

God in a Box

Last week we looked at the end of the book of Job and tried to draw out some observations about what we mean when we say that God is “sovereign”. We talked about how God took responsibility for all that happened to Job, but how, at the same time, He doesn’t initiate evil. He has chosen to allow a degree of evil in this world in order that we human beings might have the freedom to respond to Him as we choose -- in love, worship and service; or in hatred, disdain and rebellion. Anything less than having that freedom would make us into something less than what we know and experience as being human.

Now, this week, we’re going to look at what Job’s three friends said about God that made Him angry with them. In all their speeches about what had happened to Job, what had they said about God that made Him demand a sacrifice from them? Today we’ll find out. Let’s go to the text and we’ll start into these long-winded middle chapters.

The speeches begin in chapter three and Job is the first man to speak. He begins:
*Cursed be the day of my birth, and cursed be the night when I was conceived.
Let that day be turned to darkness. Let it be lost even to God on high, and
let it be shrouded in darkness.*

His talk goes on in that same vein, with Job saying that it would be better if he’d never been born and wondering why he is still living. It ends with these words:

*Why is life given to those with no future, those destined by God to live in
distress? I cannot eat for sighing; my groans pour out like water. What I
always feared has happened to me; what I dreaded has come to be. I have no
peace, no quietness. I have no rest; instead, only trouble comes.*

You can see that Job has given up on life; he has no hope that God will restore him, nor does he see any purpose in continuing to live.

And here comes the first response to Job, and it’s from the mouth of Eliphaz the Temanite:

*In the past you have encouraged many a troubled soul to trust in God; you have
supported those who were weak. Your words have strengthened the fallen; you
steadied those who wavered. But now when trouble strikes, you faint and are
broken. Does your reverence for God give you no confidence? Shouldn’t you
believe that God will care for those who are upright? Stop and think! Does the
innocent person perish? When has the upright person been destroyed? My
experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the
same.*

And he goes on for another chapter and a half. What he is saying is that God always rewards the upright with His care and, therefore, if anyone is suffering, it must be because they’ve done something to make God angry with them. “Shouldn’t you believe that God will care for those who are upright?” The unspoken part of that

sentence is, "Shouldn't you have been more upright -- then God would have continued to protect you."

Job is not comforted by his friend's advice. He says, now in chapter 6, that he has a right to complain and that his desire is that God would crush him, take his life away, because he has no goal to strive for and no hope of success. Then he turns to Eliphaz and confronts his explanation of the events:

One should be kind to a fainting friend, but you have accused me without the slightest fear of the Almighty.

In other words, Job says, "Eliphaz, you've judged me as guilty of great evil without knowing what you're talking about and that shows that you have no fear of God. You'll lie about me to protect God and that dishonours Him!" Then Job continues:

All I want is a reasonable answer -- then I will keep quiet. Tell me, what have I done wrong? . . . Stop assuming my guilt, for I am righteous. Don't be so unjust. Do you think I'm lying? Don't I know the difference between right and wrong?

And then he turns to God to express his complaint:

What are mere mortals, that You should make so much of us? For you examine us every morning and test us every moment. Why won't You leave me alone -- even for a moment? Have I sinned? What have I done to You, O Watcher of all humanity? Why have You made me Your target? Am I a burden to You? Why not just pardon my sin and take away my guilt? For soon I will lie down in the dust and die. When You look for me, I will be gone.

If you were a religious kind of person and you heard someone talking that way to God, you would think he was being disrespectful, maybe flippant, and you might confront him for what he had said. The shortest man in the Bible speaks next and I think he might have been one of those religious kind of people who couldn't stand Job's bold and heartfelt honesty. By the way, the shortest man in the Bible was not Knee-high-miah, but it was this guy, Bildad the Shuhite:

How long will you go on like this? Your words are a blustering wind. Does God twist justice? Does the Almighty twist what is right? Your children obviously sinned against him, so their punishment was well deserved. But if you pray to God and seek the favor of the Almighty, if you are pure and live with complete integrity, He will rise up and restore your happy home.

He goes on to accuse Job of godlessness, finding his security in his wealth instead of trusting God.

When you look at what Bildad has said, it sounds right in a way. "Does God twist justice?... If you pray and seek the favor of the Almighty, He will restore your happy home." But on the other hand, he sounds harsh in his judgments; "Your children obviously sinned against him, so their punishment was well deserved." Is that any way to talk to a friend who has lost all ten of his children? You assume their guilt, without any evidence, and then tell their grieving dad that they got what they deserved?

Job's friends are so intent on making their theological point that they lose their sensitivity and compassion -- as do people today who value their theology above their love for others. Job doesn't respond to Bildad's callous remarks, but continues to press his point that he has no way to defend himself against God, that God is too strong, unstoppable in His purposes.

And who am I, that I should try to answer God or even reason with Him? Even if I were innocent, I would have no defense; I could only plead for mercy.

Job wishes that there could be a mediator between himself and God, but knows there is none. And then he returns to his plea for answers, especially to the question, "Why?"

Don't simply condemn me -- tell me the charge You are bringing against me. What do you gain by oppressing me? Why do You reject me, the work of Your hands? . . . Why, then, did you bring me out of my mother's womb? Why didn't you let me die at birth? Then I would have been spared this miserable existence. I would have gone directly from the womb to the grave.

We have yet to hear from the third friend, Zophar the Naamathite, but he speaks for the first time in chapter 11.

When you mock God, shouldn't someone make you ashamed? You claim, 'My teaching is pure,' and 'I am clean in the sight of God.' If only God would speak; if only He would tell you what He thinks . . . Listen! God is doubtless punishing you far less than you deserve!

And from there Zophar goes into a speech about mysteries of God and implies that Job is a sinner. Then he spits it out:

If only you would prepare your heart and lift up your hands to Him in prayer! Get rid of your sins and leave all iniquity behind you.

And the rest of his speech describe the blessings that will come if only Job would repent of his sin. Job's response is more than a little sarcastic as he says:

You really know everything, don't you? And when you die, wisdom will die with you.

And Job proceeds from there to describe the wisdom and power of God.

Job's three friends have all made their case and every one of them has concluded that there is a formula by which God is always bound: He punishes those who do wrong and He blesses and protects those who do right. Because Job is suffering, Job must have done some great evil, and all three agree that this must be the case.

Job, however, disagrees with their assessment. He repeatedly proclaims that he is innocent and asks for an audience with God. He dismisses the counsel of his three friends and instead appeals to God to make an accusation against him so that he can defend himself.

Oh, how I long to speak directly to the Almighty! I want to argue my case with God Himself. For you are smearing me with lies. As doctors, you are worthless quacks. Please be quiet. That's the smartest thing you could do.

Listen to my charge; pay attention to my arguments. Are you defending God by means of lies and dishonest arguments? You should be impartial witnesses, but will you slant your testimony in His favour? Will you argue God's case for Him? Be careful that He doesn't find out what you are doing! Or do you think you can fool Him as easily as you fool people? No, you will be in serious trouble with Him if even in your hearts you slant your testimony in His favour. Doesn't His majesty strike terror in your hearts? Does not your fear of Him seize you? Your statements have about as much value as ashes. Your defense is as fragile as a clay pot. Be silent now and leave me alone. Let me speak -- and I will face the consequences. Yes, I will take my life in my hands and say what I really think. God might kill me, but I cannot wait. I am going to argue my case with Him.

Of course Job's friends are horrified by this defiant and self-righteous attitude! Imagine Job, in the middle of being severely disciplined by God, rebelling against that discipline to the point of proclaiming his innocence!!

Here is Eliphaz' response:

You are supposed to be a wise man, and yet you give us all this foolish talk. You are nothing but a windbag. It isn't right to speak so foolishly. What good do such words do? Have you no fear of God, no reverence for Him? . . . What has captured your reason? What has weakened your vision that you turn against God and say all these evil things?

And from here Eliphaz goes on to say that wicked people are in pain throughout their lives, always enduring terrors because of their sin, and always living in dread of a yet greater punishment that awaits them.

Job's response is to tell his friends that they are no help at all and that, if he was in their place, he would at least try to bring some comfort. Then he declares again his absolute hopelessness:

My days are over. My hopes have disappeared. My heart's desires are broken. . . . My hope will go down with me to the grave. We will rest together in the dust.

Bildad speaks next and offers pretty much the same opinion that Eliphaz has given; that the wicked suffer now and live in dread of even greater suffering to come.

Job:

How long will you torture me? How long will you try to break me with your words? . . . You are trying to overcome me, using my humiliation as evidence of my sin, but it is God who has wronged me. I cannot defend myself, for I am like a city under siege.

As chapter 19 continues with Job's defense, he describes more of the pain and humiliation that he has endured to this point -- rejected by relatives, by friends, even by children. He begs his friends to demonstrate some compassion:

Have mercy on me, my friends, have mercy, for the hand of God has struck me.

Why must you persecute me as God does? Why aren't you satisfied with my anguish?

Oh, that my words could be written. Oh, that they could be inscribed on a monument, carved with an iron chisel and filled with lead, engraved forever in the rock.

But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that He will stand on the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God! I will see Him for myself. Yes, I will see Him with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought.

To me this is one of the most moving passages in the Bible and one that Handel chose to use in his "Messiah". Such faith in the midst of such despair and hopelessness!

Then Zophar speaks and, in his own words, parrots the arguments of Eliphaz and Bildad:

Don't you realize that since people were first placed on the earth, the triumph of the wicked has been short-lived and the joy of the godless has been only temporary?

Finally Job answers this specific line of argument:

The truth is that the wicked live to a good old age.

And he carries on with that kind of reasoning for the rest of chapter 21.

Then Eliphaz starts his final speech and he gives Job a blast of judgment:

Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous? Would it be any gain to Him if you were perfect? Is it because of your reverence for Him that He accuses and judges you? Not at all! It is because of your wickedness! Your guilt has no limit.

And then Eliphaz starts to list the sins Job must have committed.

You must have refused water for the thirsty and food for the hungry . . . You must have sent widows away without helping them and crushed the strength of orphans.

Job doesn't even respond to this accusation, although he does describe his care for the poor, the widows, the orphans, the strangers in chapter 29. But here he asks why the wicked are allowed to live so long without having to suffer for their evil deeds.

The final speech by one of Job's friends is Bildad's very brief reminder in chapter 25 that God is great and that no mortal can stand before Him and claim to be righteous.

Here is Job's reply:

How you have helped the powerless! How you have saved a person who has no strength! How you have enlightened my stupidity. What wise things you have said. Where have you gotten all these wise sayings?

And then he launches into his description of the greatness of God, His majesty and

power:

God stretches the northern sky over empty space and hangs the earth on nothing. He wraps the rain in His thick clouds and the clouds do not burst with the weight . . . (and later) . . . These are some of the minor things He does, merely a whisper of His power

But Job is not done. In the next five chapters he describes his life, the obedience that he has been committed to for all his days and he defends his innocence. He remembers the great life that God had given him and describes the anguish that he now experiences.

And now my heart is broken. Depression haunts my days. My weary nights are filled with pain as though something were were relentlessly gnawing at my bones. With a strong hand, God grabs my garment. He grips me by the collar of my tunic. He has thrown me into the mud. I have become as dust and ashes. I cry to you, O God, but you don't answer me. I stand before you, and you don't bother to look . . . You persecute me with your great power.

His final speech ends with one more plea to be heard:

If only I had someone who would listen to me and try to see my side . . . Let the Almighty show me that I am wrong. Let my accuser write out the charges against me. I would face the accusation proudly. I would treasure it like a crown.

Just to know. Job, like humans from the beginning, just wants to know, to understand, what's happening to him.

Now, why did God threaten to punish Job's three friends and why did He say that they hadn't spoken the truth about God, but Job had . . . that Job had got it right?

Job's friends understood the justice of God through the grid of a system. Evil gets punished, good gets blessed. People who do wrong never prosper, but people who do right always prosper. That was their grid. That's how they understood that God worked. But Job looked at the world the way it really is. He knew that there were people who deserved to be punished much more than he did, that there were evil people who were living in peace, without guilt or fear. He also knew that God was sovereign, that He was responsible, and so He knew that God's justice wasn't always going to bless the good and punish those who did wrong -- at least not in this life. Job also looked beyond this life and anticipated a fuller justice -- "I know that my Redeemer lives and that He will stand on the earth at the last!"

No matter what box we try to shove God into, He doesn't fit. He's too big, His purposes too complex for us to comprehend. We try to reduce Him to systematic theology and we only get part of the picture. We try to explain Him to people who don't yet believe and our explanations sound trite, even to us. We think we need to defend Him for earthquakes and tornadoes and our arguments are vague and unconvincing. One of the most obvious lessons from the book of Job is that God is too big for our words, greater than our understanding and that we can't formulate an explanation for

what He is and why He does what He does. He told Job that his 3 friends hadn't said what was right about Him, as Job had, and Job had only said the obvious -- that God can't be reduced to simple formulae, that His ways are beyond us, that we see only the fringe, the outer edge of His works, that He is Sovereign over all His creation.

But Job also said that he believed he would see God, that God would stand on the earth, that He would make Himself known -- and 2000 years or so after these events, God did exactly that. And when He walked on the earth, in human flesh, He revealed Himself as the greatest lover of people that we could imagine. He not only came and shared the existence of a people in bondage to sin, He offered His own life to break that bondage, to break the curse, to take onto Himself all the heartache and brokenness that our human rebellion had brought to His beautiful creation.

I said last week that God takes responsibility and we see it ultimately in the cross of Christ. Because of love, He gave His body to be tortured and killed. Because of love, He did what had to be done to win the hearts of humankind. And though there are so many who still reject that love, every day thousands more come to know it. In love for us Jesus broke bread and said, "This is My body, broken for you." And in love for us He took the Passover cup and said, "This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins."

This is how we know God, through the cross. This is the love that defies human explanation and that breaks through our pride and resistance. This is the love that has changed the world and He invites you to His table now.