. So, don't make the careless statement, "Don't you think it's time to move on?"

**Don't make it about you.** Again, in trying to comfort someone who is grieving we want to share our own stories of suffering and grief, especially if they are similar. And sharing your personal story might be encouraging *at some point*, but it shouldn't be the first thing we do. It is better to be invited to share your story. Resist the urge to talk about yourself.

**Don't ask potentially painful questions just to satisfy your curiosity.** Be careful asking about situations. There is no need to make someone relive their reason for suffering just because you want to know more.

All these and more can make you a miserable comforter.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Guthrie, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew about What Really Helps (and What Really Hurts)*, 40.

However, there are some good things to do as we strive to comfort one another.

**Welcome their lament and grief.** Be ok with their raw emotions. Don't be put off by their tears and questions. It is easy to think sometimes as Christians that because we believe in the gospel and the resurrection, grief is somehow wrong. But it isn't wrong. In fact, it is right to grieve death and suffering. We are acknowledging that this isn't how the world was originally created. Jesus grieved at the death of his friend, Lazarus. So, we grieve too. It's natural. We don't grieve as those without hope, yet we still grieve, so welcome their emotions.

**Accept the mystery of suffering.** We need to demonstrate humility when trying to comfort others. We don't have to know the perfect answer to every situation of suffering. To be honest, this is something that has always been hard for me as a pastor. I feel like I should know exactly what to say as if I could fix the situation and cure their grief with a simple statement.

Instead of fixing their grief it's ok to simply say things like, "I'm so sorry for your loss," "I'm sad with you," or "I'm so sorry you have to go through this."

It's ok to say, "I don't know why this is happening, but I am praying that God would give you and me the faith to trust that he is doing something good through this."

Sometimes grieving people need us to bring a correct posture more than a correct answer.

But sometimes we do mess up and say something or do something that doesn't help, which means we should try to be gracious and forgive when others cause more hurt by their well-intentioned but careless words. Others don't know what you're going through exactly. We can't expect them to know exactly what to do or say, so even in our suffering, we need to be gracious.

## **GOSPEL**

The good news is that even though you and I can fail at comforting one another, God does not. He knows exactly what we are going through and knows exactly what our hearts need. And so he comforts us by not just saying some nice things, but actually giving us himself.

In John 14, Jesus tells the disciples that he is going away but he will send the Holy Spirit who is our "Helper" or "Counselor." That name can also mean Comforter. God himself comes to his people, indwells us, and comforts us in our times of suffering.

The Spirit brings us peace, one part of the fruit he bears in our hearts according to Galatians 5:22-23.

He gives us peace that passes all understanding according to Philippians 4:7.

In describing the nature of the kingdom of God, Jesus says that comfort is a defining experience of his people...

**Matthew 5:4**

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

You might be walking through indescribable pain and suffering right now, and those you expected to bring you comforting words and presence may have failed to do so, only heaping more pain on your situation. Remember that God remains faithful and trustworthy when others fail you. You really can turn to him, pour out your pain, express your grief, and you really can find peace even though it might seem so far out of reach in this moment. God is not a miserable comforter.

**COMMUNION**

One of the ways we remind ourselves of our comforting God who came to us in our brokenness, is by way of communion. Jesus took on flesh and offered that flesh and spilled his blood to redeem us from the curse of sin and death. It is through his death and resurrection he has sent his Spirit to indwell us and comfort us.

So we want to celebrate that this morning as a church...

**CONFESSION**

**PRAYER**

**ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

**2 Thessalonians 2:16-17**

**16** Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, **17** comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.

## **VERSES**

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

2 Corinthians 13:11

Romans 12:15

Job 2:11-13

Job 4:7-11

Job 5:1-2

Job 15:4-6

Job 22:5-11

Job 8:3-4

Job 8:20

Job 11:11

Job 20:27-29

Job 5:8

Job 22:21-23

Job 8:5-7

Job 11:13-17

John 9:1-3

Job 16:2

Job 13:5

Job 42:7-9

Matthew 5:4

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

## **SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE**

1. Summarize the diagnosis and solution Job's friends gave him when they came.
2. Has anyone ever said something to you that hurt more than it helped? Have you ever said something that in hindsight you realized wasn't helpful?
3. What are some of the best ways we can come alongside others in their time of suffering?
4. How has God comforted you in your times of grief?
5. What are some of your favorite passages of Scripture with which you might be able to encourage a grieving friend?