
Consoling the Suffering

SCOTT HOEZEE

A group of friends were playing touch football. At one point, the person in whose back yard the game was being played was accused of committing a foul. He responded: You cannot accuse me of doing something wrong; and do you know why? Because this is my football, that's why. Well, sometimes we make up our own rules and make everyone play along. In the book of Job, some of Job's friends do this regarding God and suffering. Today on *Groundwork*, we will look at how and why they did this. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now program number three in our five-part series on the book of Job. In the first program, we, of course, saw how Job's life got upended into a series of terrible tragedies that left him destitute; but we also saw that Job refused to give up on God, even though Job willingly admitted he was miserable; he even wished he had never been born, but he still did not want to give up on God.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, he goes on trusting God. He maintains his integrity...that is a great phrase from the book of Job...the fact that his faith is real, and despite what has happened to him, he is not going to, as his wife urges him, curse God or dismiss God; and the friends come to comfort him...so-called comforters...so-called friends...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So-called friends, yes.

DAVE BAST

Right; and we have listened to what they have said, and basically their argument is pretty simple: God blesses those who are good; God punishes those who are evil. It seems like God is punishing you; therefore, you must be evil, or at least you have done something evil. So, Job, you better figure out what it is, repent of it, and try to get back in good with God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but Job didn't buy it. I mean, he does not claim anywhere that he is completely without sin, but to lose your livelihood, your ten children, your health...everything, Job is really quite convinced whatever sins he may be guilty of in life, it did not warrant this, if this is a punishment, as the friends are suggesting. So, Job doesn't buy what particularly the first three friends were selling to him...he just didn't buy it; and the friends will go on to...and a fourth friend who shows up, named Elihu...they are going to have a few more things to say, and we are going to dig into that a little bit more in this program; but before we do that, we just want to note again that as we look at Job...and we said this, I think, in both the previous two programs, Dave...we know this is not some academic exercise. This is real life. Everybody who has ever read Job...studied Job...anybody listening to these programs...a lot of us know Job's pain, lament, and disorientation from the

inside, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We too suffer.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and you know, one of the things we have pointed out, too; there are elements in this story that we probably should not push, literally. So, there is a scene where Satan strolls into heaven and comes up to God, and they kind of have this wager over Job. You know, those details may be more like a parable than the real description of heavenly reality; but the point is, there is something there that rings true to us in our lives. There is something that we need to take away, and that is the fact that it is more complicated than just God did this to me. There are other factors at play; and these are things we feel deeply when pain and suffering strike us. So, this is far from a theoretical story.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it touches us. It also, of course, touches people we know; and so, in addition to a lot of us being able to identify with Job...a lot of us are also able to identify with Job's friends. We are often the people who need to say something to the Job-like people who we know in our families and in our lives.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so this goes on and on, actually; what these friends try to say goes on and on...actually, the whole middle section, from about Job 4 to Job 37 is pretty...almost repetitive. These friends keep going around and around the same mulberry bush, over and over...Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar...they just kind of keep doubling down on their arguments. In the previous program, we really focused on the idea that if you suffer you were bad because only bad people suffer; so Job, fess up. Tell God what you did wrong; but there is another thing they also say...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Kind of the flipside of that; they try to convince Job that it is always better to be righteous because wicked people are *always* miserable.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, it is interesting, as you were saying that, Scott; we all, I think, feel this strong temptation to explain people's lives to them, and explain the experiences that they are going through. If there is one thing Job ought to teach us is, beware of the temptation to explain...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Don't go there; and then, we also, if we are Christians, feel a strong sense to defend God; that, you know, God isn't bad; God does not do bad things; God is always good; and surely he is, but one of the things that leads us to, as it does with the friends, is the idea that if you are wicked...if you are a sinner...you really cannot be happy. You are never happy because God will punish you, and he will certainly do that in the end;

but meanwhile, even along the way, deep down inside...you may be laughing on the outside, but you are really tormented on the inside.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, here is this classic statement. This comes up multiple times in the mid-section of Job, but here is from Job 15. This is from Job's friend Eliphaz: ²⁰All his day, the wicked man suffers torment; the ruthless man through all the years stored up for him; ²¹terrifying sounds fill his ears. When all seems well, marauders attack him. ²²He despairs of escaping the realm of darkness. He is marked for the sword. ²³He wanders about for food like a vulture. He knows the day of darkness is at hand. ²⁴Distress and anguish fill him with terror; troubles overwhelm him like a king poised to attack, ²⁵because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty, ²⁶defiantly charging him with a thick, strong shield.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, basically what he is saying is atheists are always unhappy...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Deep down. They may look happy, but they are not; they are miserable; and that is sometimes an argument we use ourselves, don't we, as Christians?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, yes; sometimes parents...you know, if you are a kid growing up and your parents forbid you to see a certain movie, or they won't let you go to a certain party because they are afraid there is going to be some drinking going on...and sometimes kids are unhappy with that: Oh, why can't I go? My friends all have fun! And sometimes parents will also say: Well, they might seem like they are having fun, but they are really not...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you as a kid usually want to say: Yeah, it really does seem like they are having fun. In fact, I think they are. And so, the friends here are trying to say: You can be wicked if you want, but that is nothing but misery. You do not even have enough to eat most days; and that just does not square with what usually comes in through your eyeballs if you look at real life.

DAVE BAST

And Job slaps them right down, too. He says: No they are not; that is not true. Listen, here is another passage from Job 21: ⁷Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? ⁸They see their children established around them; their offspring before their eyes. ⁹Their homes are safe and free from fear. The rod of God is not on them. ¹⁰Their bulls never fail to breed; their cows calve and do not miscarry. ¹¹They send forth their children as a flock; their little ones dance about. ¹²They sing to the music of timbrel and lyre. They make merry to the sound of the pipe. ¹³They spend their years in prosperity, and go down to the grave in peace.

And that is true, too, Job says. You know, look at the world!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; wake up and smell the coffee, Job is saying. I can give you a list as long as my scabby arm of all the really rotten scoundrels in this world who are doing just well. It reminds me of the original Godfather movie, where this violent gangster named Don Corleone, who spent his life building an empire on murder and ordering murder, and he dies peaceably, playing with his grandkids in the midst of his beautiful tomato vines

in his garden; he dies old and full of years; and he was a wicked man! Job says that happens all the time, my friends. Do not tell me the wicked never prosper...they do.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and again, I think we need to face reality here. The world is not as neatly arranged as maybe sometimes our theological arguments would suggest; and every time we see another example of maybe a celebrity suicide or something like that, we tend to say as believers: See, you know, they are miserable all the time...they are always...and the truth is, most unbelievers are not miserable. Most of them...many of them live happily, you know, during their course in the world. They are not afraid of death. They just think it is the natural end; and that is kind of how they go about their business. So, Job says to his friends...finally, he kind of puts it to them: How can you console me with your nonsense? Nothing is left of your answers but falsehood...that is Job 21:34.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is; and actually, eventually the three main friends fall silent; and as we will see in just a moment, starting in Chapter 32, a fourth person who has shown up, Elihu, has some things to say; and we will ponder what he contributes to the conversation in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we have had now about twenty-eight chapters in this book of Job, where there are arguments going on with Job and his three friends; that is Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar; and so, basically from Job 4 through 32, it is those friends; but now, in Chapter 32, we read this:

¹So, these three men stopped answering Job because he was righteous in his own eyes. ²But Elihu, son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. ³He was also angry at the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him. ⁴Now Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he, ⁵but when he saw that the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, all of a sudden, this fourth guy shows up, and apparently he has been there all along. We talk about the *three* friends of Job, and they are the ones who do most of the talking; but there is this young guy, Elihu, as well; and he has been sitting respectfully in the background; but when he gets to this point, Elihu suddenly rises up in sort of righteous indignation and says... It is kind of like the first three guys in the batting order have all struck out...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

And now it is his turn in the next inning to come up to bat, and he is going to show them how to handle this pitcher, Job, you know, with his fastball and his curveball answers; and so, Elihu launches in...

¹⁰Listen to me, you men of understanding: (this is more from Job 34) Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong. ¹¹He repays everyone for what they have done. He brings on them what their conduct deserves. ¹²It is unthinkable that God would do wrong; that the Almighty would pervert justice. ¹³Who appointed him over the earth? Who put him in charge of the whole world? ¹⁴If it were his intention, and he withdrew his Spirit and breath, ¹⁵all humanity would perish together HH ; and mankind would return to the dust.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, this is all unthinkable, Elihu claims; and the truth is, what you just read there, Dave...I mean, he is saying some right things, and it actually has a little bit of preview of what God himself is going to say starting in Job 38, which we will look at in the final program of this series. God is God, and God does not do wrong; and Job never said God did wrong; Job just wants to know what is going on. Job thinks God does not do wrong either, but Job is suffering, and apparently unjustly; and so, Job just wants to figure it all out; but basically, what Elihu...along with the other friends...what Elihu does not notice is that he is not learning from God how justice may or may not go in the world; Elihu is imposing his own theology...his own structure...onto God; and again, as we have said in previous programs, the setup of the book of Job tells us readers there was more going on behind the scenes here than Job or any of his friends even know; but they do not seem to care about that. They have their theology; they have their orthodoxy; the world has to work this way, so it is going to work this way even if it contradicts common sense and what you can see with your own eyes.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. We said in an earlier program that most everything that Job's friends say to him is theologically correct...

Scott Hoezee: Yes.

DAVE BAST

It is orthodox...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is the way you *wish* the world would be.

DAVE BAST

Well, and it can be...in theory it can be echoed in other parts of the scripture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Yes, God is righteous, absolutely; but the problem is, they have this sense of righteousness, these friends of Job, and they are so firmly convinced of their orthodox truth that they begin to actually go after Job when he doesn't agree with them; and when he tries to say: Wait a minute. What is happening to me isn't right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; well, and here is more from Elihu in Job 34: ³⁵Job speaks without knowledge. His words lack insight. ³⁶Oh, that Job might be tested to the utmost for answering like a wicked man! ³⁷To his sin he adds rebellion. Scornfully he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God.

So, wow, Elihu, you are just beating up on Job pretty good. This is like visiting a person dying of cancer in the hospital, and before you leave the room you slug him in the jaw a couple times; nice guy! Job is down, and Elihu is kicking him.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is just terrible. You know, I think, Dave, what it gets at, and we all, I think, struggle with this temptation when we are trying to help, when we are trying to find something to say to somebody who is hurting, or asking hard questions: We end up saying more than we know, sometimes we try to say more than we could possibly know. The other thing is, we fall into the...we give in to the temptation that it is more

important that I be right than kind. I need to be correct, and if that hurts your feelings, too bad. It is more important to be orthodox than kind.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is what we see going on here, and that is a terrible sin to fall into because we do end up kicking people when they are down.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; well, you know, it makes me think of the famous phrase of the Apostle Paul. It comes in the book of Ephesians: Speak the truth in love; and it seems like a lot of people just hear the first part of that, and there is a certain mindset that often goes along with orthodoxy...with right teaching...with right doctrine...that wants to speak that truth, but the love part... I mean, you are dealing with another human being, and with an individual. We tend to lump things into groups, you know, and we tend to generalize; and that's another thing, I think, that strikes me about the speeches of these friends. They are all generalizations...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

They are all generalizations, but they are looking at a person...an individual...Job; and his case is his case. His story is unique. It does not fit into their generalizations, but they will not give up their big picture thinking and actually see the suffering brother in front of them, and speak in love to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think it is also instructive to notice how they argue. Job is looking at his life, and he is starting with himself, and trying to work his way back to understanding God. The friends are not really looking at Job. They are starting with God and how they are pretty sure everything has to work, and then they work backwards from there down to Job; and by the time they get to Job, they are not even seeing him anymore. It is just a matter of him fitting inside the box they have constructed that has to contain God, Job, and the answers to all questions. So, Job is starting from human misery and saying how does this square with God? The friends are starting with God and saying we are going to square you with him.

DAVE BAST

Right; and we will explain your misery to you. So, I wonder, though...and here is the question for all of us: What about us? We have talked about when we suffer, but what about when we try to comfort or encourage? Are we prone to make the same kinds of mistakes that the friends are? That is what we want to think about next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this middle program—third program in a series of five on the book of Job; and in this program and the previous one, Dave, we have been looking at the arguments of Job's friends. Three friends, primarily throughout most of the middle part of Job, but now a fourth person, Elihu, we have been thinking about on this program; and we have noted that their desire to be correct outpaced somewhere along the line their desire to be loving. They did not come to Job to kick him while he is down, but they ended up kicking him while he was down, because their arguments were not holding water with Job's real, on the ground situation, and that frustrated them. Sometimes you hear the phrase: People are more important than things; and you hear that sometimes when maybe somebody breaks Grandma's favorite china plate, and she just comes down on the family like a

ton of bricks, like that plate meant more than the feelings of her family. People are more important than things; and here in Job we could say: People are more important than your need to be correct all the time.

DAVE BAST

And we are not suggesting by any stretch of the imagination that truth does not matter or that orthodoxy is not important. We are both pretty orthodox people. I mean, we believe in the importance of doctrine and of doctrinal standards and Church catechisms and the authority of the Bible. The Bible is true. It is God's Word. So, that is granted. We agree with all that. We take that and try to live it in our lives, but what we are also saying is that people are important, and sometimes we can misapply the truth. I think we said this in an earlier program in this series. They were saying the right things, but at the wrong time and in the wrong way to the wrong person; and as a result, all of their true statements ended up being false.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and you know, another thing that happens, and I think we have all observed this in other people, Dave; you and I have seen it as pastors; we have probably been guilty of it ourselves; and that is, when you really are committed to the truth, and when you do believe as we do believe, that there is truth. We are not post-modern relativists, loosey-goosey...you know...what's true for you doesn't have to be true for me. Everybody has their own facts. No, we do not believe that as Christians. So, we want to be true; we want to be correct; we want to defend the truth; but unfortunately, sometimes that leads us to want to convey great confidence, and sort of an armor-plated truth that we possess; but often, right underneath all of that confidence is a lot of fear; and as the Apostle John wrote in one of his letters in the New Testament, perfect love casts out fear; but the obverse of that is, where there is a lot of fear, love can be...

DAVE BAST

Love gets cast out; yes, right. So, people are sometimes uptight; and Christians can be uptight in their eagerness to defend the truth; and this also calls for a little humility. We don't know what is going on in another person's life, let alone how God may choose to deal with that person, and what the meaning of the things that they experience might be. One of the things that always kind of gets my goat is when some preacher stands up and generalizes about a whole country, you know, like America or Canada, and says: Well, such and such a disaster happened because God is judging the nation for this and that particular sin; and I always want to say: How do you know? You are privy to the workings of the Almighty's mind? We don't know. We cannot draw these direct conclusions between God's justice or God's holiness or God's righteousness or God's mercy, you know, and things that happen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Don't you wonder, Dave, how things would have gone differently in the book of Job if the four friends, or any one of them, or all four of them had been willing to say: All right; we could be wrong here. Let's admit, in humility, we could be wrong. We are not saying we are, but we could be; and on that possibility, let's have a dialogue, Job. Indeed, let's do what you want to do. We will open our eyes, look at the facts, and probe this, because the Holy Spirit might be leading us to some new insight. We could be wrong. That is a very hard to say if underneath your desire to be confident is fear.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you just reminded me of a line from Oliver Cromwell, the English statesman, who once cried out to a group of his opponents: I appeal to you by the mercies of Christ, consider that ye might be mistaken.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

Could you possibly consider that I might be mistaken in this; so I am going to be a little humble in what I assert.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we will just review briefly something that we observed in the previous program, program two in this series, Dave, and that is that in the Bible, very often when people try to connect the dots and say this thing...what you were just saying, you know...about preachers: This bad thing happened because Canada has sinned—the whole nation has sinned, and therefore... When people do that in the Bible, they are almost always wrong. We looked at the man born blind...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In John 9: Hey, here is a guy in a bad situation, Jesus. Who sinned, him or his folks? And Jesus says: Neither. That is not what is going on here. Life does not work that way. A tower in Siloam had fallen on some people and killed a bunch of them. It was a recent event, and Jesus said: Do you think that the people who got killed are any more sinful than the people who escaped with their lives? No, it does not work that way. So, opening our minds to the possibilities that we do not know everything. In fact, a friend of mine...a colleague of mine at Calvin Seminary had her synodical interview for her job, and one of the questions was very short and her answer was just as short. The questioner said: What is the basic message of the book of Job? And without missing a beat, she said: God is God and you are not.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I am not either; right, absolutely. So, here is the point: Move toward the pain, as we said. Go when someone is hurting; go when they are suffering; sit with them; sit in silence, as Job's friends did at first. Be a presence there—be the presence of Christ—and be very hesitant to give answers or suggest reasons; but you can embody the love and grace of the Lord Jesus simply by your presence there with them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we listen to some more of Job's laments in Chapters 13 to 21, but also find out what he declares is the source of his continued hope at a time when all seems lost.

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