

Complaints and Courage
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Job 23:1-9,16-17

23 Then Job answered:

² “Today also my complaint is bitter;

his hand is heavy despite my groaning.

³ Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!

⁴ I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.

⁵ I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.

⁶ Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.

⁷ There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

⁸ “If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;

⁹ on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

¹⁶ God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;

¹⁷ If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!

Job = story, not fact

About theodicy = stimulating our minds and hearts by raising huge questions about God’s character and the meaning of human suffering

Last week the stage was set in this story with

God

The divine beings

The adversary/prosecutor role

It was just “a typical day in the divine oval office, and the topic of God’s ‘just’ operation of the cosmos was put on the table.”

- Is it really wise or just for God to reward the righteous? What if it corrupts their motives?”
- It raises the question of whether God should reward all good deeds and punish all bad ones, if God does at all?
- Is it possible that people could experience horrible pain and not deserve it?

- Can very selfish, awful people really succeed in God’s good world? If so, what does that tell me about the character and purposes of God?
- Can I draw conclusions about God’s character based off of my observations of the moral order of the universe?

Job = A man in the land of Uz. That man was honest, a person of absolute integrity; he feared God and avoided evil.

Job’s loss of family, servants, material things and health – he suffers for no reason.

Today, we have jumped ahead to chapter 23.

In the 21 chapters we’ve skipped (3-22),

- Job was rebuked by his wife – just curse God already and die!
- Job is visited by 3 “friends.”
 - Eliphaz the Tehanite
 - Bildad the Shuhite
 - Zophar the Na’amathite
 - They’re not really “friends” if you consider they spend all of their time arguing with Job, without really providing any comfort. In fact, Job calls them “miserable comforters” (16:3). So why are they there if they’re not Job’s friends?
 - Well, according to Maimonides, a 12th century Jewish Philosopher, in this story, these friends **represent** the BEST of ancient near-eastern thinking at that time. Remember that this story is proposing a truly difficult questions, therefore, the BEST **thinkers** are needed in this debate. One interpretation suggests:
 - Elphaz represents the Rabbinic tradition – addressing Job’s punishment for his sin
 - Bildad represents the MU-TAZ-ILITE perspective – Job punishment is actually a test in order to receive a greater reward from God
 - Zophar represents the ASH-A-RITE perspective – Job suffers because of God’s arbitrary will.¹
- Job and these “friends” discuss and argue back and forth, Job’s integrity, his suffering and his supposed “sins.” It’s much like a court-room scene with the prosecution and defense going back and forth presenting evidence to the jury in order to reach a verdict.
- They debate whether:
 - IS God Just?
 - Does God run the universe on the strict principle of justice?
 - How is job’s suffering to be explained?
- As they argue, there is a clear assumption / starting point from all of them
 - There is a correlation between human action and God’s justice
 - Wise and good people = success and reward by God.
 - Evil and stupid people = disaster and punishment by God.
 - God is good and created a moral universe the rewards accordingly.
 - It’s likely that we all begin with this clear assumption, as well. It feel right.
- JOB’S POSITION:
 - I’m innocent. My suffering isn’t divine justice. It must be something else. His position leads to two possibilities:

¹ <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/bible/book-of-job/eliphaz-bildad-zophar>

- God doesn't run the world according to justice OR...
- God IS NOT just
 - Job is righteous / this upsets him
- FRIEND'S POSITION:
 - Completely disagree with both of job's conclusions ---
 - God IS JUST
 - GOD DOES RUN THE WORLD according to justice
 - Therefore --- JOB "MUST HAVE" SINNED and this punishment is deserved
 - They CANNOT and WILL NOT see it any other way.

This goes back and forth numerous times with these arguments and then in chapter 22, the friends begin to conjure up sins that Job committed:

- you've taken payments from your family for no reason
- you've stripped the naked
- you've denied water to the thirsty and bread from the hungry
- you've rejected **widows and crushed orphans**
 - They tell him that he's jaded about his "righteousness" and a fool that simply won't accept the truth that he is in fact a sinner. ULTIMATELY – they conclude that **Job is simply a whiner and a complainer!**

That brings us to our scripture reading for today.

Remember – in chapter 1 and 2 of this story, **God says**, "There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (1:8).

If you're Job, you are beyond frustrated. These are your friends, why won't they believe you. To them it sounds like whining and complaining, but you're fighting for your life! Your sanity! They won't even allow you to **consider** the unlikely...

Job says,

No. I'm not letting up. I'm standing my ground. My complaint is legitimate! [to his "friends" – if you're right, then] God isn't being fair. Job gives up on these endless arguments (21 chapters) with his "friends" and decides that he'll have to take this up with God himself, directly. You are providing me no comfort, no answers, no hope – and I cannot allow that. I'm going to God.

This past week we continued our book study in chapter 2 of The Cross and the Lynching Tree. In this chapter, Cone focuses on Reinhold Niebuhr, theologian and ethicist. Many consider Niebuhr, the most influential theologian of the 20th Century.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. – Does this sound familiar? Niebuhr is credited with writing the serenity prayer – THAT's how influential Niebuhr was.

Neibuhr was the pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, MI from 1915 to 1928 and then became professor of Christian social ethics and theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1928 to 1960. There are those who say, “His work had the most important impact on social thought and public policy of any Christian thinker of our time”.... Many of his books “are still widely read in theology, history, social ethics, sociology and political philosophy” (32). Pastor Andi and I can attest to having been exposed to Neibuhr during our theological educations. He was particularly progressive in his perspectives for that era; a powerful white theologian, sensitive to the evils of racism and the sufferings of African Americans. Neibuhr used the cross as an important theological symbol in his writings and life and unlike many theologians of his time, instead of seeing the cross and the gospel message rooted in love, Niebuhr declared that the cross and the gospel message was based in justice.

What perfect timing to talk about Job’s cry for justice and fairness with Neibuhr – a progressive theologian, who’s gospel focus was that, “to live the ways of Jesus and taking up one’s cross meant that humanity must first focus on justice!?”

BUT What Cone discusses at length in the chapter is Neibuhr’s failures to deal with racial issues, effectively. He abhorred racial **prejudices**, but didn’t advocate for racial **justice**. For someone sensitive to the black suffering of his time and for which the cross of Christ was a particularly important theme in his thought, he failed to connect the cross and the problems between the races.

The failures that Cone points out include Niebuhr’s failure to integrate his own Detroit parish, Niebuhr’s call for moderation in the implementation of the Supreme Court’s decision to end segregation in public schools in 1954, Niebuhr’s failure to include the problem of black oppression in his book, The Irony of American History and his attitude that when it came to racial ‘justice,’ blacks just needed to be patient.

As we look at Cone’s critiques/complaints of Neibuhr, alongside the story of Job ...

* Cone asks how Neibuhr could miss such glaring racism and inequality that is right before him

* Job asks how his “friends” could miss such glaring mistreatment and inequality that is right before them

Cone answers the question, “Niebuhr had ‘eyes to see’ black suffering, but I believe he lacked ‘the heart to feel’ it as his own” (41). “Cone compares Niebuhr with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, fellow theologian who famously became involved at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Again, of the two theologians—Bonhoeffer and Niebuhr—one died on the cross and one did not. Cone insinuates that Niebuhr did not have the courage to live out his own words about the cross.”²

Reading Job – Discussing The Cross and the Lynching Tree ...

As Christians, what does the cross mean to us?

It’s a valid question and one for which we should know the answer, right? I mean, if we’re going to wear crosses as jewelry, claim the Christian faith and celebrate the crucified and resurrected Jesus, shouldn’t we examine the cross and its meaning in our lives and how it affects our living?

What does the cross mean to us?

And... do we have the courage to take up the cross and live it?

Can we be like Job, ready and eager to plead our case before God?

² <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/137>

Based on *how we live* “the cross,” are we in positions to go before God like Job and declare our innocence? -
Confident that if we were to plead our cases that God would be just with us?
Would we be prepared for such justice?

Perhaps Cone is a little too hard on Niebuhr. If we are going to be “just,” as we hope God is, we can’t overlook the complexities of Niebuhr’s life and the times in which he lived. And while he had his shortcomings, he also made significant advancements with his theories on Christian Realism. Cone acknowledges this saying, “I have never questioned Niebuhr’s greatness as a theologian, but instead admired his intellectual brilliance and social commitment. What I questioned was his limited perspective as a white man on the race crisis in America. His theology and ethics needed to be informed from critical reading and dialogue with radical black perspectives” (60).

As for Job and his “friends,” I think we can agree that Job’s “friends” were very hard on him. Where Cone questioned Niebuhr’s “limited perspective as a white man on the race crisis,” we can say that while Elphaz, Bildad and Zophar were quite intellectual and thorough in their evaluations, but they didn’t have all the answers. Their “support” of Job had a limited perspective, lacking empathy for Job and his suffering, a suffering that they did not experience and couldn’t truly understand. It is in the midst and also in the aftermath of such suffering, that perspectives are broadened, understanding deepened and hope strengthened.

Job is confident in his innocence and is prepared to plead his case before God. He’s actually a bit proud with a swagger...

- just show me where that God is...I’m looking for God, but God keeps hiding from me. God’s avoiding me because God knows just how innocent I am.

AND...Job is also fearful. It seems like he catches himself – the upright man that he is, he hears what he’s actually saying and realizes that while he’s right, if he’s going to go before God, he needs to remember to be humble as he does it.

- Am I prepared to go before God?
- Can I do this?

After last week’s reading in Job, we were reminded of hope; have hope even in the direst of circumstances and never lose faith despite the worst of suffering.

Today, we are reminded of courage;

- * being courageous means listening hard and deep;
- * considering the impossible;
- * putting yourself out there in order to experience what others do;
- * don’t just SEE, but try to FEEL.

As we engage in these debates of theodicy, listen to those who are suffering. Be courageous enough to empathize with them and imagine their suffering. And... don’t forget about God. God’s a part of all of this and we’ve yet to consider God’s role, thoughts and feelings. That’s where we’ll continue next week.

AMEN