

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Story of Our Lives...and God

(Growing through Job's story)

The Unfriendly Heresy of "Friends"

(Job's friends, part 1; Job, chapters 4-27)

Study #4

Introduction: Forensics, cosmic and otherwise...

Whenever and wherever disaster strikes in our country, there will soon be investigations. Groups of trained people will give time and effort to finding out what went wrong.

For instance, after Hurricane Beryl hit Houston in July, the city's power grid went down. The state of Texas launched an investigation to find out why as many as one million Houstonians were without A/C for nineteen days in sweltering, July heat.

And when there was a major train derailment in North Dakota, also in July, the National Traffic Safety Board looked into it, to find out why the train went off the tracks.

Investigators investigate mishaps on land, on sea, and in the air to find out why.

This search for the answer to "Why?" is the science of forensics. Based on the number of movies and series dedicated to forensics (Law and Order, CSI, NCIS, Murdoch, and all of the Sherlock Holmes shows), it's clear that lots of us are fascinated by the question, "Why?"

We live in a cause and effect world. And when we see an effect, we want to know the cause.

This morning, we are going to listen to three men who were consumed by an interest in forensics. Let's call it "cosmic forensics."

There has been no car or rail or plane crash. But their friend, Job, has suffered a personal wreck. They have investigated - and they know why his life has been wrecked.

Over the next few minutes together, we'll see what we can learn from their faulty forensics.

It's been a couple of weeks since we've looked at Job. So, let's take a minute to review.

Reviewing Job's trials...

In the first scene of the book, we meet Job. He's healthy, wealthy, and wise. He had a large and happy family, and he led a God-honoring life.

That's the view from the ground. From earth. Then the author of Job shifts our focus heavenward.

In heaven, God and Satan (or "*the satan*") talked about Job behind his back. The result of their talk about Job was an agreement to test Job. God gave Satan permission to test Job by trials to see if his love for God was genuine.

The tests Satan dished out were extreme.

Job lost all of his flocks and herds AND his ten children on one disastrous day. Then, he lost his health when he was afflicted with painful boils that covered his whole body, head to toe.

When three of Job's good friends - Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite - heard about his plight, they traveled to visit him and to comfort him in his distress.

They sat with Job, silently, for seven days and seven nights. That's what good friends do.

At the end of those seven days, Job lamented his life. That lament, recorded for us in chapter three, was very dark. He told God that he wished he had never been born. He told God that he wished that he could die.

I believe that the frankness and pessimism of Job's lament made his friends uncomfortable. So, they spoke - and spoke and spoke and spoke.¹

Previewing the structure of the debates...

The speeches of his friends and Job's responses are often referred to as "debates." And these debates make up the largest section in the book of Job. (chapters 4-27) It is easy to get lost in these debates.

In fact, if we don't back up and see the overall structure, much of what follows is hard to follow.

So here is what we have.

Job's three friends gave speeches. Eliphaz gave three speeches; Bildad gave three speeches; Zophar spoke only twice.

After each speech, Job replied.

So, we have Round One: Eliphaz, Job, Bildad, Job, Zophar, Job; Round Two: Eliphaz, Job, Bildad, Job, Zophar, Job; and Round Three: Eliphaz, Job, Bildad, Job (no Zophar).

That's a lot of speeches. When you read Job's book, you find that there is a lot of repetition in these speeches. That is OK, because the repetition drives home the point of the speeches.²

¹ Reitman (*Unlocking Wisdom*) has this: We expect God to provide the ultimate explanation for Job's affliction and for Job to be vindicated. However, with no obvious justification for Job's suffering forthcoming, Job's friends can no longer silently endure his torment. They feel intense pressure to provide some explanation for his suffering and some hope for his eventual relief that can placate their own deep unease.

² One of the more profound moments in all of my experiences with the Bible was the day that I sat down and read the book of Job, start to finish, in one sitting.

My plan is not to move through all of the speeches, verse by verse. Rather, we're going to pay attention to the main thrust of the speeches. We're going to listen to these speeches for four Sundays.³

On the last two Sundays we will focus on Job's speeches. On these first two Sundays we'll listen to his friends.

Next Sunday we'll see their world-class insensitivity. But this morning, we'll evaluate their theology, their belief system, as it relates to the theme of human suffering.

Job's brutal, gut-wrenching, honest lament prompted these three men to speak. They wanted to help Job. They wanted to teach him. It will be helpful for us all to hear their teaching this morning.

They offer a rational, reasonable explanation for his suffering. And theirs was an understanding of the cause of suffering that has been popular for thousands of years. Even today, it is still popular and widespread. We will see today that it is a dangerous, heretical theology.

Let's turn now to the book of Job and listen to his friends. We'll give the most attention to the leader, the first speaker, Eliphaz.

The "Wise" and Dignified Leader: Eliphaz

Meet Eliphaz:

In Hebrew, "Eliphaz" means "*God is victorious.*" He was a descendant of Esau, the unchosen son of Isaac and Rebekah. He was an Edomite (meaning, descended from Esau) from the region of Teman.

Taking in the speeches, one after the other, brought home the message of Job in a new and powerful way for me.

³ We have spent a week each in the first three chapters to lay the groundwork for what is to come. Four messages will explore the major themes raised by debates between Job and his three friends. On one Sunday we'll listen to the young man, Elihu, to hear what he has to say. Then two or three messages will be for the purpose of listening to the LORD as He finally speaks "*out of the whirlwind.*" The final message will show the final defeat of Satan and the triumph of God.

Eliphaz was (likely) the oldest and most mature of the group. He was as eloquent speaker. We picture a dignified, elderly gentleman.⁴

He was also courteous.

Eliphaz' First Speech (Job 4-5)

From soothing first words of affirmation... (4:1-6)

[4:2] "If one ventures a word with you, will you become impatient?

But who can refrain from speaking?

**[3] "Behold you have taught many,
And you have strengthened weak hands.**

**[4] "Your words have helped the stumbling to stand,
And you have strengthened feeble knees.**

**[5] "But now it comes to you, and you are impatient;
It touches you, and you are horrified.**

**[6] "Is your fear of God not your confidence,
And the integrity of your ways your hope?⁵**

Nice touch, Eliphaz. Very comforting words. I'm sure that those words would have meant a lot to Job. But (spoiler alert) Eliphaz has only just begun to talk.

As he talks to his suffering friend about suffering. Eliphaz shares with Job what he has learned about suffering.

...to retribution theology 101 (4:7--5:7)

[4:7] "Remember now, who ever perished being innocent?

Or where were the upright destroyed?

**[8] "According to what I have seen, those who plow wrongdoing
And those who sow trouble harvest it.**

Think on that one. Think of the harvest his friend, Job, is reaping.

⁴ So, Mason ([The Gospel according to Job](#)) and Reitman ([Unlocking Wisdom](#)).

⁵ Commendably, Eliphaz calls Job to the fear of God and to hold fast to his integrity.

What is Eliphaz saying? What is he accusing Job of having "**sown**"? Obviously "**wrongdoing**" and "**trouble**."

Then Eliphaz went on to relate an encounter he had with a "**spirit**" (a night spook) that disturbed him. This spirit left him with a clear message: Nobody can be righteous before God. (4:14-21)⁶

Eliphaz' "point" in bringing up this encounter with the spirit was to not-so-gently tell his friend, "*Job, everybody sins - including you. Nobody is perfect; nobody is pure.*"

So, great. Eliphaz has a good handle on the reality and depth of human sinfulness. Nobody can stand before God on their own merits. And Eliphaz reasons, because of that sinfulness, people suffer.

[5:6] "For disaster does not come from the dust,

Nor does trouble sprout from the ground,

[7] For man is born for trouble,

As sparks fly upward.

In other words, people's troubles don't just happen. They are earned. People who suffer get what's coming to them.

It reminds me of the scene in the musical, "The Sound of Music," where Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer were singing to each other.

They are so happy that they have found each other, so they sing "*...somewhere in [our] wicked, miserable youths, [we] must have done something good.*"

According to Eliphaz, Job's story is Maria's and Captain von Trapp's story, backwards. Since Job is suffering now, "*somewhere in his righteous, God-fearing youth, he must have done something bad.*"

Eliphaz continued with some "friendly" advice for Job.

A way forward (5:8-27)

⁶ The spirit explained that a man's punishment reflects his lack of righteousness before God.

Turn to God (5:8-16)

**[5:8] “But as for me, I would seek God,
And I would make my plea before God...
[11]...He sets on high those who are lowly,
And those who mourn are lifted to safety.
[12] “He frustrates the schemes of the shrewd,
So that their hands cannot attain success...⁷**

Eliphaz’ meaning is clear. “God is telling you something through your trials. You did something to upset Him. Repent.”

And coupled with that thought is a wonderful promise.

God will restore your life (5:17-27)

**[5:17] “Behold, happy is the person whom God disciplines,
So do not reject the discipline of the Almighty.
[18] “For He inflicts pain, and gives relief;
He wounds, but His hands also heal.
[19] “In six troubles He will save you,
Even in seven, evil will not touch you.**

I picture this confident, elderly guy patting Job on the head, assuring him that he and Bildad and Zophar are all in agreement about this. They know what they are talking about.

**[5:27] “Behold this; we have investigated it, and so it is.
Hear it, and know for yourself.”**

These three are the ancient world’s National Traffic Safety Board. They have done their forensic work, and they know the answer to “Why...?”

Following that speech, Job speaks. Then Bildad and Job and then Zophar and Job.

⁷ Here, he confidently says that God rewards the righteous and frustrates the plans of the wicked. Job’s plans/life have been frustrated. Therefore, Job must be wicked.

Now it’s time for Round Two and we come to Eliphaz’ second speech (chapter 15). It is much more intense.

Job has rejected the counsel of his friends. Eliphaz is offended. The earlier, gentler tone is gone.

Eliphaz’ Second Speech (Job 15)

Who do you think you are, Job? (15:-11)

**[15:2] “Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge
And fill himself with the east wind?⁸**

Eliphaz knows that he’s got the right solution to Job’s problems. Job simply doesn’t understand. Or, worse, he’s too proud to accept the *cause* of his suffering (SIN) and the *remedy* (REPENT).

Eliphaz tried the kind, soft, gentle approach. But Job didn’t receive that. So, he decides to take another tack. Ungentleness.

You’re just getting what you’ve got coming to you (15:12-35)

**[15:20] “The wicked person writhes in pain all his days,⁹
And the years reserved for the ruthless are numbered.
[21] “Sounds of terror are in his ears;
While he is at peace the destroyer comes upon him...¹⁰
[34] “For the company of the godless is barren,
And fire consumes the tents of the corrupt.”¹¹**

Bottom line? Job has evidently defied God. He deserves his suffering. End of speech.

⁸ See especially verses 7-10.

⁹ And what is Job doing as Eliphaz speaks? He is writhing in pain.

¹⁰ Remember the attacks of the Sabeans and the Chaldeans against Job’s flocks and herds.

¹¹ Remember the “*fire of God from heaven*” (1:16) that consumed Job’s 7,000 sheep.

Then there are more speeches and more responses from Job. We come to Round Three and listen to Eliphaz' final, shortest, and most vitriolic speech.

Eliphaz' Third Speech (Job 22)

Starting out sarcastic (22:1-4)

**[22:2] "Can a strong man be of use to God,
Or a wise one be useful to himself?..."**

**[4] "Is it because of your reverence that He punishes you,
That He enters into judgment against you?"**

His words drip with sarcasm. *"Clearly it is because you are wise that your trials have come. No doubt it is because you are devout and love God that He has afflicted you."*

Now comes the frontal attack on Job's life.

Moving to aggression (22:5-20)

**[22:5] "Is your wickedness not abundant,
And is there no end to your guilty deeds?"**

**[6] "For you have seized pledges from your brothers without cause,
And stripped people naked."**

**[7] "You have given the weary no water to drink,
And you have withheld bread from the hungry..."**

**[9] "You have sent widows away empty,
And the strength of the orphans has been crushed."**

Next, an attack on Job's faulty view of God.

**[22:13] "But you say, 'What does God know?
Can He judge through the thick darkness?"**

**[14] 'Clouds are a hiding place for Him, so that He cannot see;
And He walks on the vault of heaven.'**

The accusation now is that Job believes that God doesn't know what is going on. Job thinks he can sin with impunity. God can't see, so why not sin. Job knows that he can get away with it.

But, of course, he hasn't gotten away with it. He's been punished. And now Job's only hope for a restored life of blessing is repentance.

Concluding with hope (22:21-30)

**[22:21] "Be reconciled with Him, and be at peace;
Thereby good will come to you..."**

[23a] "If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored."

SUMMARIZING ELIPHAZ

After all these speeches, what can we say about Eliphaz and his view of suffering? Well, three threads run through his speeches.

Thread ONE, there is only one explanation for suffering: SIN.

People suffer because they have sinned. Never mind that Job was the greatest man of all the east (Job 1:3). Never mind that even God said that Job was **[1:8] blameless and upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.**

This cosmic forensic scientist knows the reason. God's moral universe is a zero-sum game: One sin, one punishment; one misbehavior, one trial. Job is suffering, therefore he must have done something bad.

Thread TWO, there is only one solution for suffering: REPENTANCE.

And thread THREE, there is only one possible result from repentance: BLESSING.

Eliphaz has put together a nice, neat system explaining how life works. But we, who know Job's back-story, know that Eliphaz is all wet.

- Not that we can sin with impunity. No, sin does always come with a price.
- Not that God doesn't judge sin. Of course He does.

- Not that repentance isn't important for the child of God after he sins. It is.
- Not that God doesn't bless us in any of a variety of ways when we trust and obey. He does.

But in THIS case, in Job's case, Eliphaz was wrong. God singled Job out for affliction precisely because he was righteous.

Eliphaz was wrong in accusing Job of gross sin and of turning away from God. Job didn't turn away from God and Job didn't do any of the stuff Eliphaz accused him of doing.

Eliphaz was convinced that he was right - and he could not have been more wrong.

Since Eliphaz was the leader of the three friends, we have spent more time listening to him than we will to Bildad or to Zophar. But they both mostly echo what Eliphaz has said.

I'll simply highlight some of the lowlights of their heretical counsel to Job. First, we'll listen to Bildad.

The Serious-Minded Traditionalist: Bildad

Meet Bildad

Bildad was a Shuhite. That may mean that he was a descendant of Shua, the friend of Jacob's son, Judah (see Genesis 38).

Picture Bildad as the staunch traditionalist. He prides himself on taking a no-nonsense approach to solving life's problems and dilemmas.

Bildad's first speech followed Eliphaz' first speech and Job's response. Job destroyed Eliphaz' arguments - and Bildad could not have cared less. He plowed on ahead with what he wanted to [wrongly] say.

Bildad's First Speech (Job 8)

Reasoning just like Eliphaz (8:4-7)

***[8:4] "If your sons sinned against Him,
Then He turned them over to the power of their wrongdoing.***

***[5] "If you will search for God
And implore the compassion of the Almighty,***

***[6] If you are pure and upright,
Surely now He will stir Himself for you
And restore your righteous estate.***

***[7] "Though your beginning was insignificant,
Yet your end will increase greatly.***

Well, there you have it. Job, why did your kids die? They sinned. (v. 4) Why have you suffered, Job? You aren't pure and upright. (v. 6) How can you get your life back? Repent. (vv. 5, 7)

This is simply Eliphaz, take two.¹² Bildad's second speech is, again, same old, same old.

Bildad's Second Speech (Job 18)

No R-E-S-P-E-C-T received! (18:1-3)

***[18:2] "How long will you hunt for words?
Show understanding, and then we can talk.***

***[3] "Why are we regarded as animals,
As stupid in your eyes?***

He's angry that he gets no respect from Job. But then Bildad doesn't exactly lavish respect on Job, either.

No R-E-S-P-E-C-T given! (18:4-21)

***[18:5] "Indeed, the light of the wicked goes out,
And the spark from his fire does not shine...***

***[13] "It devours parts of his skin,¹³
The firstborn of death devours his limbs...***

¹² We aren't surprised that Job rejected Bildad's "wisdom" just as he had rejected Eliphaz. Nor are we surprised that Bildad was offended by being rejected.

¹³ Remember Job's affliction, a disease of the skin.

**[18] "He is driven from light into darkness,
And chased from the inhabited world."¹⁴**

[19a] "He has no offspring or descendants among his people..."

**[21] "Certainly these are the dwellings of the wicked,
And this is the place of him who does not know God."¹⁵**

And Bildad's third speech? His final speech is nothing but a short, bitter rant against his "friend" Job.

Bildad's Third Speech (chapter 25)

**[25:2] "Dominion and awe belong to Him
Who makes peace in His heights..."**

**[4] "How then can mankind be righteous with God?
Or how can anyone who is born of woman be pure?"**

**[5] "If even the moon has no brightness
And the stars are not pure in His sight,**

**[6] How much less man, that maggot,
And a son of man, that worm!"**

The third friend sitting among the ashes with Job is Zophar, the Naamathite. We'll spend just a moment listening to Zophar.¹⁶

The Blunt and Tactless: Zophar

Meet Zophar

Zophar is the least diplomatic of the three friends. He shoots first and asks questions later.

¹⁴ Remember that after Job was afflicted with sore boils, we found him sitting on the ashes (chapter 2). This was the place where, in the ancient world, those with communicable diseases were sent so that they would not infect the community.

¹⁵ Like Eliphaz, Bildad ties the previous promise of God's restoration to Job's repentance at the end of this second speech.

¹⁶ Zophar's *spiritual* heritage is traceable to the line of Cain (See Genesis 4:22), Naamah being a daughter four generations out from Cain. However, he could not have been the physical descendant of Cain, as Cain's line was wiped out in Noah's flood, but it is possible that (just as the pre-Noahic Nephilim show up in Joshua as *like* the ancient Nephilim) Zophar is of a family that was like Cain's family, the Naamathites.

He's probably been chomping at the bit to throw his two cents into the debate. Zophar resorts to insulting word pictures to simply say that Job - his friend - is a wicked, wicked man.

Zophar's First Speech (Job 11)

**[11:2] "Shall a multitude of words go unanswered,
And a talkative man be acquitted?"**

So, Job is nothing but a windbag and it would be great if God would, once and for all, just put Job in his place.

**[5] "But if only God would speak,
And open His lips against you,**

[6a] And show you the secrets of wisdom!"

Further, Job, not only are you guilty of sin, but if God were to deal with you as your sin requires, you would get way more affliction than you have received.

**[6b] For sound wisdom has two sides.
Know then that God forgets part of your guilt.**

In other words, "Job, you got off light!"

And, since Zophar had the same perspective on the source of Job's troubles Eliphaz and Bildad had, he gave Job the same prescription.

**[11:14] If wrongdoing is in your hand, put it far away,
And do not let malice dwell in your tents;**

**[15] "Then, indeed, you could lift up your face without moral
blemish,
And you would be firmly established and not fear.**

Repent of your sinful ways and be restored. That's the first speech. And here are a couple of zingers from Zophar's second speech.

Zophar's Second (and final) Speech (Job 20)

Speaking of his good friend Job, Zophar says:

**[20:4] "Do you know this from ancient times,
From the establishment of mankind on earth,
[5] That the rejoicing of the wicked is short,
And the joy of the godless momentary?...
[7] He perishes forever like his refuse;
Those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?'...
[29] "This is a wicked person's portion from God,
The inheritance decreed to him by God."**

And Zophar's third speech? There isn't one. When it came time for him to speak in the third round of the debates, Zophar just sat there. *"I got nothing."*

Again, with friends like these...

So, here at the end, what do we learn from what Job's three friends have said?

Conclusion:

The book of Proverbs says that there is a wise way to live, and that we would be wise to pursue that wise way. Practicing wisdom is smart. Wise living improves the odds of avoiding avoidable problems.

But wise living offers no guarantee of a long, healthy life, accident-free driving, financial security into retirement, or a conflict-free home. Stuff happens.

A broken world, our sin, and the reality of Satan all contribute to disasters despite our best efforts to avoid or to control them.

When disaster strikes, we'd love to know WHY. But, this side of eternity, we don't and can't know WHY with certainty. It is crucial to understanding the story that God never told Job nor his friends why Job was suffering.

So, having listened to Job's friends' unfriendly heresy, two thoughts.

ONE, when we see someone who is suffering, let's NOT assume that they are suffering what they are suffering because they have done something wrong.

I don't know anyone's whole story. And I sure don't know anyone's backstory. My "cosmic forensics" will always be faulty.

Eliphaz and his buddies didn't know, either. But they didn't know what they didn't know. So, they assumed that because Job suffered, he must have sinned.

Of course, Job had sinned. Everyone has. But the friends were wrong to believe that the moral universe worked as a zero-sum game, that suffering is always best explained by, *"He sinned."*

Watch Jesus. When He passed by a man who had been born blind, His disciples asked Him, **[John 9:2] "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?"**

They went immediately to causality. Not Jesus. No doubt, He did know the cause of the man's blindness, but he didn't go there.

Instead, Jesus said, **[3] "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him."**

He directed His followers away from philosophical wonderings about cause and pointed them to God's power to use this man's suffering for His good purposes.

Whether it's someone here at church or someone we see on the street, someone we know well or hardly at all, someone we're drawn to or not, Job's friends teach us that we don't know - we CAN'T know - why someone is suffering.

This or that particular suffering may have little or nothing to do with personal guilt. It's better to...

...give the gift of silence - even for longer than seven days.
...give the gift of compassion - we'll focus on that next week.
...resist the instinct to "fix" something or someone.

TWO, when we suffer, let's not fall for the heresy of "retribution theology." Instead, let's learn to more and more quickly turn to God in our sufferings and learn.

Jesus learned obedience from what He suffered (Hebrews 5:8)
So can we.

Let's trust that God intends to use our problems to shape our character, to draw us closer to Himself, to teach us to trust and to pray, and to grow in compassion toward others.

Today, God is calling you to abandon the heresy of certainty.
Abandon yourself to God, trusting Him with your messy, unpredictable, uncertain life.