

The Prosperity Gospel Offers No Comfort

Job 8:1–10:22

Studies in Job #4

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THIS week I was talking with the now “Rev.” Michael Spotts about his upcoming preaching series through Ecclesiastes and our current series through Job. He mentioned a book on the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and the author had this great illustration of Job. He said the story of Job is like a long desert road with no lights, no off ramps, and no rest stops for miles and miles.¹ That’s Job! It starts off great with his blessed life and his amazing response of “the Lord gives, the Lord takes, blessed be the name of the Lord” when he faces harsh testing. But then we soon find ourselves on the long road in the desert with his agony, his groans, his desire to curl up and die, all sprinkled with his friends’ not-so-comforting words. We began to see last Lord’s Day with Eliphaz that Job’s counselors tell him, “Suffering is God’s punishment for sin; the remedy is repentance.” Scholars call this “retribution theology.” We know it by the phrase, “what goes around, comes around.” The flip side of this theology is what we know as the prosperity gospel. Buckle up, brothers and sisters; we’re definitely not there yet.

¹ Adapted from Zach Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes, The Gospel According to the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2014). 5.

“Comforter” Bildad (8:1–22)

Let’s start with the words of “*comforter Bildad*” in chapter 8. If you were here last Sunday you’ll remember how Eliphaz eased his way into advising Job with some praise; but Bildad is blunt: **How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind? (8:2)** Have you ever been called a “windbag?” Have you ever been accused of being full of hot air? Some friend!

Bildad gets right to the point of *his counsel* in verses 3–7: **Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? (8:3)** Again, like Eliphaz, Bildad goes right to the truth that God is just. His justice is exact. Therefore he punishes sinners. And so Bildad, like Eliphaz, cuts close to the heart of Job with his unloving application of correct doctrine: **If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression (8:4)**. Don’t forget, Job’s friends are agents of the accuser. Job sees Bildad’s lips moving, but he’s hearing the voice of Satan! What’s the remedy? “But if you repent, Job...” **If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright**. But notice it’s not mere repentance. It’s an “if-then” kind of repentance. This is so classic of the prosperity gospel. They take a truth and twist it into a test.

Does God promise if we repent he will hear, answer, and restore us? Yes; but that's only half the truth. Restoration is not necessarily all the tangible blessings of life. But Bildad says this. "There's something waiting for you on the other side of your repentance, Job": **surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation (8:5-6)**. What's the promise? He'll restore you to prosperity. He says it another way: **And though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great (8:7)**. "You did well in life before, but with God there's even more." He's promising what Satan told God Job was really all about: the stuff!

So what's the proof Bildad offers for the truth of his counsel? He makes an *appeal to authority* in verses 8-10: **bygone ages and what the fathers have searched out** are put in contrast to us, who **are but of yesterday and know nothing**. So Bildad asks, **will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding?** (8:8-10) Why does Job need to listen to Bildad? In the words of Tevye in *The Fiddler on the Roof*: "Tradition!"

He then gives a series of *illustrations* of this principle of reciprocity or "what goes around, comes around," in verses 11-19: **Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh? No. Can reeds flourish where there is no water?** (8:11) Of course not. The result is that **while they are yet in flower**

and not cut down, they wither before any other plant (8:12) Then comes the payoff of the illustrations: **Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish** just like the papyrus reed without water. **His confidence is severed, and his trust is a spider's web.** How strong is that? Not at all! **He leans against his house, but it does not stand; he lays hold of it, but it does not endure (8:13–15).**

Then he *summarizes his counsel* in verses 20–22. Because he is just **God will not reject a blameless man, nor take the hand of evildoers (8:20).** And if Job repents God **will yet fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouting (8:21).** This is the counsel of the prosperity gospel. God keeps strict accounts. And when you sin he sends you a bill of debt. But if you confess your sin that is responsible for your suffering then you will set everything right again and God will bless you more than before. Back in 1547 a piece of paper was placed on the pulpit of San Pierre Cathedral in Geneva, which was where John Calvin preached. The note read: “No one will save you from destruction...Revenge will be had at last.”² I thank God you have not treated me with such reciprocity!

² Ronald Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation*, (), 82.

Uncomforted Job (9:1–10:22)

Just like with Eliphaz, *uncomforted Job* responds by basically saying, “Tell me something I don’t know!” **Truly I know that it is so: But how can a man be in the right before God?** (9:2) “I know God is just and that I’m a sinner. But what have I done to deserve this? I just want to talk to God.” But Job says **if one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times** (9:3). Then he speaks in hymnic fashion of God’s wisdom and God’s strength, asking the rhetorical question, **who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?** (9:4) I want you to pause and reflect here on Job’s faith. He hasn’t rejected God! He feels God has rejected him, but he still believes. Listen to his beautiful hymn to God’s power: **he removes mountains, shakes the earth out of its place, commands the sun, seals up the stars, stretched out the heavens, trampled the waves of the sea, made the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the chambers of the south, and does great things beyond searching out, and marvelous things beyond number** (9:5–10).

But it’s because God is so wise and powerful (9:11–13) as well as just, Job feels like he’s between the proverbial rock and a hard place: **how then can I answer him?** (9:14) His faith is evidenced because even as he pleads his

innocence he says **I must appeal for mercy to my accuser** (9:15). The advice of his friends is irrelevant to him because they're saying, "God is just," and Job is saying, "I know that, but he seems to be acting unjustly towards me in this suffering because I did everything right." Everything up seems down to Job. It's why he says **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** (9:16–18). Another lesson I want you to take from this is that when you feel as Job felt, go to God. I've said it before, the difference between just complaining about God and sanctified sorrow is that complaining is telling yourself and everyone else; sanctified sorrow is telling it to God! Listen to how Job feels in all this:

He feels totally helpless! **If it is a contest of strength, behold, he is mighty! If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?** (9:19)

He feels totally betrayed by God: **Though I am in the right, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse. I am blameless; I regard not myself; I loathe my life** (9:20–21)

He feels totally disillusioned: **It is all one; therefore I say, ‘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? (9:22–24)** Again he says, **I become afraid of all my suffering, for I know you will not hold me innocent. I shall be condemned; why then do I labor in vain? If I wash myself with snow and cleanse my hands with lye, yet you will plunge me into a pit, and my own clothes will abhor me (9:28–31).**

He feels totally condemned: **For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no arbiter between us, who might lay his hand on us both (9:32–33).**

He feels totally depressed: **I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul (10:1).**

Then he speaks directly to God in chapter 10 verses 2 and following: **Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the designs of the wicked? (10:2–3)**

He speaks to God and says he's acting like a man with finite sight of his situation (10:4-5): **you seek out my iniquity and search for my sin, although you know that I am not guilty, and there is none to deliver out of your hand?** (10:6-7)

He speaks to God as his Creator in verses 8-11. Note that he appeals to him who not only **granted me life** but also **steadfast love**. That's the word for the Lord's faithfulness to his covenant promises!

He speaks of the seeming injustice of it all in verses 14-17: **were my head lifted up, you would hunt me like a lion and again work wonders against me. You renew your witnesses against me and increase your vexation toward me; you bring fresh troops against me.**

Then he throws his hands up as he did in his initial lament in chapter 3, asking why he even exists: **Why did you bring me out from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me and were as though I had not been, carried from the womb to the grave** (10:18-19).

So he cries out that God would just **leave him alone** before he dies so at least he'll have a **little** moment of **cheer** this side of the grave (10:20-22), beyond which is **the land of darkness, deep shadow, gloom, and where**

light is as thick darkness.

It's a long road through Job. We've heard it once, now we've heard it again, and we'll hear it again and again, but the prosperity gospel of Job's friends offers him no comfort. And it does not offer us anything either! So Job despairs; he laments; he sorrows. The more he thinks of God's power, wisdom, and justice, that brings him no comfort either. Yet, in it all, there is still the small spark of faith. He does not understand why he suffers, but he entrusts his soul to his God. Of course we know the reason he suffers lays in the inscrutable wisdom of God, just as it did when our Holy Father sent his Son to this earth to undergo unimaginable anguish, pain, and sorrow in reliance upon the Holy Spirit all for our good. So that when we reflect on Job's sufferings and our own, we cannot help but think of Jesus, whose perfect innocence and righteous life truly did not merit what he experienced, except that he suffered it all for us, who truly deserve justice and punishment. This is the essence of our faith. This is good news for weary souls this morning. Amen.