

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(September 29, 2024)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

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

(Growing through Job's story)

#### **Insensitive Clods**

(Job's friends, part 2; Job, chapters 4-27)

Study #5

#### **Introduction: Fluent in the universal language of suffering...**

I've learned, over a lifetime of trying, that language acquisition is hard.

Everywhere I've traveled, I've met people who know one or more language beyond their heart language.

Every African I ever met in Kenya had at least two languages. Most had three or more. Lots of people I've met in Central and South America speak English in addition to Spanish. Russian friends often knew a smattering of English.

Me? The miracle is that after studying Spanish on Duolingo for years, I still don't know Spanish very well.

But I do speak another language, and it isn't foreign. This language is hard to learn, but I have learned it naturally. It isn't hard to learn like Urdu, Mandarin, or Pashtu are hard to learn. You know this language, too.

Even if you aren't adept at learning new languages, you are fluent in the universal language of suffering. We all speak "suffering."

Suffering differs from person to person, in variety, intensity, degree, and frequency.

For some people, suffering is a slow burn. It isn't all-consuming. But it is pervasive, even if it is less intense.

All of our lives are marked by enough hardship, dashed dreams, and disappointment that we conclude that there's always something wrong with everything. Sure, there are moments of bliss, but they don't last. We suffer.

For others, suffering is an attack. In an instant, something hits that changes everything. There is news from a family member, a friend, a doctor. We think, *"Life will never be the same. I'll never be the same."*

We all know the language of "suffering," and if we're going to study the book of Job, we have to spend time thinking about and talking about suffering, because Job suffered.

Job's suffering is a big part of the book. His suffering isn't the biggest part, but it is the part that leads to the biggest part.

The biggest part of Job's book and story is God. We've reflected on that in recent weeks as we've begun to look at Job.

The truth is that at all times, we may not only, but we are always primarily dealing with God.

This morning, while we'll never lose sight of the importance of dealing with God, we are going to look more horizontally than vertically.

Today, we look to the Bible to learn both how NOT TO HELP our sufferings friends and how we CAN HELP our suffering friends.

All of us are card-carrying members of the Society of Sufferers. So is your friend. What does your suffering friend need from you, his friend?

The people with whom you rub shoulders every day are among the walking wounded.

What do they need? What do you have that you could offer them that would really help them, that would do them good, that would point them to God?

The question is important because we want to help. We want to be Jesus' hands and feet to the hurting people who make up our broken world.

You want to come alongside those who are suffering and be a healing presence, in Jesus' Name.

Well, today, the story of our friend, Job, provides some very helpful guidance for us who long to bring healing to the hurting.

*Unfriendly heretics...*

Last Sunday we learned the belief system of Job's three friends. Theirs was a theology of suffering that said, *"If you suffer, you must have sinned in some way to deserve that suffering."* (What we called, "Retribution Theology")

Of course, Job's suffering - the loss of his great wealth, his ten children, and his health - was NOT due to his sin.

What was going on was that God gave Satan permission to afflict Job to prove that Job would keep on trusting and loving Him even if he lost all of his great blessings.

That was last week. Today, we're looking at the friends for something else.

We won't ignore their belief system, but we're going to focus on their bedside manner. We're going to watch to see how they dealt, *as friends*, with their friend, Job.

And, just as they taught us last week, they'll teach us a good bit this morning, too.

There are quite a number of gifts our suffering friends would appreciate receiving from us.

I'm going to highlight just a few of these gifts over the next few minutes. Job's friends did great with one of the gifts. Not so much with most of the others.

First, let's look at the one really good gift that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar gave to their friend, Job.

They handed him this gift when they showed up at the city dump and found him in pain and grief, a shell of the man they had formerly known.

### **Our Suffering Friends Need the Gift of [Silent] Presence**

#### **Job's Friends (Job 2:11-13)**

***[2:11] Now when Job's three friends heard about all this adversity that had come upon him, they came, each one from his own place - Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him. [12] When they looked from a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe, and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. [13] Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights, with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.***

They wordlessly expressed their heartfelt compassion. For seven days and nights they gave their friend the gift of silent presence.

I can only imagine what those seven days and nights were like. And I can only imagine because I've never sat with someone for seven days and nights. I've never been silent for seven days and nights.

I've never sat, silent, in a city trash heap while a good friend who has lost everything scrapes himself with broken pottery to relieve the pressure from the boils that cover his body.

But these three friends gave that gift. It was a really good gift. We applaud them for their week-long service of silence.

There will be times when your suffering friend needs the gift of your silent presence, too.

### **YOU and Your Friends**

There will eventually come a time for speaking. Words are important. But there will almost certainly be, especially at first, a time for not speaking.

My mother died of colon cancer in January of 1980. This was just a few months after Kathy and I got married. It was before any of our kids were born. Mom had lots of friends, so the church in Dallas where the funeral was held was filled with people.

As her son, I was standing at the door to the church as people filed out when the service was over. Lots of people had things to say to me. They said kind things. No one said anything dumb or cruel - and I don't recall one of those well-intentioned words.

What I have not forgotten from that day were the tears streaming down the face of my friend, Bob, as he gave me a hug, spoke not a word, and left.

Bob gave me the gift of silent presence. And it may be that your silence will touch your friend in ways deeper than words ever could.

Today, you and I are indebted to Job's friends for the example they provide of giving the gift of silent presence.

So, here's the first thought for the day. Don't let yourself feel pressured into speaking. When you're with a suffering friend, silence can be golden.

Think about that when your friend tells you about something in his life that just broke: a marriage; health; career.

Don't talk. Be quiet. If your friend talks, listen. Draw him out with questions. If he doesn't talk, don't let the silence make you uncomfortable. Sit there. Your silence will bless your friend.

Eventually, as your friend's suffering continues, or as their losses mount, or as their pain becomes chronic, they will need to hear words from you.

At some point words will be important. There will be a limit to the help that wordlessness can provide. So, when that time comes what do we say? What do our friends need to hear?

Well, once again, Job's friends ride to our rescue. They help us see what our friends need to hear. Sadly, they guide us by way of a negative example. They show us what NOT to say.

### **Our Suffering Friends Need the Gift of True Words**

#### **Job's Friends' Faulty Narrative (Job 4:7-8; 5:20-26)**

Remember the narrative around which they had built their theology: *God's moral universe is a zero-sum game. Commit a sin, suffer. Commit a lot of sins, suffer a lot.*

That is exactly what Eliphaz, the leader of the three friends, said in his first speech. (See Job 4:7-8) The other friends, Bildad<sup>1</sup> and Zophar<sup>2</sup>, said much the same thing in their own speeches.

These three also held to the converse of this idea, namely that good things happen to good people.

Eliphaz assured Job that IF he would just turn back to God, problems would disappear, blessings would flow. (See Job 5:20-26; note that Bildad and Zophar fell right in line with these thoughts in their own speeches.)

---

<sup>1</sup> See Job 18:9-29-21.

<sup>2</sup> See Job 20:29.

The problem with that narrative is that it is simply not true that bad things happen to bad people (whoever they are) and that good things happen to good people (whoever they are).<sup>3</sup>

Listen to Jesus on this one.

### Listen to Jesus (Luke 13:2-3)

*From the gospel of Luke (Luke 13:2-3)*

One time, some people brought a report to Jesus about a horrible crime committed against some Jews. Pontius Pilate had murdered these Jews while they had been offering sacrifices to God in the Jerusalem temple.

Jesus was concerned that people might think that those murdered Jews must have done something bad to deserve such a horrible death. So, He spoke.

***[Luke 13:2]...“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans just because they have suffered this fate? [3] “No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”***

Remember these words of Jesus the next time you read of an earthquake striking somewhere or a hurricane making landfall, or an epidemic spreading through a nation or a population.

Jesus didn't assign guilt as the cause of suffering. Neither should we. He wants us to know that in this life, stuff happens.

---

<sup>3</sup> Some people wonder if the friends are right. After all, sin does truly explain the broken condition of our world. And Lamentations 3:39 tells us, ***“Why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his sins?”*** At the same time, some suffering clearly comes to us through no fault of our own in the form of disease, financial collapse, abuse, and persecution. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who was well acquainted with suffering wrote, *“The notion that we can never suffer innocently so long as within us there still hides some kind of defect is a thoroughly unbiblical and demoralizing thought.”*

In God's sovereign ordering of the way the world works, He causes ***[Matthew 5:45]...His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*** (Both of these, by the way, are good gifts from God.)

Job's friends spoke falsehoods. When we speak to our suffering friends, we have to speak to them truthfully.

### Approach Your Suffering Friends Truthfully

When Eliphaz spoke for the third time he accused Job of great wickedness. (Job 22:1-9)

He said that Job had been unjust in his financial dealings, that he hadn't ever helped people who were hungry or thirsty, that he had sent widows away without helping them, and that he had taken advantage of orphans.

Job never did any of that. He was extremely generous.<sup>4</sup>

But his three friends had adopted a narrative. (*“If you suffer, you must have sinned.”*) Rather than adjust the narrative to fit the data, they changed the data to fit the narrative.<sup>5</sup>

Their words weren't helpful because their words weren't true. We must speak the truth to our suffering friend.

I'm going to move from Job to Proverbs for a minute to listen to what King Solomon had to say about the power of words to bless. We'll apply this wisdom to what we can say to our suffering friends.

Some words are beautiful. They are beautifully crafted and are put together like a piece of art.

These words satisfy the hungry, suffering heart. Solomon described these words.

---

<sup>4</sup> See God's assessment of him, chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> It would have been far better for the friends to look at their narrative / theory (all suffering is due to personal sin) and then re-evaluate in light of new data (Job, a man of tremendous integrity and godliness, is suffering).

## Our Suffering Friends Need the Gift of Fitting Words

### From Solomon: Beautiful Words

***[25:11] Like apples of gold in settings of silver,  
Is a word spoken at the proper time.***

That's a mouth-watering image of delicious words. As you know, it is possible to speak in an ugly way.

Some words are ugly because they are thrown together without thought, haphazardly. Some speeches are ugly because they tear down rather than build up.

Mull over that contrasting picture between ugly words that hurt and beautiful words that refresh and heal.

Those words might be affirming, gentle words. Or not...

I'm thinking about those times when a family or a group of friends organize an "intervention" to help someone they love to recover from a life-destroying addiction. These interventions are always well-planned. Each person who participates gives careful thought to what they will say.

They speak truthfully. They speak calmly. They speak lovingly. Nobody just flies off the handle. And the thoughtfulness of the words brings beauty, nourishment, and power.

Think, too, about the power of words spoken by friends to point each other to God. There is an Old Testament record of a friendship just like that.

### From David and Jonathan: God Words

The ten years before David became KING David were filled with terror and hardship.

David had to flee for his life from King Saul, who was trying to kill him.

During those ten long years David's most steadfast friend was King Saul's son, Jonathan. At one point, when David was at his lowest, Jonathan went to David's fugitive outpost.

***[1 Samuel 23:15] Now David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life while David was in the wilderness of Ziph, at Horesh. [16] And Jonathan, Saul's son, set out and went to David at Horesh, and encouraged him in God.***

Notice that phrase. Jonathan "***encouraged [David] in God.***"

That's Jonathan reminding David of God's promise that he would be king, telling David to put aside fear that Saul would kill him, assuring David of God's goodness and of His presence.

From that one phrase, Jonathan "***...encouraged him in God***" you and I catch a vision for the possibility of speaking to our suffering friend in such a way that they know that we are behind them.

More than that, we catch the vision of speaking words that can draw our friend to trust that God is for them, that God is with them. There is no higher calling than this.

Imagine you, putting words together that can point your friend past her suffering to God.

It'll happen in the middle of listening to her pour out her heart to you, expressing her pain. There will come a time when you sense it is just the right time to say, "*God.*"

- You point out what you know of His character from Scripture.
- You tell about His works.
- You speak from the heart about Jesus' death on the cross.
- You talk about Jesus' priestly, intercessory ministry.
- You tell your friend how God has met you at your point of need.

And God uses your thoughtful, beautiful, carefully chosen “*apples of gold in settings of silver*” words to touch your friend at her point of need.<sup>6</sup>

Words CAN have those helpful effects. But words only have those effects if they are *true* and *appropriate*.

The words of Job’s friends were unhelpful not only because they weren’t true. They were unhelpful because they were *inappropriate*. They were the wrong words spoken in precisely the wrong way at exactly the wrong time.

### From Job: [In]Appropriate Words

*Job’s friends violated the rule of appropriateness*

As their speeches multiplied, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar got increasingly philosophical about the reason for Job’s suffering. Sadly, they ignored the fact that they were speaking to a man whose world had just fallen apart at the seams. I call that inappropriate.

It is a rare person who is scraping his boils while sitting on life’s ash heap who wants someone to wax eloquent on the cosmic “*Why’s*” behind their suffering.

On occasion, I have tried to explain to the best of my ability and based on my understanding of Scripture, the reason WHY evil and suffering exist in the world today.

I’ve had lots of one-on-one conversations about this and in a few small group settings. I’ve addressed this theme in sermons.

I think that engaging in these kinds of discussions and trying to understand why our world is broken and how our broken world works

(or doesn’t work!) is important. I think everybody wins when we talk about these and other “first order of magnitude” kinds of issues.

But rarely does the conversation about why the innocent suffer need to happen *while* the innocent person is reeling from his loss.

The words of Job’s friends were poorly-placed. They weren’t at all “*apples of gold in settings of silver*.”

I think that the New Testament version of Proverbs’ “*apples of gold*” line may be this, from the Apostle Paul.

*You - speaking an “appropriate” word (Ephesians 4:29)*

***[Ephesians 4:29] Let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but if there is any good word for edification according to the need of the moment, say that, so that it will give grace to those who hear.***

The words that our friends need when they are suffering are grace-giving words that build up. Not cliches or trite sayings. Those words tear down. Or, at best, they are inert. They just sit there.

I wouldn’t be surprised if what Job’s three friends said to him were sayings plastered on robes and chariot bumpers in 2000 BC.

They were the ancient world’s corollary to:

- It’s always darkest before the dawn.
- When God closes a door, He opens a window.
- Time heals all wounds.
- Life goes on.
- Everything happens for a reason.

Those words don’t build up. Throw them out.

And throw out guarantees of perfectly restored blessing - unless you know of a promise that I haven’t found in the New Testament that God’s people won’t die of disease, starvation, or persecution.

---

<sup>6</sup> In three more Sundays, we’ll see how to speak God-words to our suffering friend when we come to the speech of the young man, Elihu. Elihu became a powerful advocate for Job. And the good news is that you and I can become God-centered advocates on behalf of our suffering friends, too.

Throw into the trash can formulas that tie up the world's problems with a nice, neat bow. Life is messy. Admit it.

One thing we learn from Job's story is that we don't know why this or that suffering has come to someone. We should never hesitate to say to a sufferer about the cause of their suffering: *"I don't know."*

To have listened to Job's friends is to have heard them at their worst. And they did their worst because they forgot why they had rushed to be by Job's side after his losses in the first place.

They had come to *"sympathize"* with him and to *"comfort him."* (2:11). They forgot that. Forgetting their purpose, they also forgot what would have been a comfort to them in their own losses.

So, today, we'll learn from their negative example and not do what they did. We'll listen to words written by the Apostle Paul two thousand years after Job and walk in them.

***[2 Corinthians 1:13] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, [4] who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.***

We will put ourselves in our friend's shoes.<sup>7</sup>

We'll remember how God met us at our point of need when we suffered loss. And we'll give to our friend the kind of God-words that we got from others or that we heard from the Bible that God used to comfort us.

When we speak those words, they won't just sit there. They are dynamic and they come with life-impacting power.

Our friends who are passing through deep valleys will benefit from our silent presence, from our refusal to speak in cliches or to jump to a too-early explanation, and from our appropriate, fitting God-words.

But we won't be willing or able to give silence and we won't find the words that bless if we aren't moved by compassion. Nothing motivates us to reach out and touch the heart of a suffering friend like love.

So, in addition to everything that's been said so far, if we are going to be of any help to anyone, we've got to love them.

### **Conclusion: The power of the way of love**

We have watched as Job's friends failed Job. Sadly, they didn't help him at all.

But their failure to help wasn't, ultimately, a failure of technique. It wasn't that they hadn't read the right books or attended the right seminars. Theirs was a failure of the heart. They failed to love Job.

Actually, they feared Job - and Job knew that they were afraid of him. He saw that they considered him a *"terror."*<sup>8</sup>

And it is true that being with suffering people can be terrifying.

We're scared because we don't know what to say or how to act. We're scared because of unfamiliar and unpleasant smells and sights. We're scared because, well, if calamity struck YOU, it could strike ME, too.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kathy and I listened to a podcast recently in which the person being interviewed, who was an historian, said that before writing about any historical figure, he tried to get to a place where he understood that what the person did made sense to that person. None of us can ever know exactly what another person is feeling. But we can try to put ourselves in their shoes.

---

<sup>8</sup> Job sees through their misguided efforts to console him. He sees that they are only trying to appease their own fear and anxiety over his suffering. (6:21-23; 12:1-6; 13:1-12).

It can be a frightening thing to look raw suffering square in the face. But John wrote to us in his first letter that ***[1 John 4:18] ... perfect love drives out fear.***

You have believed in Jesus, so you have tasted His perfect love. You are following Jesus, so you can follow Him in perfect, fearless love.

Jesus said, ***[John 15:13] "Greater love has no one than this, that a person will lay down his life for his friends."***

Love is what drove Him to teach, to heal, to cast out demons, and to wash feet. Love was what drove Him to give Himself on a cross for you. (Romans 5:8)<sup>9</sup>

In the same way, when we love, we will find a way - sometimes silently AND sometimes with words - to deeply encourage our suffering friend.

Love will cast out our fear (1 John 4:18) of saying the wrong thing and will embolden us to speak from the heart.

The first step on the road to be help to the suffering is to pray that God will teach us to love the way He loves us.

---

<sup>9</sup> John writes, ***[1 John 4:10] In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.***