



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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Till We Have Faces

Job 4:1-14:22

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We've watched as Job's friends arrived to comfort him, but found the scene—poor Job, afflicted and sitting in the town garbage dump—so horrible that all they could do was sit in silence. Even though they acted as if they were at Job's funeral, that may have been their wisest move. They were at a loss for words and they knew it. So for seven days and nights they sat with Job until *he* finally spoke. And when he spoke it was to lament and to curse the day on which he was born. Job's broken the ice and now his friends speak. And their conversation or dialogue—or maybe we should just call it an argument—is arranged in three cycles that take up the first half of the book.

This is the rhetorical strategy of the book. Each series or round of dialogue between Job and his friends addresses a specific philosophical point. The four friends discuss and argue their way around that point, ultimately reaching some kind of resolution that then leads into the next series or round of dialogue. So let's jump into this first round. It runs from Chapter 4 through Chapter 14—yes, *ten* chapters, and we'll run all the way through this morning so be ready to turn some pages.

Eliphaz speaks first. He starts out with words of encouragement, reminding Job of his wisdom in 4:3-4:

**Behold, you have instructed many,
and you have strengthened the weak
hands.**

**Your words have upheld him who was
stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble
knees.**

But Job's forgotten his own wisdom and Eliphaz encourages him to remember:

**But now it has come to you, and you are
impatient;
it touches you, and you are dismayed.
Is not your fear of God your confidence,**

**and the integrity of your ways your
hope? (Job 4:5-6)**

And so Eliphaz reminds Job of what we called the Retribution Principle. This is how they all—including Job—assume God works. God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. He says in 4:7:

**“Remember: who that was innocent
ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?”**

Remember the triangle I mentioned a couple of weeks ago—the triangle that we can use to help understand what these four are arguing. At one point of the triangle is God's justice, at another is Job's righteousness, and at the third is the Retribution Principle, this assumption that God punishes the wicked and blesses the righteous. The problem is that Job's affliction puts these in tension. Either Job isn't really righteous or God isn't really just or the Retribution Principle doesn't adequately describe the way God does things. So already we see that Eliphaz is affirming the Retribution Principle. He also affirms the justice of God. So I think you can see where he's going to say the problem is. It's Job's righteousness. Job isn't really righteous after all. Now, Eliphaz does two things to soften the blow and to hopefully defect the anger he knows is going to come back from Job. First, he presents what he tells Job as something that came to him in a vision. In verses 12-16 he describes an eerie scene in the night that set his hair on end. A voice spoke to him. Now he passes those words to Job. Look at 4:17-19:

**“Can mortal man be in the right before
God?**

**Can a man be pure before his Maker?
Even in his servants he puts no trust,
and his angels he charges with error;
how much more those who dwell in
houses of clay...”**

Eliphaz says, “Job, God told me to tell you that you're not as righteous as you claim.” It's hard to say why Eliphaz would claim to have heard from God. It may be that he knows Job won't like hearing this, so he buffers himself from Job's anger. “Don't shoot the messenger,” and all of that. Or maybe he's making the claim to add authority to his words. But Eliphaz doesn't seem like the dishonest type. I think he actually does believe God gave him these words. But believing God has given you a vision doesn't make it so.

God will eventually defend Job's righteousness and expose Eliphaz's nonsense. Eliphaz does this and there are a lot of Christians who do it, too—and I doubt that they're dishonest. Most are well-meaning and really think that God had spoken to them when he hasn't. This should be a warning to anyone who would presume to speak for God. If you've got something to say, never claim God gave it to you unless it came from the pages of Scripture.

Even then, there's a second warning here. Eliphaz also softens the blow to Job by noting that no mortal is truly righteous. “Don't feel so bad, Job, because we're all in the same boat.” Except that they're not. Eliphaz and Bildad and Zophar aren't sitting on the ash-heap having lost everything. Eliphaz is technically correct. St. Paul says it himself, more or less quoting Ecclesiastes, “None is righteous, no not one” (Romans 3:10). Like a lot of Christians offering advice, Eliphaz grabs onto a biblical truth as if it were a nail, and with a single massive blow from the hammer, drives it home. Now, if Job's righteousness were the problem, great. Problem solved. But it's not. And rather than healing his friend, Eliphaz hurts him deeply. He says in 5:17-18:

**“Behold, blessed is the one whom God
reproves;**

**therefore despise not the discipline of
the Almighty.**

**For he wounds, but he binds up;
he shatters, but his hands heal.**

“Just repent Job. Admit your sin and God will heal your wounds and restore what he has taken from you. ‘Hear, and know it for your good’ (5:27),” he says. But here's the thing: If Job took the advice of Eliphaz, if he were to give up his claims to righteousness that he knows is right, and made a false show of humility before God just to get his stuff back, he'd prove the Adversary right. Remember, the Adversary has challenged God's way of doing things. He's said that if God rewards the righteous, people will be righteous for selfish reasons. And that's just what Job would be doing if he caved to Eliphaz's pressure.

Notice that everything that Job and his friends say is right. All of these points in their arguments are good and valid theological points. We can find all of this stuff somewhere in the Bible. And yet they all end up being wrong. Because

they're missing one simple, but profound truth, because they're camping out on the justice of God as key rather than the wisdom of God, they take all these truths and put them together to create one big error.

Now, in 6:10 Job angrily responds to Eliphaz:

**This would be my comfort;
I would even exult in pain unsparing,
for I have not [hid behind holy words].**

Job is utterly miserable, he hopes for death, and he finds his consolation in a refusal to hide behind the sugar-coated reality of his friends. How can a false admission of guilt on his part make anything better when he's not being punished for his sin? No, that would only make things worse, because then he'd have lost his integrity too. So he angrily rips into Eliphaz and defends his righteousness. In verse 29 he puts it out there plainly, saying, "My vindication is at stake." He demands Eliphaz take back his words, then he cries out for death some more. Finally, in 7:7-21 Job cries out to God:

**What is man, that you make so much of him,
and that you set your heart on him...**
(7:17)

The Psalmist uses a similar phrase in Psalm 8, where it gives comfort. God watches over us. But here Job is accusing the Lord of being overly attentive and finicky to the point of harassing the righteous. Job wishes God would either leave him alone or tell him what petty infraction he's guilty of so that he can get it over with. Job feels as though he's been through a trial and pronounced guilty without ever having had the chance to defend himself.

In Chapter 8 Bildad confronts Job. And that's really what it is. He doesn't like what Job has said. Look at verses 2-3:

**"How long will you say these things,
and the words of your mouth be a great wind?
Does God pervert justice?"**

Or does the Almighty pervert the right?

"You're a windbag, Job, speaking nothings!" Bildad's not stupid. He knows full well where this is going. If Job is going to insist on his own righteousness—and since they all know that the Retribution Principle is how God works, no one's questioning that—then the implication is that God himself is unjust. Bildad sees that that's what Job is saying, if not in so many words.

So Bildad, like Zophar, urges Job to repent of his sins in 5-7:

**If you will seek God
and plead with the Almighty for mercy,
if you are pure and upright,
surely then he will rouse himself for you
and restore your rightful habitation.
And though your beginning was small,
your latter days will be very great.**

Repentance is the route to restoration. In verses 11 and 12 Bildad asks whether papyrus can grow where there is no water. Of course not. Without water the reeds wither and die and he says in 13:

**Such are the paths of all who forget God;
the hope of the godless shall perish.**

So he's accusing Job of having forgotten God—of having strayed from the path of righteousness. And, of course, this isn't helping.

Job already knows all this, but it doesn't answer the question. What he really wants is to bring God into the courtroom as defendant, to bring a charge of injustice against him. But Job knows that will never happen. Look at 9:2 and following:

**"Truly I know that it is so:
But how can a man be in the right before God?
If one wished to contend with him,
one could not answer him once in a thousand times...."**

How can one bring a charge, says Job, against the one who overturns mountain in his anger (9:5), who shakes the earth (9:6), who commands the sun and the stars (9:7), who alone stretched out the heavens (9:8).

No, says, Job, it's hopeless in verses 13-20:

**"God will not turn back his anger;
beneath him bowed the helpers of Rahab.
How then can I answer him,
choosing my words with him?
Though I am in the right, I cannot answer him;
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.
If I summoned him and he answered me,
I would not believe that he was listening to my voice.
For he crushes me with a tempest
and multiplies my wounds without cause;
he will not let me get my breath,
but fills me with bitterness.
If it is a contest of strength, behold, he is mighty!
If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?
Though I am in the right, my own mouth would condemn me;
though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.**

Even if God is in the wrong, I have no chance in court against him! And so Job is hopeless. You can hear him getting worked up as he says these things. His hopelessness mounts and finally out comes the accusation. It's been there all along. Job's been beating around the bush, afraid to say it, but now it comes out in verses 22-24:

**'He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.'
When disaster brings sudden death,
he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.
The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;
he covers the faces of its judges—
if it is not he, who then is it?**

There, he's said it: God is unjust. It's the only conclusion Job can draw. He knows that he is righteous. He knows that justice requires that the wicked be punished and the righteous rewarded, ergo God is unjust. He has afflicted a righteous man. Job goes on to call for an arbitrator. He wants his day in court. He wants God to take responsibility for this injustice. And then he remembers that it's pointless and Chapter 10 is another lament. Job pleads for death.

¹ A better rendering of כְּחֵדָּתִי אֶמְרֵי קְדוֹשׁ than the ESV's "denied words of the Holy One".

As far as his friends are concerned, Job is just digging himself further into a pit. Zophar is sitting there fuming as Job speaks and now he has his chance to respond. You can hear the anger in his voice. Job's speaking blasphemies. Look at Chapter 11:

**“Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
and a man full of talk be judged right?
Should your babble silence men,
and when you mock, shall no one shame you?
For you say, ‘My doctrine is pure,
and I am clean in God’s eyes.’
But oh, that God would speak
and open his lips to you,
and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!
For he is manifold in understanding.
Know then that God exacts of you less
than your guilt deserves. (11:2-6)**

Ouch. Great words from a friend, eh? “Stop your babbling, Job. Stop being such a goody-two-shoes. If God did speak as you demand, you’d finally understand what real wisdom is and find out that God hasn’t afflicted you half as much as you deserve!” And Zophar goes on, like Eliphaz and Bildad, to urge Job to admit his guilt and to repent. If he will only do that, all will be well again. In verses 16 and 17 he says:

**You will forget your misery;
you will remember it as waters that
have passed away.
And your life will be brighter than the
noonday;
its darkness will be like the morning.**

Eliphaz beat around the bush about Job’s sin, but Zophar just comes out and says it in verse 14: “Put away the iniquity that is in your hand, Job!”

Poor Job. He’s miserable enough already. He thought it was bad when his friends sat for seven days and nights and said nothing, but now they speak and make it even worse. And he really bites back in Chapter 12. Look at verses 2-4:

**“No doubt you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you.
But I have understanding as well as
you;
I am not inferior to you.**

**Who does not know such things as
these?
I am a laughingstock to my friends;
I, who called to God and he answered
me,
a just and blameless man, am a
laughingstock. (12:2-4)**

At this point Job’s thinking starts to shift. He’s ticked-off with his friends and as much as he’s angry with God for his affliction, the worthlessness of his friends’ advice drives him back to God. In 12:13 he affirms:

**“With God are wisdom and might;
He has counsel and understanding.**

Job waxes eloquent about the might and power, the strength and wisdom and the sovereignty of God. He leads away the false councilors, he makes fools of false judges, he overthrows the mighty, he pours contempt on princes. Suddenly Job’s hopelessness at the prospect of ever bringing his case before God, let alone winning it is gone. In Chapter 13 Job now looks for hope in God’s court again. In verse 3 he says:

**But I would speak to the Almighty,
and I desire to argue my case with
God.**

But it’s not just his complaint against God for his injustice. Now Job’s talking about dragging his three friends into court with him, confident that God will vindicate him and rebuke the three of them:

**As for you, you whitewash with lies;
worthless physicians are you all....
(13:4)**

**Will it be well with you when [God]
searches you out?**

**Or can you deceive him, as one
deceives a man?**

**He will surely rebuke you
if in secret you show partiality.
Will not his majesty terrify you,
and the dread of him fall upon you?
Your maxims are proverbs of ashes;
your defenses are defenses of clay.
(13:9-12)**

Job sort of gets his confidence and his hope back. In verse 13 he says:

**“Let me have silence, and I will speak,
and let come on me what may.**

In verse 15 he speaks one of the best-known verses from the book:

**Though he slay me, I will hope in him;
yet I will argue my ways to his face.
This will be my salvation,
That the godless shall not come before
him. (13:15-16)**

Before Job was despairing of making a case at all, but now he pleads with God, “withdraw your hand from me” and let me speak, give me a chance to prepare my case. His friends keep telling him that if he will only admit that he isn’t as righteous as he claims, God will restore him. But in Chapter 14 Job envisions himself being restored to God’s friendship, having his righteousness vindicated. Look at 14:13-17:

**Oh that you would hide me in Sheol,
that you would conceal me until your
wrath be past,
that you would appoint me a set time,
and remember me!
If a man dies, shall he live again?
All the days of my service I would
wait,
till my renewal should come.
You would call, and I would answer
you;
you would long for the work of your
hands.
For then you would number my steps;
you would not keep watch over my sin;
my transgression would be sealed up in
a bag,
and you would cover over my iniquity.**

For just a moment there’s a glimmer of hope in Job. I can imagine him looking up to heaven hopefully. But then that gross potsherd in his hand, the one he’s been using to scap the pus from his sores, brings him back to reality. He remembers his lost wealth and his dead children and the hope is gone in verses 18-19:

**“But the mountain falls and crumbles
away,
and the rock is removed from its place;
the waters wear away the stones;
the torrents wash away the soil of the
earth;
so you destroy the hope of man.**

And thus ends the first cycle of speeches in Job. What was the point of all that? Well, notice: Job’s friends are consistently and repeatedly urging him to give up his

claim to righteousness, to admit that he has no integrity, and that if he will humble himself and repent, God will restore him. For Job's friends it's all about the *benefits* of friendship with God. And now we see that the Adversary's challenge to the Lord isn't finished. We might have thought that God won the challenge when Job refused to curse him for his affliction, but the test goes on. Now Job's friends play devil's advocates. They don't urge him to curse God and die, but they urge him to make it all about the benefits, all about the stuff. They urge him to do whatever it takes to get it all back. And Job refuses. His integrity is more important than stuff. Even if it means accusing God of injustice, Job will not compromise his own righteousness. Now, that's put him in a difficult spot. For a moment we see a glimmer of hope return to Job, but by the end of the cycle it's gone. Job has no hope of ever having his day in court. He will never be vindicated. But he still holds fast to his integrity. Job truly does value righteousness for righteousness' sake.

And, Brothers and Sisters, that's the point. I think we too often miss the point of the book of Job. We read Job and we think that the purpose of the book is to hold up Job as an example of how a godly person responds to tragedy and suffering. Job refused to curse God. Job refused to sin. We quote some of those well-known words of Job: "Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him." Nevermind that most of those verses we take to be expressions of deep trust in God come from some of the most difficult Hebrew of the book and were poorly translated in the King James. We gloss over Job's weaknesses. We use translation to cover up his theological errors. And that's a mistake. We need to allow Job his faults and his weaknesses. As grand as Job's view of God is, it's still deficient. But that's okay. Well, it's not, but it does mean that Job is human, just like the rest of us. His knowledge of God is imperfect, just like ours—although perhaps in different ways. You see, our problem is often that we make the book of Job all about Job. Considering the title, that's a natural mistake. But at the end of the day, the book is about God, not Job. Job's not the one on trial. God is the one on trial, his policies being put to the test. Job is his star witness, and for all his flaws, Job does spectacularly well, not because his theology is perfect, not

because he always knows the right thing to say, not because he never questions God, but because he values righteousness for righteousness' sake, because he values friendship with God for the sake of God himself.

And that's precisely why Job is so frustrated and discouraged. It's precisely why he cries out to God, demanding a hearing. And hopefully it's the same reason we cry out to God in frustrating in the midst of our pain and suffering. And as I said last week, it often feels like we're crying out to a brick wall or as if our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling—that no one is listening. And it may just be that, as he was with Job, God is giving us the opportunity to hear ourselves. This was the basis for what I think is C. S. Lewis' finest novel, *Till We Have Faces*. Not all that different from Job, the wronged and grieving queen, the main character of the story, rages at the gods. And then she hears a voice and she stops her raging. And as she listens, she realizes that it's her own voice coming back to her—bouncing off the ceiling if you will—and it's only then that she realizes what idiotic babble she's been screaming. And yet the gods, in their silence, had done the one thing necessary. They'd given her the opportunity to dig those words out of her soul and then to hear her own foolishness. And the light goes on and she speaks the famous line that gave the book its title, "How can they meet us face to face till we have faces." Brothers and Sisters, that's often just it. Like Job, we want the God we know and love and who has shown us so much grace and good to come and give us an answer in the midst of our trials, our pain, our suffering, our tragedy—in those times when it seems like he's retreated to the other side of the wall and bolted the door. Like Job we cry out and may even rage at the silence and it may just be that God is giving us the opportunity to hear ourselves, to realise our error, to know our smallness, to ponder the limited nature of our knowing—giving us the opportunity to find our face that we might then meet him face to face.

Let's pray: Father, thank you for these difficult words from Job and his friends. Help us to wrestle with them and to understand. I pray that having the benefit of the cross of Jesus before us, that we would better grasp the problem of

suffering. But most of all, remind us always of your grace that we might cling to you always, no matter what we face, no matter our fears, no matter our questions, that we might cling to you knowing that you are our life. We ask this through Jesus our Saviour and Lord. Amen.