

Week 4
January 26/27, 2019
Job 29-31,38-42
The Lens of Suffering

Session Summary and Goal:

This is the last lesson in the Patriarch Era and second lesson in Job, covering Job's defense and his conversation with God. Through the lens of his suffering, we will see Job look back, look within and around, and finally look up. It is in looking up that we, like Job find the strength, courage and ability to endure the trials of life. Through Job's experience we can understand that one's circumstances and the presence or absence of suffering in a person's life are not directly correlated to their standing before God. From Job's friends we can learn how to come alongside our brothers and sisters in trials.

Main Passages: Job 29-31, 38-42

Session Outline:

1. Looking back
2. Looking within and around
3. Looking up

Session in a Sentence:

When facing trials, we can look through the lens of suffering to a sovereign God, faithful and true who is at work through it all.

Kingdom Connection:

Job was "tried" and came forth as gold. (Job 23:10) The Lord is continuously preparing us for the race that is set before us in this, His earthly kingdom.

Missional Application:

As believers, we are called to continuously point others to Christ, in good times and in bad. Times of trial offer opportunities to "know" God in a more personal way than in times of prosperity, and to lead others to know Him more as well.

Through the Lens of Suffering

Suffering is part of living. Everyone experiences suffering at some point in their life. The question is what will you do when the suffering comes? Many will ask of God, Why me? What did I do to deserve this? They are viewing suffering as punishment. The question is, is “why” the right question to be asking?

Job was a God-fearing man who had it all: prestige, power, possessions and position. Suddenly out of nowhere, his world literally collapsed around him, stripping him bare to the core, shaking his very foundation.

From the beginning, we have a unique perspective in this story as we are privy to what’s going on behind the scenes as we see Satan challenge God that His faithwalking people do so only for the benefits He provides them. Job proves this to be false, learning quite a bit about who he is and who God is in the process. In the end, we see that Job’s foundation was secured in God alone. He withstood the test and by faith, he endured. The story of Job’s suffering allows readers the opportunity to learn from his experiences, to see how to endure difficult times and serves as a reminder that suffering does not correlate with standing before God.

Last week we looked at Job’s friends who came to comfort him and in doing so nearly derailed his faith. They each thought they knew why he was suffering, each from their own perspective. Eliphaz basing his explanation on observation and experience, Bildad, the legalist arguing on the traditions of men, Zophar, using human reasoning and Elihu pointing to Job’s own pride as the cause for his current situation. Collectively, they believed only the unrighteous suffer for their sins and the righteous are rewarded, concluding that Job’s circumstances must some how be Job’s own fault. Sadly, these beliefs are alive and well today. Whenever someone tries to comfort you with an explanation for your affliction or simple formula for solving your issues, be wary and discerning. Though their intent maybe to assist you, be careful or you might find yourself in the ash heap with Job’s friends.

Today, we will look at Job’s response to his friends, and to the Lord. We will see how to look through the lens of suffering to a sovereign God, faithful and true who is at work through it all. Job looks back, looks within and around, and finally looks up. It is in looking up that we, like Job find the strength, courage and ability to endure the trials of life.

1. Looking Back - Chapter 29

In chapter 29 we see Job look back at the past for verification of his righteousness. He and his friends had already shared 3 rounds of speeches and in chapter 29 he sums up his defense by recalling and reviewing his past good deeds in defense to charges against him by his friends. In Job 29:2-4 he laments:

*Oh, that I were as in months past,
As in the days when God watched over me;
³ When His lamp shone upon my head,
And when by His light I walked through darkness;
⁴ Just as I was in the days of my prime,
When the friendly counsel of God was over my tent;*

Job did not understand that God was still watching over him. His hardships did not mean that God had abandoned him, nor does it mean that we have been abandoned in difficult times. God is continuously refining us and preparing us for the race that is set before us (see Hebrews 12:1-2).

Amid difficulty, it is human nature to long for the “good ole days” recounting the good times from the past. But, focusing on past deeds does not change the current situation. In fact, it can be detrimental in keeping us from facing reality.

Let’s look further as Job recalls his past deeds in verses 7-17:

*When I went out to the gate by the city,
When I took my seat in the open square,
⁸ The young men saw me and hid,
And the aged arose and stood;
⁹ The princes refrained from talking,
And put their hand on their mouth;
¹⁰ The voice of nobles was hushed,
And their tongue stuck to the roof of their mouth.
¹¹ When the ear heard, then it blessed me,
And when the eye saw, then it approved me;
¹² Because I delivered the poor who cried out,
The fatherless and the one who had no helper.
¹³ The blessing of a perishing man came upon me,
And I caused the widow’s heart to sing for joy.
¹⁴ I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
My justice was like a robe and a turban.
¹⁵ I was eyes to the blind,
And I was feet to the lame.
¹⁶ I was a father to the poor,
And I searched out the case that I did not know.
¹⁷ I broke the fangs of the wicked,
And plucked the victim from his teeth.*

Many commentators believe that Job was a judge because of the way he characterizes his work. At that time, “judge” was a position held because of respect and standing. Judges were chosen to help manage the community and solve disputes.

But we see here that Job walks a fine line between explaining good deeds done and bragging about them in defense to his friends’ accusations. Job’s one weakness that is visible throughout his conversations is his prideful boasts of all that he has done. Job focuses more on what he had done for God and His people than on remembering what God had done for him and through him for others. When reviewing things that have gone right, pride can be one of our most dangerous foes, causing us to change our focus from depending on God toward relying on our own self in pursuing success.

But remembering can be beneficial when our focus is on looking back at *what the Lord has done* rather than on *what we have done for* the Lord. Throughout Biblical history, the Lord has remembered His promises to His people and reminded His people to remember all that He has done and promised to do for them. For example, the word “remember” is found 14 times in Deuteronomy as Moses admonishes Israel to remember the way the Lord had led them and cared for them even in the wilderness, even when they rebelled, admonishing them that He would continue to do so. (Deuteronomy 8:2-24:22)

In looking back, Job was focusing on his own accomplishments, desiring to prove himself before the Lord and failing to see the Lord God Almighty for who he was, Sovereign Creator of the universe.

2. Looking Within and Around - Chapter 29-31

Using the pronouns “I” or “me” 52 times in 29:1-25, we see that Job is self-focused looking within to himself in his difficulty. He carries this into Chapter 30 as he looks around at the reality of his current situation. “But now,” he begins in Job 30:1, seeming to accept his reality. Commentator Warren Wiersbe explains that Job identifies 5 complaints regarding his current situation that parallel joys of the past that he recounted in Chapter 29:

1. “I have no respect” (30:1-15; see 29:7-11)
2. “I have no blessing” (30:16-23, see 29:2-6)
3. “I have no help” (30:24-25, see 29:12-17)
4. “I have no future” (30:26-28, see 29:18-20)
5. “I have no ministry” (30:29-31, see 29:21-25)

Do these complaints sound familiar? Job experienced sufferings similar to those which our Lord, Jesus Christ suffered. Jesus was falsely accused, spat upon and ridiculed. On the cross the world’s most righteous man became the world’s greatest sufferer. Walking with God never means a suffering-free life.

Job never really “saw” himself until he saw God through the lens of suffering. Though ready to reason and defend as many do today when faced with suffering, it is only in seeing God for who

He is that brings Job to his knees in awe and reverent fear of the Lord. It is only when Job understands who he is through his relationship with the Lord that he gains insight into his situation. It is only when we come to the end of ourselves that God can step in and show us who we are in Him and that we are not alone in our affliction.

In Chapter 31 we see Job give his final defense with sixteen, “if I have...” statements, telling (not asking) the Lord to judge him based on bad deeds he did NOT commit, particularly in the areas of lust, deceit and adultery.

Then in further self-examination Job describes himself as a fair and generous employer (31:13-15), a good neighbor who cared for the poor and needy (31:16-23,29-32), and a sincere worshipper of the Lord God Most High (31:24-28). Job then offers one more area where he has done right in the eyes of the Lord and not committed sins or evil – Stewardship (31:38-40).

And with that, “the words of Job are ended.” Job has completed his oath of defense, his plea of innocence. He has looked back, he has looked within, and he has looked around and he is ready to face whatever judgement the Lord has for him.

The next 6 chapters contain his young friend Elihu’s argument, which interestingly focuses on the character of God, more than the character of Job. His focus was not to prove that Job was a sinner but to prove that Job had a wrong view of God. In the end, he proclaims that God is gracious, God is just, and God is great. Warren Wiersbe explains that unlike the first 3 friends, Elihu assesses Job’s problems accurately:

Job’s actions may have been right—he was not the sinner his three friends described him to be—but his attitude was wrong. He was not the “saint” Job saw himself to be. Job was slowly moving toward a defiant, self-righteous attitude that was not at all healthy. It was this Know-it-all attitude that God exposed and destroyed when he appeared to God and questioned him. So, even though God said nothing about Elihu, the man did have a helpful ministry to Job. Unfortunately, Job would not accept it. (Wiersbe, pg178)

3. Looking Up – Chapter 38-42

When we first met Job in chapter one, we saw a religious man, described as upright and blameless and consistently practicing the religious rituals to cover the sins of his children. But there is no mention of a personal relationship with God. In fact, God is mentioned as Elohim, the generic word for God. But by chapter 42, Job refers to God as Yaweh, the covenant name of God. Calling Him Lord, he approaches in complete humility, acknowledging His sovereignty. Job went from asking “why” to understanding “Who” is in control, looking up and seeing with new vision. How did he get there?

Beginning in Chapter 38, God speaks to Job, asking him questions that give Job insight to WHO God is, infinitely powerful, with ways and thoughts much higher than Job’s. Job thought he knew about God, not realizing how much he did NOT know about God. Recognizing our own ignorance is always a first step toward wisdom!

God begins with asking Job about Creation:

Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? (v. 2)

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? (v. 4)

Tell me if you have understanding, who set its measurements? (v.5)

Or, who stretched the line on it? (v. 5)

On what were its bases sunk? (v. 6)

Or who laid the cornerstone? (v. 6)

Who enclosed the sea with doors? (v. 8)

Then God moves to the management of the earth, explaining His providential working and asking Job if he could manage and oversee creation:

*38:34 "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
That an abundance of water may cover you?
35 Can you send out lightnings, that they may go,
And say to you, 'Here we are!'"*

*39 "Can you hunt the prey for the lion,
Or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
40 When they crouch in their dens,
Or lurk in their lairs to lie in wait?
41 Who provides food for the raven,
When its young ones cry to God,
And wander about for lack of food?"*

*39:9 "Will the wild ox be willing to serve you?
Will he bed by your manger?
10 Can you bind the wild ox in the furrow with ropes?
Or will he plow the valleys behind you?
11 Will you trust him because his strength is great?
Or will you leave your labor to him?
12 Will you trust him to bring home your ^dgrain,
And gather it to your threshing floor?"*

God pauses in Chapter 40, offering Job a chance to respond. Job, in wisdom chooses to shut his mouth and listen:

Then the Lord said to Job, will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it.

Then Job answers the Lord, behold I am insignificant; what can I reply to you? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken and I will not answer; even twice and I will add nothing more. 40:1-5

God replies:

⁶ Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said:

*⁷ “Now prepare yourself like a man;
I will question you, and you shall answer Me:*

*⁸ “Would you indeed annul My judgment?
Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?*

Changing the subject from power to justice, God reveals Himself to Job through a series of questions. Job enters His presence, seeing Him for the very first time. It is only after looking up and seeing God for who he is that Job realizes he had been asking the wrong question all along... when facing the hardships of life, the question isn't why, its who. Who is in in control? Job finds God in his trouble, and “sees” Him in a new way.

After hearing from the Lord, seeing Him for who He is, Job's connection with the Lord moves from being just about religion, to one of personal relationship. He didn't have to know why, because he knew Who. Look at Job's response:

42 Then Job answered the LORD and said:

*² “I know that You can do everything,
And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You.*

*³ You asked, ‘Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.*

*⁴ Listen, please, and let me speak;
You said, ‘I will question you, and you shall answer Me.’*

*⁵ “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,
But now my eye sees You.*

*⁶ Therefore I abhor myself,
And repent in dust and ashes.”*

This is faith. Surrendering to God's will leads us to find God's way for our lives. Suffering does not create faith, but it does reveal it, develop it and mature it. In the words of Henrietta Mears:

“we will not always understand what God is working out on the battleground of our hearts but know this: there is a reason and value to everything God allows.”

Don't waste your time running to friends and family in times of trouble, run to God, seek God. When we seek Him with our whole hearts, He will be found by us (Jeremiah 29:13). We don't know what we don't know. Sometimes things will only be clear once we get to heaven. God's purposes in suffering are often hidden. But we can know this, God never wastes the suffering of His saints.

Job passed the test, just as the Lord knew he would when He gave Satan permission to test him. The Lord demonstrated His grace and mercy by restoring Job.

In addition to learning how to suffer well ourselves, Job teaches how to comfort others through trials. What have we learned? Let's look at a few do's and don'ts:

Don't preach to them. All of Job's friends thought they knew why Job was suffering. The last thing someone in a difficult time needs is us for us to tell them what we think is the reason for their suffering or to try to speak to them on behalf of the Lord.

Do point them to God. Elihu was not rebuked by the Lord because that is what he tried to do, point Job to God and to encourage him to listen when God spoke. While others do not need our preaching, they do need for us to come alongside and encourage.

Do be present with them. This is the best thing Job's friends did. The seven days that they just remained with him without saying a word may be the best comfort he received from them!

Do pray for them and for their circumstances. What people need most in trials is to know God. That should be part of our prayers for those encountering trials, not just for their circumstances to change but for them to see the Lord more clearly in the process. It is our relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ that will sustain us.

Resources:

Be Patient, Commentary on Job, Warren Wiersbe

What the Bible is All About, Dr. Henrietta Mears

Life Application Study Bible, Dr. Charles Stanley

Various sermons on Job, Sermon Central