

The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

Job and the Problem of Suffering

Readings: *Job 18:1-21:34*

Reflections:

- Now it is Bildad's turn for another round at Job. Bildad is offended that Job is not kinder to his friends. He continues his insults to Job that Job simply isn't being sensible. We see that the basic equation – be righteous and prosper, be evil and suffer – is sensible to the human mind and heart. The notion of evil people prospering (even for a season) or good people suffering simply seems offensive to us. Yet, Job in his speeches are continuing to push us to move beyond this simple approach of subtly blaming those who are suffering as being the cause of their own pain.
- Bildad then goes through a horrifying account of someone being completely devastated with calamity and suffering and then concludes: "Surely this is the dwelling of an evil man; such is the place of one who knows not God." (Job 18:21). Now if you read through this account and think through everything Job has been through, this is such an incredible judgment and insult to Job. Bildad is basically saying to Job's face "you are evil and you don't know God!" Again we are reminded of how incredibly insensitive the religiously self-righteous heart can be when faced with people in pain.
- Job can't stand what he is hearing. "How long will you torment me and crush me with words?" There is a saying, "Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me." This statement is a lie. Words have the power to wound and crush a person's spirit. We treat them lightly but they often carry the most significance in shaping our sense of identity, security and confidence for life. People can be literally crippled for life because of harsh, thoughtless and uncaring words. Job reminds us of the power of our words to build up or to crush. Proverbs 15:4 says, "The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit." (Also see Prov.18:21)
- "Ten times now you have reproached me..." Ten simply means many, many times you have done this (see Gen.31:7; Num.14:22).
- Job spirals into despair and expresses a sense of hopelessness at first about being abandoned by God: "he uproots my hope like a tree..." Job then expresses his deep sense of alienation and isolation: "He has alienated my brothers from me." One of the most powerful

effects of suffering is isolation. We don't like being around pain and so we try to avoid it. What does that result in? Avoiding people in pain. Countries full of people suffering don't get any tourists. Cancer wards aren't places people want to hang out for a night. Job reminds of us of one of the greatest sources of suffering for those in pain – alienation from isolation.

- Job then cries out for pity: “Have pity on me, my friends, have pity!” Job is expressing the heart cry of all people in deep pain and suffering. Will we stand back cold and disinterested? Will we have no pity? We see in Jesus what it means to have compassion for those in pain. The story of the Good Samaritan and the account of the woman caught in adultery are all strong reminders of what it means to have compassion. Maybe the greatest examples were the many, many lepers Jesus healed. These lepers no one would touch. These lepers lived completely isolated lives. They would suffer incredible pain and would have to sit and beg for food to survive. Jesus' embrace and continued focus on healing them is an example of having compassion for those most suffering, isolated and rejected from society. People who have AIDS are maybe the closest parallel we have today.
- Job then makes an interesting statement: “Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll...” First, I am certain that the person who wrote Job would have never imagined that twenty five hundred years later someone would be studying this story on another continent and in another language. This reminds us that we can never underestimate God's ability to do more than we could ever imagine.
- More importantly, this cry in the text reminds us that those who are suffering are desperate to be heard and to find some form of legacy. When facing death, people want that their cause and their memory will not vanish but that they will be remembered beyond their death. Interesting how many people as they move into their older years look for monuments, plaques and engraved stones to create a sense of legacy. The human heart wants to live beyond death “engraved in a rock forever!”
- Job now makes a declaration about God that shows that he has not completely fallen into despair but still does have hope in God: “I know that my Redeemer (better translated “Vindicator) lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth (better translated “dust”). And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in (or free from) my flesh will I see God; I myself will see him, with my own eyes – I, and not another.” This passage has caused many commentators trouble as most don't believe Job had any notion of the resurrection. Job believes he is going to die and yet he has this sense that God will vindicate him (after his death?) when God stands on the dust (a symbol of coming to earth and standing on Job's grave or place of death, returning to dust. But then it says Job will see God with his own eyes! The phrase “in the flesh” could also be translated “free from the flesh” but this doesn't make sense when he says with his own eyes. It seems that in this moment of faith and hope, Job is for the moment able to perceive that there is a life after death and that somehow God will rescue him from the grave. Although not perfectly clear, Job's statement

here is definitely pointing towards what we will see in Christ, as the first one resurrected from the dead.

- Job then ends with a harsh warning to his friends, that they should fear judgment! When the emotional pendulum swings for those suffering, it swings hard.
- Now it is Zophar's turn! Zophar seems to be on a bit of a tangent with this speech even though he states that he is giving a direct reply. He basically focuses on the brevity of the prosperity and life of the wicked. It as if he didn't hear anything Job has said and is just on his own little hobby horse. Again a good reminder that people who suffer are worthy of our attentive listening ears.
- One of the themes of Zophar is that those the wicked have robbed must be repaid, even if it is by the children of the wicked, "His children make amends to the poor; his own hands must give back his wealth." This raises a question, "Will those in North America have to pay back those across the world that have suffered from our imperialistic pursuit of wealth at their cost?"
- Zophar declares a perspective found in the wisdom literature of Israel: stolen food tastes sweet but turns sour in the stomach. It is an image of those that would seek their own gain but do so through injustice.
- Zophar ends his speech again by declaring the complete judgment of God against the wicked.
- It is not surprising how Job opens his response: "LISTEN CAREFULLY to my words!" I can see Job thinking, "you haven't listened to a word I say!" Job gets sarcastic: "After I have spoken, mock on."
- Job's response is simple: experience contradicts what his friends have said. The wicked prosper and the innocent suffer. There is no evidence to suggest that what his friends are saying is actually true. In fact as you review this history of humanity, in fact the wealthy do live safe, secure and self-indulgent lives (for the most part) and the vast majority of suffering comes upon those who are completely innocent of having done anything to deserve such pain. Job also adds that death levels everyone and everything. It is the great equalizer of humanity. "Side by side they lie in the dust, and worms cover them both." (Yuck!) Job's conclusions are completely in line with truth and completely undermine the self-righteous position of his friends.
- He ends this set of speeches with a bang: "So, how can you console me with your nonsense? Nothing is left of your answers and falsehood!" This conclusion is not just for Job's three friends but for all of us who would be tempted to blame people for the suffering they are suffering. We are confronted that this approach to life is nonsense and we must abandon it to discover the true meaning of grace, the grace we are offered in Jesus.