

“Proverbs of Ashes, Defenses of Clay”

Job 8:1-14:22

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Today we dig into our third session on the amazing book of Job covering chapters 8-14. Today's reading covers the continuing dialogue between Job and two of his “friends” – Bildad and Zophar. There's a lot of Scripture in this lesson, so we're going to attempt to break them down into 4 topics:

1. Power of Job's remarkable understanding of God
2. Perils of “friendly” counsel
3. Pitfalls of arguing with God
4. Potholes of faith in God when in pain

Starting with the first point on the outline, Job showed a powerful and mind-boggling grasp of the truth of who God is. We need to remember that it is believed Job was a contemporary of Abraham. He did not have the Pentateuch – the first 5 books of the Bible, and He did not know Jesus. While he understandably falls short in his understanding of God – especially in his pain (don't we all?), the accuracy of his revelation of God is truly remarkable. I see in our reading a progression of his understanding of God as Creator of nature, to a deeply personal Creator. Let's take a look at some of the highlights for Job's correct revelations of God:

From verses 9:5-12, he speaks to God's mightiness in His creative powers and ability to control what He creates. He uses statements like:

- “He moves mountains;”
- “He shakes the earth from its place;”
- “He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the light of the stars;”
- “He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea;”

He then progresses in His understanding of God as not only Creator such as in nature, but also the Creator of life. Job says in chapter 12:10, “*In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.*” He then takes it even deeper into God's interaction with His masterpiece creation - humanity. In Chapter 12, verses 17 & 21, he notes, “*He leads rulers away stripped and makes fools of judges. He pours contempt on nobles and disarms the mighty.*” Job is correctly proclaiming God's providence and power over *everyone* – even rulers and judges. This lines up with Daniel 2:21, “*And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings; He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.*”

At times, Job displayed the correct protocol of how humanity is to approach God. He understood that, as sinners, we are separated from God's holiness. Therefore, to have a relationship with God, there would need to be a 3rd party to mediate on our behalf. He said in Job 9:33, “*If only there were someone to mediate between us, someone to bring us together.*” We, as believers, have the distinct privilege of knowing who that Mediator is from 1 John 1:21: “*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*”

In chapter 10, verses 8-11, Job recognized God as his personal creator with proclamations like:

- “Your hands shaped me and made me.”
- “Remember that you molded me like clay.”
- “Did you not ... clothe me with skin and flesh and knit me together with bones and sinews?”

In Chapter 14, verses 14 & 15 imply Job's belief in an afterlife. “*If someone dies, will they live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer*”

you; you will long for the creature your hands have made.” He rightly believes God longs for His creation to be with Him. This lines up with Ezekiel 33:11, “*Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’*”

Finally, in his revelation of God as His Creator, verse 13:15a is as raw a statement of faith as one can get to. “*Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.*” In essence, Job is saying that even if God Himself kills him, he will still hope in Him. Job’s statement is the fruit of a deep understanding of God’s character. A lot of Christians aren’t willing to get to the truth that God can and will initiate suffering. He never does this with joy, and His motivation for doing this is always rooted in love and goodness. It’s also proof of Job’s conviction that this is not the only life – his statement implies an eternal life perspective. Think about it, why would you have hope in God if your dead? Without an eternal life perspective, his statement makes no sense.

In the second section of our outline, “Perils of “friendly” counsel,” we find we can learn from other people’s mistakes in their attempts to respond to, or comfort, a friend’s pain and suffering. As I read Bildad’s and Zophar’s miserable misconceptions of God that end up heaping more pain on poor Job, I remembered a great piece of wisdom from one of my uncle’s friends mentioned at his funeral, “*Never miss an opportunity to shut up!*” As we look closely at their comments, we’re going to find lies about God in them. Let’s start with Job’s good buddy, Bildad in Job 8:4, “*When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.*” Yes, the penalty for sin is indeed death, but Bildad is showing a complete void of the concept of grace and/or forgiveness.

Bildad continues his works-based insertions of prepositions in his proposition in verses 5 & 6, “*But if you will seek God earnestly and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous state.*” (Emphasis added by me) Effectively, Bildad is proclaiming that it is *on us* to get right with God. He doesn’t know that our faith isn’t like all other religions that have us reaching up to God to have a relationship with Him. The Christian faith is the *only one* that has God reaching down to us through the cross of Christ. 1 John 4:19 confirms that we love Him because He *first* loved us.

We shift over to Judge Zophar in Job 11:5-6, “*Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that he would open his lips against you and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom, for true wisdom has two sides. Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin.*” Some of your sin? Which sins has he forgiven, Zophar? How do you know? God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ is total. Otherwise, Zophar’s statement implies room for continuing judgment.

Zophar, in chapter 11:13-19, echoes Bildad’s works-based gobble-de-gook and then sprinkles in some prosperity doctrine folly for good measure. He tosses in a couple of “if” prepositions – *if* you do this and *if* you put away that. What he’s saying is upon fulfilling these “if” statements, Tinker Bell is going to sprinkle fairy dust and Pollyanna is going slap a smile on our faces! The ideas of “*free of fault,*” “*stand firm,*” “*surely forget*” without forgiveness are myths, at best. Moreover, there’s still the issue of dealing with our past sins. In God’s economy, we’re accountable for *all* our sins. We can’t just one day decide we’re turning a page thinking the destruction we’ve left behind doesn’t need to be dealt with. A spouse says to another spouse, “*Darling, I’ve been cheating on you, and I’ve lost all our money by gambling it away. But today, I’m a new person!*” If you believe Bildad’s drivel, the offended spouse is just supposed to be thankful for this alleged “new” person and forget about these sins. How realistic is that?

Job rightly concludes Bildad’s and Zophar’s comments belong in a litter box, but in a far more elegant way than I just did in chapter 13:12 – the source for the title to our lesson, “*Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay.*” He points out God would see right through their judgmental tones.

We now move into our third section of the outline, “Pitfalls of arguing with God.” No doubt motivated by his circumstances; Job wanted some answers. He believed he had lived a life that warranted better treatment than what he was getting. Does that sound familiar? How many of us, when things aren’t going our way, believe we “deserve” better because we believe we’re living according to God’s will? While the Scriptures indeed promise blessings for obedience, these blessings can, in reality, be very

painful. You'll recall when Jesus told the disciples to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a huge storm came upon them threatening their lives. Jesus was with them, so in the storm, they *must have been* in the middle of God's will. What was their "blessing" in this life-threatening scene? They learned Jesus never left them in their trial, and He was in complete control as he eventually quieted the storm.

In Job's case, his determination to speak to God is a testimony to the manner in which he had lived his life – one of devotion to God. Imagine, though, you are asked to sit in the middle of a movie theater. You are forced to watch a replay of every less-than-holy deed or thought you've committed in your life. After watching that, how secure would you feel in your claim to be innocent? In chapter 9, verse 2, Job subtly acknowledged that despite his best efforts, there's still a gap between those efforts and dealing with a holy God by asking, "*But how can mere mortals prove their innocence before God?*"

This is a critical question that warrants a Biblical response. The truth is we mere mortals *cannot* prove our innocence before God. We've *all sinned* and fallen short of the glory of God – we're all guilty. (Romans 3:23) Yet, praise God through faith in Christ, we become justified and declared not guilty as noted in Romans 3:28: "*Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.*" Christ took on our guilt and paid the judgment for our sin at the Cross.

His pure and righteous shed blood is applied to us through faith, and this is how God sees the believer – washed in His son's pure and righteous blood. This is what 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us, "*For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*" Yet, we still sin after our conversion in our forgiven state. Our innocence because of Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice – is continuously presented before God by our Advocate as noted in 1 John 1:21: "*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*"

Despite his comments in chapter 9, Job still said in chapter 13, verse 3, "*But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God.*" This sounds like a prideful request, and it may indeed have some of it in him. However, Job's "desire to speak to the Almighty," I believe, is something God is waiting for all of us to ask of Him. I believe the Garden of Eden set-up (before the fall) was our original design – to be in daily fellowship with Him without the presence of sin. If that is true, then God is looking for each of us to want to talk to Him. He can handle our periodic weak and misguided motivations for approaching Him because He knows us – He created each of us. His preference is to offer mercy and forgiveness for the sake of Him revealing the deep love and good thoughts He has towards each of us.

We now arrive at the final section of our outline, "Potholes of faith in God when in pain." When pain comes, and it always does in almost countless forms, the degree or intensity of that pain can lead us to go down wrong spiritual paths in our desperation for relief. Here are some of the paths Job went down in his pain:

- God doesn't care
- God's unfair
- God doesn't offer hope
- God is angry or disappointed in me

Please know that everything I'm about to share with you contains no judgment whatsoever on Job or anyone else who has gone down these paths in their pain. I can assure you of this as I've been down every one of these paths, myself! Let's start with the God doesn't care path. In Job 9:23, he says, "*When a scourge brings sudden death, he mocks the despair of the innocent.*" The "he" in this verse is God. Basically, what Job is saying in his pain is that God not only doesn't care about us in our pain, he actually mocks us. What does *God* say about the death of any of His creations? I mentioned earlier Ezekiel 33:11 that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. 2 Peter 3:9 adds to this truth that God does care, "*The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.*"

The next dangerous path we can travel on in our pain is the notion that God is not fair. The reference verse for this path is Job 10:1-3, *“I loathe my very life; therefore, I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul. I say to God: Do not declare me guilty, but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked?”*

In these verses, Job’s pain is leading him to challenge God to explain what’s happening to him. This is a self-righteous position, and one that is loaded with pride. He is basically saying God is unfair to the righteous and favors the wicked – He is unjust. This is such an easy place to go when you’re hurting. You develop that “Woe is me” feeling and start comparing yourself to others. You see people who not only have *no* faith, but also are blatant enemies of God being abundantly blessed. You look at this apparent lack of fair treatment and say to God, “Seriously?”

Have you been there? This is why we must develop and train our hearts and minds to look at things *through God’s eyes*. What is the **truth** about God’s fairness and His feelings towards the wicked? Psalm 7:11: *“God is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day.”* The current circumstances may not demonstrate this truth at all, but it is no less the truth. The truth is the truth, even if we don’t believe it. Again, developing a true comprehension of *God’s* truths will help prevent us from going to the place that Job is where he believes God is not fair.

We can also, in our pain, develop a sense of hopelessness. Job does this in chapter 10:21-22: *“before I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and utter darkness, to the land of deepest night, of utter darkness and disorder, where even the light is like darkness.”* These verses show Job’s incorrect conclusion of his destination upon his death. In his misery, he believes God is going to banish him to hell. That’s not what happens to the righteous. Let’s see what Jesus said was the truth in John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*

In Chapter 14, verses 18-20 are more words of Job’s hopelessness. *“But as a mountain erodes and crumbles and as a rock is moved from its place, as water wears away stones and torrents wash away the soil, so you destroy a person’s hope. You overpower them once for all, and they are gone; you change their countenance and send them away.”* Every felt like this? I have. God does not destroy a person’s hope because true hope is in God. God is eternal, so *He* can’t be destroyed.

What destroys hope are the fiery darts of lies from Satan and his minions tempting us to believe there is no hope. If we get to this point, we must do what Paul tells us to do in Ephesians 6:16, *“above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one.”* Our faith is in a God of hope. Without our faith, we come into agreement with Satan’s lies and get to the point of no hope. How do we build our shield of faith? Romans 10:17 tells us, *“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* This is why Bible study is so essential in the believer’s life. It is not only where we find our faith, but it is also where hope grows as we maintain and grow our faith.

Perhaps the most common path we take in our pain is that God is either angry or disappointed with us. Verses 13:21 and 24 reveal Job has gone down this path, He says in verse 21, *“Withdraw your hand far from me, and stop frightening me with your terrors.”* Job’s statement here is a clear acknowledgement that he believes God is doing this to him. Based on chapter 1, we know Satan is doing this to him. However, God is allowing it, so the question needs to be asked, “Does it make a difference as to whether God is *initiating* or *allowing* pain and suffering?” For me, there is no difference because God is in control in either instance. Therefore, to find rest in this, we’re forced to dig deeper into God’s character through His Word regarding His thoughts towards us – especially in our afflictions. Let’s take a look at two foundational truths of God regarding what He thinks about us.

Jeremiah 29:11: *“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”*

Romans 8:28: *“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”*

Job laments in Chapter 13:24, “*Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?*” It’s completely understandable that, given his suffering, he believes God is angry with him or sees Job as His enemy. What he is missing here at this point in his journey is, once again, a more complete revelation of God’s character. He’s not aware that God volunteered him to Satan. He’s not aware that God picked this fight and, effectively, *initiated* the calamities upon him. Yet, how did God describe Job in chapter 1, verse 8? “*there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil.*” If you think about this scenario, an important question to ask with the truth of God’s assessment of Job is, “*Why would God be angry at a blameless and upright person?*”

How many of us who *have been* in pain, or are *now*, believe that our pain was/is a result of God being angry at us? This mindset, while understandable in our weakened state of suffering, is not grasping what transpired at the cross. Jesus’ sacrificial work at the cross completely and totally satisfied God’s wrath upon the sins of the believer. Please follow along regarding what happened at the cross.

1 John 4:10: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

Propitiation is another word for appeasement, which means satisfies. Propitiation also implies forgiveness and remission.

Hebrews 9:18: “Now where there is remission of these, *there is* no longer an offering for sin.”

As I noted earlier, Christ’s sacrificial work on the cross was a “once-and-for-all” work. For the believer, we are permanently forgiven and declared not guilty and righteous in the eyes of God. With that truth, I get back to my earlier question, “*Why would God be angry at a blameless and upright person?*” In other words, “*Why would God be angry at a person in whom He has forgiven because of their faith?*” The answer is simple - He is *not angry* with you in your suffering. The understandable response to that statement is, “*If He is not angry with me, why isn’t He stopping the pain and suffering?*”

That question, no doubt, is one in which every follower of Christ has asked, or will ask, amidst their hurting. It’s a completely understandable question, but the answer is one that requires advanced faith thinking. What Job didn’t know, and, sadly, what most Christians don’t know today was/is the critical role suffering plays in the building and deepening of one’s faith *in*, and understanding *of*, God. Suffering introduces a more complete revelation of God’s character and an adoption of the truth that there is purpose in suffering. Let’s take a look at some verses that reveal the lessons that God seeks to teach us in suffering.

Hebrews 5:8: “though He was a Son, *yet* He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.”

1 Peter 4:13: “but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.”

1 Peter 4:19: “Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls *to Him* in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.”

From these verses, our suffering can lead to learning obedience, being joyful, and doing good - *if* we choose to do so. These are very tall tasks to achieve when we are in a weakened state and in pain. Why would a good and loving God use such tactics to teach us these things? Aren’t there easier ways? I do believe that if God could come up with a less painful way to teach us, He would. In His grace, He could demonstrate undeserved mercy and relieve us from our suffering. Should He take this route of relief to teach us something – as opposed to using pain to teach, let me ask you a question: Which of these methods would be easier to take for granted and miss the lesson?

This question of asking why God uses pain and suffering to teach us is really less a question about *God's* character, but more about *our own* character. I can't speak for you, but the most meaningful and long-lasting lessons I've learned have come through a lot of pain. I'm too stubborn, prideful, hard-headed, and hard-hearted to truly understand God and his ways unless His tactics contain some suffering.

I believe God's design for us is to be eternal beings, and the original design, for humanity, was there would only be one eternal destination. With the arrival of sin in the Garden of Eden, a second destination, hell, was opened. I have come to liken this life that we're living now to be a sort of eternal boot camp. Military boot camp is hard – it involves physical, emotional, and mental training, and it prepares the participant for battle. I would imagine any military leader would tell you that while victories may be won on the battlefield, they are truly won or lost in the preparation and training for the battle. Just as in a military battle, our choices in this life can have life or death consequences. With now two eternal destinations facing us, we are forced to make a choice to determine which one we end up. Our choice as to whether or not we believe in/surrender to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is the sole determination of our eternal destination.

However, I believe we will have responsibilities in heaven. While what we do in this life doesn't determine whether or not we get into heaven, I believe it does impact what we'll be doing when we get there. Therefore, I believe this life is a boot camp for our eternal life. I'm not buying into the scene that once in heaven we just float amongst the clouds playing harps.

God knows us better than we do. I believe that out of His goodness and love for us, He will sometimes seemingly go to merciless extremes to reveal Himself to us for the purpose of building our faith in, trust in, and reliance on Him. That may seem strange or even cruel, but His purposes yield tremendous blessings and benefits. Job was also not aware of the benefits of suffering. Listen to these promises from the Apostles Paul and Peter – two believers who suffered greatly for their faith.

Romans 8:18: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

1 Peter 2:20b: "But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this *is* commendable before God."

In summary, the book of Job is "post-graduate" level faith instruction. We never really know what kind of faith we have until it is tested. When we were in school, quizzes and tests were regularly given to let *both* the teacher and us know where we were on our understanding of the material. With faith, our teacher, God, already knows where we are. His desire is to grow our faith, which means He wants us to know Him more and deepen our relationship with Him. That was our original design - to have a close, intimate relationship with Him. Therefore, when He gives, or allows, faith tests to us, His objective is never mean-spirited, though it may feel like it at times. In today's lesson, we learned:

1. Power of Job's remarkable understanding of God
2. Perils of "friendly" counsel
3. Pitfalls of arguing with God
4. Potholes of faith in God when in pain

I recall with some classes where the material was difficult, sometimes I had to take a step back and remember the basics. When it comes to faith, those basics are God loves us, our salvation is secure, and our hope is real. If we're willing do that, then let's stand up and sing the Doxology.