

“Fighting for Hope”

Job 15-21

February 12, 2023

When we meet with someone for the first time in biblical counseling, the first objective after listening and gathering as much data as possible, is to give the counselee hope. They may be suffering because of their own sin, or the sin of someone else. They may be suffering according to the will of God or because of the onslaught of Satan. But regardless of the source of their suffering, we can offer them hope because we have a God who forgives sin, a Savior who suffered unjustly and can lead us through our unjust suffering, and we have a God who is sovereign over Satan and is working out His good and holy purposes beyond what we can fully see in our painful circumstances.

Well, Job could have certainly used some biblical counseling. As we have already learned, he is suffering at the hand of Satan, but not apart from the hand of God. Satan is seeking to destroy Job’s faith, while God is allowing his faith to be tested to prove it genuine. Unfortunately, Job’s friends who came to comfort him after the death of his ten children, the destruction of his wealth, and his ongoing sickness, end up withholding hope from Job when he needed it most. The problem was that they had a limited understanding of God’s ways. They firmly believed the general principle that godly choices lead to good living while sinful choices lead to suffering. But they failed to understand the role of Satan in life of the believer, and more importantly, the hand of God in suffering to bring about good and holy purposes in lives of His children.

Today we are going to see that **We must not withhold hope from those whose suffering has embittered their soul, because God is a source of hope that defies all hopelessness. Therefore, hope is always in season for those who trust in God.**

Last week I organized my main points around what Job’s friends were telling him. But today I’m going to arrange my points according to Job’s response,

because what’s most important is what will happen with Job’s faith in response to severe testing. Keep in mind that *faith made is evident by hope*. You can say you have faith, but if you don’t have hope, your faith is not active. **Faith produces hope**. If you need hope, you need to fuel your faith. We can detect what is happening with Job’s faith by looking for evidence of hope. And when he is fighting for hope he is fighting the fight of faith—weak as it may be in the moment.

As we survey chapters 15-21, Job is going to progress from *grasping for hope*, to *clinging to hope*, and finally *fighting for hope*. It may not seem like much progress, but it will be just enough to see that Job’s faith has not failed. While all seems hopeless, yet Job will cling to even a thread of hope that God is just.

1. Grasping for hope (Job 15-17)

This section begins with Eliphaz’s attack on Job’s faith. We must not forget what God Himself told us about Job in chapters 1-2: he is “a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and turns away from evil” (1:8; 2:3). Yet Eliphaz accuses Job of not fearing God, because he judges Job by external circumstances rather than considering his heart (as God sees it).

15:4: “...you are doing away with the fear of God and hindering meditation before God.” Of course we know the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Job 28:28; Ps 111:10) so it’s not surprising that the next beachhead for Eliphaz is to declare that Job lacks wisdom. **[15:7-7-10]** Its noteworthy that “all of the characters seem to pride themselves in what they know, or think they know,” with none of them demonstrating exemplary humility at this point.¹ Beware, with great knowledge, comes the temptation for pride. And pride aways destroys wisdom. “Before honor comes humility” (Pr 15:33).

Eliphaz has the audacity to not only presume to be wiser than Job, but to suggest that his perspective is equivalent to God’s. Vs. 11: “Are the comforts of God too small for you, or the word that deals gently with you?” So Eliphaz

¹ Daniel Estes, “Job” (Teach the Text Commentary series), pg. 94.

suggests that he and his friends have been gently speaking the counsel of God. Wow! If they have been gentle, I'd hate to see them deal harshly with Job!

Next Eliphaz suggests Job is abominable and corrupt in vs. 16 and then proceeds to describe all the ways that the wicked will experience hardship. While Eliphaz doesn't *directly* say Job is wicked, notice how he uses descriptions that align with what Job has experienced, felt, and expressed:

- Vs. 20: "The wicked man writhes in pain all his days..." (consider Job's continuous physical anguish)
- Vs. 21: "in prosperity the destroyer will come upon him" (Job was the wealthiest man in the east when he was brought down)
- Vs. 22: "He does not believe that he will return out of darkness" (Job has repeatedly expressed how he feels he is on the brink of death)

The essence of Eliphaz's message is, "Job, you don't fear God and don't have wisdom. The reason you are suffering is because God judges wicked people like you."

How is this message going to land on Job as he struggles against despair? First Job responds out of pain with blunt words in 16:2: "miserable comforters are you all." Then Job expresses his exhaustion from all that he *perceives* God is doing to him.

- Vs. 7: "Surely now God has worn me out."
- Vs. 8: "He has shriveled me up"
- Vs. 9: "He has torn me in his wrath and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth..."
- Vs. 12: "I was at ease, and he broke me apart; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he set me up as his target; his archers surrounded me..."

Job's *perception* is that God is against him and yet he is grasping for hope. We see this in vs. 17 where He insists on his integrity and then in vs. 19 he says, "even now, behold my witness is in heaven, and he who testifies for me is on high. My friends scorn me; my eye pours out tears to God that He would argue the case of a man with God." In other words, Job is on the

brink of despair and yet he holds out hope that God would hear his case and step in as his advocate.²

Then Job goes on to lament further in chapter 17 and he comes to the conclusion that death is about to take over and he shudders to think that with death will come the death of hope. [17:13-15] Earlier in 3:11-13 Job considered death as a welcome escape from his pain, but now he realizes that even death could not be the source of his hope. Do you see how close Job is to despair? And yet he has not given up. He is grasping for hope, like a man hanging from the edge of a cliff by his fingertips.

Daniel Estes points out that one of the life principles that we learn from Job is that "**At the moment when faith is hardest and least likely, then faith is most needed**" (Daniel Estes).³ In other words, when trusting God is the most difficult and seems the least reasonable, faith is the most essential.

2. Clinging to hope (Job 18-19)

As Bildad the Brutal jumps back into the conversation, it's as if he didn't even hear what Job had to say. He just picks up with the familiar theme that *God punishes the wicked*.

First, Bildad reminds Job that *the wicked will be caught* [18:5-10]. Next, Bildad reminds Job that *the wicked will perish* [16-18]. Now if we take Bildad's words about the wicked by themselves, he is quite right. The wicked will get caught in their wickedness and they will perish if they don't repent. They will not get away with their evil ways ultimately. But the problem with Bildad's perspective is that justice does not always catch up with the wicked *immediately* in this lifetime. Furthermore, we know from chapters 1-2 that Job is not one of the wicked. And even if he were, notice that Bildad's lecture does not contain a single word of hope. Not even a call to repent of the unknown sin he assumes Job has committed.

So, for Job who is clinging to the edge of the cliff by his fingertips, this is like stomping on his fingers. It's interesting to note that Bildad has only one

² David Allen, "Exalting Jesus in Job (Christ-centered Exposition), pg. 97.

³ Daniel Estes, "Job" (Teach the Text Commentary series), pg. 103.

passing mention of God in all of chapter 18 (the very last word—vs. 21). Bildad is focused on propositions and principles but has lost sight of the God who stands behind them.

Job responds in 19:2 by saying, “How long will you torment me and break me in pieces with words?” The sense here is that Job’s friends are using their words like clubs to beat him up. Job insists that the net he is caught in is not the net of the wicked, not the net of his own sin, but God’s net. From what Job can see, God is against him. [19:6-11] Is Job right or wrong? Is God truly against him? Remember, Job cannot see the malicious hand of Satan in this. And yet God is sovereign over Satan, allowing the assault, yet for a good purpose—to test and prove Job’s faith. So Job is right in the sense that his suffering doesn’t come apart from the hand of God, yet he wrongly perceives that God is against him. The test is being allowed because God is actually for him! ***Beware of assuming God is against you because life is painful. Your pain may actually be evidence that God is for you—like a surgeon who inflicts pain for the purpose of healing.***

To make matters worse for Job, he not only feels alienated from God but is also experiencing painful isolation and abandonment from people. [19:13-19] Job is so desperate for support, that he pleads with his pathetic friends to have mercy on him. [21-22a] Job is saying, can’t you have mercy on me knowing that no man—but God alone—can lift this suffering.

What do you think? Is Job’s hope gone? If Job’s fingers were clinging to the cliff by four inches before, he may only be holding on by 3 inches now, but what he says next indicates that he is clinging to hope. [19:23-27] Job is wishing his testimony of innocence could be engraved in rock so that it would remain until a time after his death when God, his Redeemer, would vindicate him. Now there is some debate whether Job actually expected some kind of rescue after his death. Keep in mind that Job did not have a concept of resurrection then as we do today, because he had limited revelation. But let me remind you that what is recorded here is not only Job’s words but also inspired by the Holy Spirit. It was not uncommon for

the Old Testament saints to occasionally speak better than they knew! For example, David’s words in Psalm 22 not only expressed the struggle of his own heart, but also spoke prophetically of Messiah in a way that he could not have known. Yet under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David spoke better than he knew.

Job is clinging to a singular hope, that though God seems to be against him, He *must* execute his justice at some point in the future to vindicate his righteous servant. And today, when we suffer, we know that Christ is a Redeemer who will raise us from the dead. So that even if justice is not issued in our lifetime, it will come and therefore we are never without hope.

3. ***Fighting for hope*** (Job 20-21)

Zophar (who always goes too far) is not inspired by Job’s hope in a Redeemer, he’s insulted [20:3a]. And so he continues to lecture Job about how suffering is the fate of the wicked. Job has just pleaded for mercy from his friends and Zophar’s response is a concentrated dose of hellfire and brimstone preaching. Zophar’s message has 3 points:

- *The wicked will perish forever*⁴ [20:4-7]
- *The wicked will experience God’s wrath*⁵ [20:12-15] In other words, the sweet taste of evil becomes a poison that he will vomit up. The sin he loves will become his death.
- *The wicked will be destroyed*.⁶ Here Zophar, like his friends, describes the fate of the wicked with language that parallels Job’s suffering to indirectly accuse Job of being wicked. [20:23b-29]

Now if all of this “preaching” and debate is beginning to sound redundant, it’s because it is—that’s the way real arguments go. Conflict usually erodes to hashing the same things over and over again, but with harsher tones from hardened hearts.

Again, notice that Zophar has abandoned any sense of hope for Job. Even any hope that Job might repent of some possible sin in his life. All three friends have resorted to an exclusive message of condemnation for Job.

⁴ David Allen, *Exalting Jesus in Job* (Christ-centered Exposition), pg. 109.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

From their perspective, all Job can expect is utter judgment because their theology is black and white, a law of retribution with no room for God to be gracious to sinners.

Don't overlook our own tendency to come to people with the law rather than the gospel of grace. When you have a disagreement with a friend, when you have an argument with your spouse, when you correct or discipline a child, do you only confront them with the law and the consequences they deserve? Or do you come with a gospel invitation of hope, reminding them that the very actions and attitudes you are addressing are the reason Jesus came to purchase our forgiveness and set us free from the bondage of our sin, so that we can grow and change to be like Jesus and share in His joy? Don't just bring the law. Bring the gospel of hope!

Job is unwilling to receive from his friends what he calls "empty nothings" and "falsehood" (21:34). Remember that although his friends have said may right things in principle, they have misapplied them to Job. **A truth misused is a truth abused.** A truth misapplied results in falsehood.

Instead of caving to his friends' abusive condemnation, Job begins to fight for hope. How does he fight? He begins reasoning in his mind. He begins arguing for a truer reality of what is happening in the world. His friends have declared that the wicked will suffer judgment in this lifetime, but Job's rebuttal is that life is not that cut and dried. In fact, the wicked often prosper in this world which means that there is more to the story than the simplistic retribution theology by which they have judged Job.

Chapter 21 begins with Job pleading with his friends to listen to him. And then he begins his argument in vs. 7... [21:7-16a] Job then goes on to say that people don't always get what they deserve in this life. So *you can't just judge a person's character on the basis of how well their life is going.* [23-26] The whole of Job's argument in chapter 21 is that yes, the wicked will ultimately face God's wrath for their sins, but sometimes they escape judgment in this life.⁷ The wicked don't always suffer and the righteous don't always prosper.

By arguing for a more accurate understanding of what is true, Job is fighting for hope. He's not just lamenting in chapter 21. He's attempting to renew his mind with a fuller understanding of life in this world where a just God reigns supremely so that there must be justice in the end even though some seem to escape justice in this lifetime. Job doesn't have it all figured out yet, but he has engaged his mind in the struggle rather than giving up hope.

This is how we too fight for hope. We do the hard work of renewing our minds with truth. Seeing a reality beyond our present circumstances that is defined by who God is and what He has promised.

So, what should we take away from our study of Job today?

First, we should not dismiss the true and horrific fate of the wicked, simply because Job's friends misapplied this truth. ***The wicked (those who reject God) will not escape ultimate and final judgment if they do not repent of their sinful rebellion against God and turn to Him for mercy.*** Christopher Ash made this sobering but true statement: "*For the unbeliever, every suffering is a foretaste of final judgment and a warning of the horrors of hell to which they are headed if they don't repent.*"⁸ Retribution theology is true in the end for those who reject God. They will reap what they sow. Disregard, rebellion, and rejection of God will result in eternal judgment—being cut off from the God of life and blessing. Stop trying to live a double life, hoping you can have just enough religion to avoid hell while loving your sin. Trust in Christ who died to save you from your sin-loving heart.

Second, ***We must cling to the enduring hope of Christ, our Redeemer, that Job's hope foreshadowed.*** You may say, "but Ty, aren't you taking Job 19 out of context since Job could not have understood how Christ would be our Redeemer?" No, actually I'm putting Job in its proper context of the entire Bible. The story of the Exodus, the book of Ruth, along with Job and other OT accounts foreshadow the ultimate Redemption that would come in the person of Christ. Because Christ died to redeem us and save us from the condemnation of our sin, our trust in Him means that even death cannot threaten our hope. No matter what suffering we go through on this earth,

⁷ David Allen, *Exalting Jesus in Job* (Christ-centered Exposition), pg. 111-112.

⁸ Christopher Ash, *Job* (Teaching the Text Commentary Series), pg. 114.

no matter what evil is committed against us, we know that justice, vindication, and salvation will be our final destination because our Redeemer lives and one day He will stand again on this earth. Even in the face of death, *despair is dead* because Christ has risen from the dead and will raise up all those who trust in Him.

Finally, **We must not withhold hope from those whose suffering has embittered their soul, because hope in God defies all hopelessness.**

Beloved, hold out the hope of the gospel, not just the law! Hope is not a prisoner of circumstance. Hope the open gate out of the prison, unlocked by faith in Jesus who reigns supremely over all. Hope is always in season for those who trust in God, even when they can't understand His ways.