

Suffering: Is It Punishment?

From the Midweek Lenten series:
Job and Jesus: The Mystery of Human Suffering

Job: 8:1-16; 21:7-27; 22:1-5; 23:1-10; 42:7-9

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The lesson from the scripture tonight is a collation of passages from the Book of Job. I am going to suggest that you take the bulletin home and read the entire text from your Bibles at home. But tonight, I invite you to listen as I read from a translation by Stephen Mitchell. His book, entitled *The Book of Job*, has an introduction and then a translation of the dialogues found in Job. It's very well done, and I hope to weave together these readings to make some things clearer.

As we said last week the Book of Job has a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue and the epilogue, if they were put together, would make their own story. That story is a very ancient story from the region of Mesopotamia that dealt with a righteous sufferer who experienced terrible calamity and yet who was very patient, blessed God, and then had his fortunes restored. That old story, which would have been readily recognized by those who first heard or read the book of Job, became the occasion for the biblical writer to address the question of suffering. The author has inserted something new between the prologue and the epilogue – a Job much less compliant in the face of suffering. The main body of the biblical story consists of Job's complaint; the responses by his three friends, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar, and then a young man, Elihu; then finally, the whirlwind, the voice of God, the vision of God, and the resolution. The Job of the dialogues is not patient, but impatient, a rebel against heaven who cries against God, who calls God to account, who would bring God into court, who says, "You are unjust," and who maintains his integrity and his innocence throughout.

I've selected some readings from Stephen Mitchell so that you get the flavor of these dialogues. It is impossible within the compass of a brief service like this to do justice to this book. But at least perhaps you will get the idea of what is going on in this drama.

The dialogue is in three cycles. In the first cycle in the 8th chapter, Job's second friend Bildad says, "...punishment means that wickedness has been done." Now that's the traditional way to understand suffering. That's orthodox religion. If

there is suffering it is because there has been sin. Suffering just doesn't happen "willy-nilly." It's punishment for what has been done wrong. Bildad says,

How long will you go on ranting, filling our ears with trash? Does God make straightness crooked? Or turn truth upside down? Your children must have been evil. He punished them for their crimes. But if you are pure and righteous and pray to God for mercy, surely he will answer your prayers and will fill your greatest desires. Your past will seem like a trifle. So blessed will your future be.

You have to think of those words of wisdom as being addressed to a man in intense suffering - on the garbage heap. That's why Job's friends have come to be called "miserable comforters." Then in the 21st chapter Job retorts,

Your doctrines can't be right. If your doctrine were right the innocent would be blessed and the wicked would suffer. But as a matter of fact, when I look out on human society, it doesn't work that way. The wicked sometimes prosper."

Here's the point of Job's speech:

Why do the wicked prosper and live to a ripe old age? Their children stand beside them. Their grandchildren sit on their laps. Their houses are safe from dangers, secure from the wrath of God. Not one of their bulls is impotent. Not one of their cows miscarries. Their grandchildren run out to play, skipping about like lambs. Singing to drum and lyre. Dancing to the sound of the flute. They end their lives in prosperity and go to the grave in peace.

Yet they tell God, 'Leave us alone. We can't be bothered about you. Why should we pray to God? What good will it do to serve you?' Is the lamp of the sinner snuffed out? Does misfortune knock at his door? Is he really driven like chafe, blown like straw in the wind? Is calamity saved for his children? Let him have his punishment now. Let his own eyes see disaster. Let him choke on the wrath of God. For what does he care about others when his own life comes to an end? One man dies serenely wrapped in safety and comfort, his thighs bulging with fat, the marrow moist in his bones. Another dies in despair, his life bitter on his tongue. Both men rot in the ground and maggots chew on them both.

So says Job. Job's righteous and orthodox friends can hardly let him get away with that. And so Eliphaz, the Temanite, said,

What use can man be to God? Even the wisest of men? Does God profit from your goodness or gain by your perfect conduct? Would he sentence you for your piety? Or punish you for your faith? Your guilt must be great indeed. Your crimes must be inconceivable.

Job responds in an eloquent passage. If only, he cries, he could bring his case before God:

Still my condition is desperate. His fist still beats on my skull. If only I knew where to meet Him, or could find my way to his court. I would argue my case before Him. Words would flow from my mouth. I would counter all his arguments and disprove his accusations. Would he try to overpower me? Or refuse to hear my defense? Surely he would listen to reason. I would surely win my case. For he knows that I am innocent. If he sifts me I will shine like gold. My feet have walked on his way and never strayed from his path. I have kept all of his commandments treasuring his words in my heart.

And then the dialogues are over and we come to the epilogue. Here it is obvious that the purpose of this whole drama was to demonstrate that Job was right; that there isn't a connection between sin, punishment, and suffering. To bear that out I read simply this paragraph from the 42nd chapter:

After he had spoken to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz, the Temanite: 'I am very angry at you and your two friends because you have not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has. So take seven bowls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer a sacrifice for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you and for his sake I will overlook your sin. For you have not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has.' So Eliphaz, the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar, the Naamathite went and did what God had commanded. And the Lord accepted Job's prayer.

Our focus in these Lenten evenings is the mystery of human suffering. As we said last week there is some suffering that obviously is the result of our carelessness or the irresponsibility of some other, but there is a mystery of darkness and human suffering which has no explanation, and it has been a stumbling block for so many in terms of faith in God. That is the suffering of the innocent. Those who have a fundamental integrity of life, but yet it seems that life continues to dump on them. The greatest minds over the centuries have struggled with this problem and we know that there has never been a satisfactory, rational explanation. Surely we are not going to find one either.

But my purpose in these Lenten evenings is a kind of preventive therapy so that if we are in the darkness we might find help. And if we are not in it, pray God, then preventive therapy so that, if we enter into it we might in the darkness find God to be our friend and not our enemy. I have been a pastor long enough to know that it is precisely in the darkness when one comes into intense suffering that one tends to accuse one's self and condemn one's self, to be filled with self-doubt. We are vulnerable to that kind of thing because none of us do it right all the time, and no one is as hard on us as we are on ourselves. There is seemingly something

endemic in human nature and broadcast in human society that seems to connect suffering with a punishment for sin. The stories of Job and Jesus I think will indicate that that is not a legitimate connection.

Job cried out, "Unjust. Unfair!" in the midst of his pain. Jesus in darkness said, "My God, my God, why?" Thank God for those who in the darkness have uttered these expressions, which give us permission as well when we have no other word to say. Job's curses and blasphemies were the expressions of such intense pain that he could not hold it back. And so with us, there are those times when there seems to be absolutely no light, and no hope, and no future, and no reason, no rationale, just pain. At such times, as well, we may take the words of Job or Jesus to our lips and know that we are at least not isolated, but have company with those who have gone before us. To find God as our friend in suffering is so critically important, rather than to see God as the adversary. "Why is God doing this to me?"

I am trying to approach the subject in this season by raising the honest questions that haunt us. Last week, "Suffering: Is There A Reason For It?" I said, "No." The kind of suffering we are taking about - that intense darkness - is such that there is no reason. The clichés trip off our tongues in reference to ourselves and sometimes painfully in reference to another when we say, "God has a reason for it." Don't ever say it! Don't ever say it! The Book of Job took on the whole orthodox understanding of things, the whole Old Testament tradition and said, "No. No. God doesn't have a reason for it." If God has a reason for it, it's not anything that you or I are ever going to be able to figure out.

Tonight, just shifting the focus a little bit: "Is It Punishment?" All that I have already said would indicate that I give another firm "No." It is not punishment. God does not punish us like a parent who punishes a naughty child. I make the statement boldly. I hope it runs square in the face of everything you've ever believed in order to shake you up a little bit, and allow you to hear me. Allow me to say something to you tonight that may get you off from that if you would tend to fall into that so-typical human pattern. "Suffering: Is It Punishment?" "No."

The three friends of Job said, "Yes." They sat with Job for seven days and didn't say a word. That's the best thing they did. But when Job said, "I am innocent. Why is this happening? God, you are unjust," they rushed to God's defense. They could sit in silence and identify with his darkness and his pain until he opened his mouth. But when he challenged the system of ideas, the doctrine, the insight that was traditional, that was orthodox. (Orthodox means the received opinion, the true, correct doctrine.) When Job in his pain blasphemed God and challenged that one-on-one relationship, that causal connection between sin and suffering, they had to rush to God's defense.

Do you ever rush to God's defense? I used to rush to God's defense, when I was young, when I was growing up, when I was studying theology, when I was uptight and upright. When I was young I would rush to God's defense. I can remember a

time in my own life's spiritual maturation when I realized that I didn't have to defend God, that God could take care of God's self quite well. But I used to do it. If you would make a statement that was contrary to correct doctrine, I would fault you. I would argue with you. I would defend the received tradition. If there was some piece of human experience that didn't fit into the biblical mold, I would deny the experience rather than check the mold. I was a defender of God. I remember it so clearly. I know now in retrospect (Thank God you didn't suggest it at the time, had you known me.) it was not that God needed to be defended, but that I needed to defend my little structure of things. I was defensive. I thought I was defending the honor of God. I thought I was defending the Word of God. Like Job's friends, that made them totally unable to enter into his pain. They couldn't even hear him. They couldn't allow his pain to penetrate into their depths, because his pain and his cries and his near blasphemy was so threatening to what they believed in their little box that they had to turn their back on the sufferer in order to preserve their structure.

I said Sunday at the conclusion something that several of you have spoken about since then. One of you here even wrote me a beautiful card about it. The fact that we ought never to let our doctrine or our moral principles stand in the way of leading with our heart, of letting compassion flow through us. It's not a bad insight actually. It was worth the price of the service - the entrance fee. The more I think about it, that's what happened to religion. Religion starts as an experience. It becomes solidified in a doctrine, and it becomes codified in a moral code. Then we lose the experience. We become disciples at second or third hand. We experience over here; now it's a creed and a code. And the creed and the code shape us and make us prisoners, so that we can no longer identify with the experience. Job's friends had their doctrine right. God is not capricious. God is not unjust. If you are good, things will go well for you. If you are wicked, you will suffer. Job, you are suffering: Job, you are wicked. Job said, "No." They said, "Yes." As those three cycles took off they became more strident because when you are threatening a person's doctrinal box or moral code, you are dealing very near the core of that person. We get very nervous when somebody is jangling our religious cage. They were defenders of God. I used to defend God, too. It was one of the great liberating moments of my life, it was like a burden rolled off my back when I woke up to the realization one day that God could take care of God's self.

So, Job will not be silenced. They cannot confute him. He says to them, "I am innocent." He goes to the extreme at the tail end of his dialogue to take an oath, to call down terrible curses upon himself if he is not being true. And then also, in the one passage that I read, he says, "Your doctrine simply does not hold true in what you observe in human experience." Now he may overstate the prosperity of the wicked a little bit. Even the wicked don't get off as good as he described, but the Psalmist in Psalm 73 said the same thing. "Surely God is good to Israel, but as for me my feet had almost slipped when I observed the prosperity of the wicked." Some people seem careless, carefree. "Life is just a bowl of cherries," and they don't seem to have a care about God or anybody else. And they get by just fine,

thank you. It's true. If we are honest there is no relationship between one's outward circumstances and one's piety or morality. Some bad people get it in the neck. And some good people get it in the neck. Job said, "Just look around you. If you could get your focus off your doctrine and moral code, and your concern to preserve all your little structures - if you would just open your eyes." That's what an orthodox person cannot do: cannot open his or her eyes. It's too threatening. The system will be shattered by the unevenness of human experience.

Well, the Book of Job was written in order to take on that whole traditional connection between sin and punishment and suffering. After the speeches are all over, there is this overpowering vision of God. Job has been saying, "God, you are unjust." And the vision shows Job how powerful God is. Job's issue is never addressed. There is simply this revelation. It is as though the God of the cosmos is saying, "Do you know anything at all about who I am and what I am about? Do you think I am tinkering around with those little petty things that concern you? Well, my goodness, I've got this whole cosmos in my hands. Where were you when creation first dawned? Where were you when I bound the creatures with chaos? And on and on.

It's marvelous poetry. It doesn't even address Job's question. Job never questioned the omnipotence of God. He was questioning the justice and mercy of God. God doesn't even address, doesn't even acknowledge his question because God is God after all. Job saw the revelation. You see, God did take Job seriously. God did get pushed into showing God's self and the experience of that revelation was so overpowering that Job said, "I repent in dust and ashes." But note this, he never said, "I repent and acknowledge that I indeed am lacking in innocence and integrity." No, no. He repented and recanted only to this extent: He said, "Well, you're right. How could I know the greatness and the grandeur that is God?"

In the epilogue there is the vindication of Job. Not an answer. But God says to those "miserable comforters" with their orthodox doctrine and their legalistic morals, "You didn't speak truly of me as did my servant Job." Job spoke truly. Job spoke honestly. "You are all caught up in your little structures. You have pat answers. Clichés trip off your tongues. And you spoke falsely. My servant Job spoke truly. Take some oxen and some rams and go make a sacrifice and ask Job to pray for you." The point of the book is thus powerfully made that that old traditional connection that suffering is the punishment for sin is not true. Why is there suffering? It is not answered. But God is, and God unveiled God's self and vindicated the truthfulness of his servant Job.

"The Mystery of Human Suffering: Is It Punishment?" No. And, therefore, we may never look at another and judge another and claim that their suffering is the punishment of God. One more thing we may never do. You'll do it. You'll do it in spite of this eloquent plea. You'll do it because it is second nature to do it. In all these three decades of pastoral ministry how many times haven't you said it to me? But, you may not say it! "Say what?" Say this: "Why is God doing this to

me?" Don't say it. God is not doing it to you. God is not your adversary. God is not your enemy in the darkness. God would be your friend. As we move from Job to Jesus we will see that trusting in the darkness is finally the last word.

Reference:

Stephen Mitchell. *The Book of Job*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., Revised edition, 1987.