

Bitter Complaints

October 10, 2021

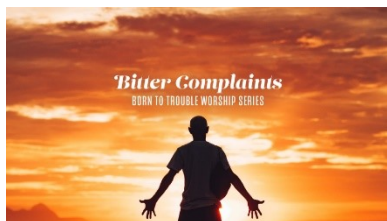
Psalm 22: 1-11

¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. ³ Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. ⁴ In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. ⁵ To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame. ⁶ But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. ⁷ All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; ⁸ "Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver — let him rescue the one in whom he delights!" ⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. ¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. ¹¹ Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

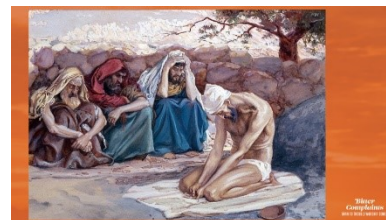
¹ Then Job answered: ² "Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. ³ Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! ⁴ I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. ⁵ I would learn what he would answer me and understand 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!

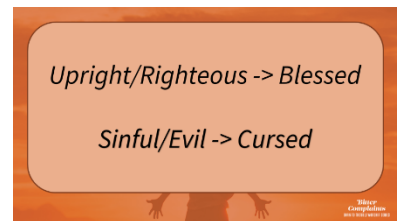


Last Sunday we started our study in the book of Job. Last week Job lost all his livestock, almost all of his servants, all ten of his children, was covered by painful sores, and was told by his wife to "*curse God and die.*" Yet through it all Job maintained his integrity, his faith in God, his trust in the divine. Relatively speaking, Job remained remarkably faithful even though he endured great loss and was suffering immensely. As we prepare to continue our journey with Job, let us begin with a word of prayer...

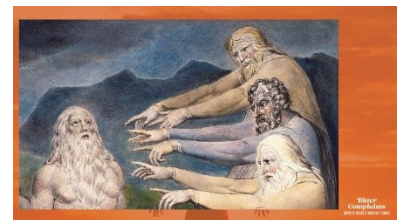
This week in the lectionary readings we jump to chapter 23 as we hear Job's bitter complaints. In the intervening 20 plus chapters, Job has spent many days with his three "friends". Still in chapter two, his friends hear of Job's woes and decide to go to console and comfort Job. While seeing Job from a distance, they wept aloud, tore their clothes, and threw dust up in the air – all signs of mourning and sorrow. Then they sat with Job for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word; they were simply present to their friend in his great suffering. After seven days, Job breaks the silence, his grief spilling forth. He is in such great anguish that he laments the day he was born. The Eliphaz speaks, stating that clearly Job has sinned, saying, "*Those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same.*" Obviously, those who sin are cursed. Job has lost all of his livestock and all of his children. Clearly Job has sinned.



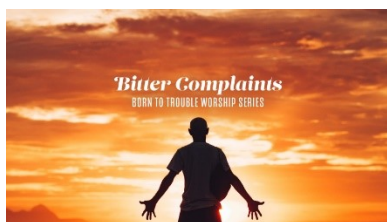
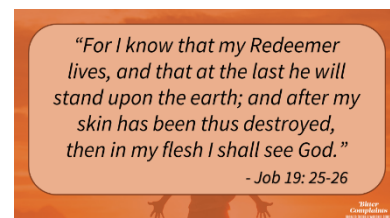
Next Job is corrected by God. In chapter five God speaks, essentially saying, *'If I were you Job, I'd seek God. I'd commit my cause to God.'* So, Job does. In chapters six and seven Job lays out his bitter complaint before God and his friends. He pours out his heart because his suffering is without end. In response to Job's prayer, Bildad speaks, telling Job to repent. Repentance is necessary because clearly Job has sinned. Why else would he be suffering so? Like Eliphaz, Bildad speaks from the common blessings-curses understanding. In this line of thinking there is no other explanation for bad things happening. Job again voices his innocence in chapter nine, but also recognizes the power and might of God – who could possibly argue with God? Job notes that *"one could not answer God once in a thousand"* times. Job reverently fears God, therefore, he needs a mediator. Knowing one is not possible, Job speaks of the bitterness, of the gloom in his soul, and he questions why God even brought him forth from the womb in the first place.



Then, in chapter eleven, Zophar piles on too. He picks up where Bildad left off, telling Job that his guilt deserves punishment. Zophar does not hear Job's complaint as the protesting of an innocent man. Instead, he hears the woes of one who is guilty but will not admit his guilt, complaining instead of admitting his sin. I imagine this is what Job feels like. In the next few chapters Job shows some cracks. He admits that he is a laughingstock – all the people think that he has sinned and that he is deserving of the suffering. This then leads Job to offer a despondent prayer to God.



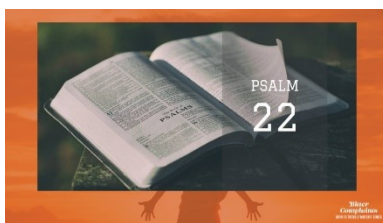
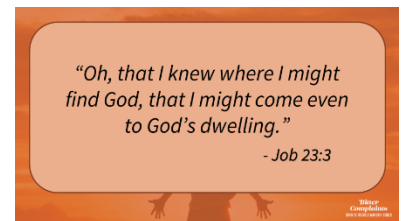
Next Eliphaz speaks again, declaring that Job has undermined his own faith. Eliphaz is again lifting up the ancient understandings of blessings and curses. Tragedy has befallen Job and his family. Clearly Job has sinned! To deny that is to deny what undergirds the whole religious system! Job defends his faith and his innocence, in verses 25 and 26, offering these beautiful words of enduring faith: *"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God."* In spite of the condemnation of and discouragement from his friends, Job's faith remains strong.



The conversation continues round and round until we arrive at chapter 23. As we do so, I invite you to turn there in your Bibles. As we do so, I wonder how Job's friends contributed to his sense of darkness, to his feeling that God was absent? Their accusations, their assumptions, their belief that these sufferings could only be the result of unrepentant sin – how these conversations must have brought Job's spirits even lower! How their condemnation must have increased his sense of loneliness and despair. We must also keep in mind that Job too lived in this blessings-curses mindset. His struggle centered on receiving curses when he did not sin. Job knew he was innocent. He knew that he did not deserve these sufferings. All that is happening to him did not fit his understanding of God or of this blessings and curses paradigm. Wouldn't this lead to Job feeling like God was absent? Wouldn't this lead Job to ask the questions we all ask when we find ourselves in the valley: WHY? Why God? Why me? Why my family?

Even though this is where most of us would go, asking why, Job does not totally go there. Job still longs to connect to God, to be heard by God. Job speaks his prayer out loud in our text for this week. He shares his brokenness and his sense that God is not listening any longer. It is a hard place to be. Again, it is a place we have all been or will surely be one day.

Compounding the experiences of suffering and of discouraging friends is the feeling that one has been abandoned by God. In our text this week, Job gives voice to this pain. *"Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!"* he declares these words in bitterness. This is real, these words that Job utters, this desire to converse with God, to plead his case about how unjustly he has been treated after living a life of faithfulness. It is an all too human experience when we find ourselves flailing in the void, unable to hear or experience God's presence. We can all relate to what Job is feeling. Even those like Job, those greats of the faith, can feel alone at times. Mother Teresa, famously known for her deep care for the poor in India, had what she called her "dark nights of the soul". Even she had seasons when God seemed distant, when she felt all alone even as she ministered to the least of these.



We began this morning with words from Psalm 22. These are David's words that come from a time when he had a sense of being abandoned by God. In the midst of his time of suffering and trial, Job too could speak these words.

In the opening verses, David cries out to God: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"... I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.*" Job's current experience with his friends is mirrored in David's words. Like David, Job's suffering has gone on and on. In verses six and seven, David laments, *"I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me; they shake their heads."* As his friends piled on top of Job's suffering and pain, he was scorned and mocked. Sure Job, I'm positive you're innocent. Sure Job, God has made the mistake. Like Job, David held onto his faith in God. David recalls that since his birth he has cast his lot with God. Our passage closes with a hopeful request: *"Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help."* Job would put it this way: My friends are here with me, God, but they are of no help. They are doing more harm than good. Be near me God, be near me.

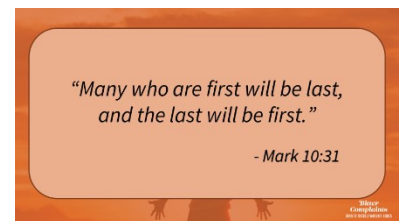
This yearning to be near to God is one we feel all the time. Even in good times we yearn to be near to God. In the gospel lesson for this week, we find the story of the rich young man. In Mark 10, the young man so wants to begin following Jesus – he has heard the stories, perhaps seen some of the transformations and miracles. As the story unfolds, we learn that the rich young man is much like Job in a way – he has followed all of the commandments since he was a young boy. His walk appears upright and blameless.



Many of us here today would fall into this description, wouldn't we? From the outside, we at least appear to be good, upright Christians. And surely many of you are. But Jesus looks deeper into the young man's heart.

Like Job, this man has many possessions. But he is very unlike Job in how he sees these possessions. Remember Job's attitude? God gives and God takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord! The rich young man cannot envision his life without his things. He cannot give up what he has been blessed with. The rich young man cannot do as Jesus commands. His heart is actually far from God in this respect. The rich young man wants to follow Jesus. The cost is just a bit too high at this point in his life. I think many today are like this young man. We too ask what the rich young man essentially asked: *'Can't we just ease our way into following Jesus, a little at a time? Do we really have to be all in?'* What a contrast to Job's faith and to the all-in call of Christ upon our lives.

As the rich young man walks away sad, Peter says, *"Look, we have left everything and followed you."* Peter and the other disciples gave all to follow Jesus. They left family and careers – left it all behind for the sake of walking in Jesus' footsteps. Reflecting the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God, Jesus reassures Peter and the other disciples, telling them, *"Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."* These words would be salve to Job's pain and grief and suffering. These words will mirror Job's journey from blessed to cursed to blessed again – faithful through it all.



For us all, faith begins with conscious decision to die to self and to pick up our cross to follow Jesus. We go from first to last when we die to self. This decision may be like the rich young man's – it may call us to lie down our wealth. Or maybe it is different. It may be to lay down our pride.

It may be to lay down our prejudices. For Job, it was laying down the anger he felt because of his unjust suffering and it was laying down the hurt because God seemed so distant. When we are willing to become last, willing to place God and others before ourselves, it is then that we pick up our cross, becoming first fruits of the kingdom in God's eyes. Accepting our role to carry our cross, we begin to walk step by step with Jesus. Job laid down his anger and pride and hurt and then bore his cross of suffering. Before the story ends, we will see that his redeemer did lift him up. But that is for another week! Stay tuned!



When we walk faithfully with Jesus, as Job did with God, we experience healing and restoration. Like Job, we might have to walk the valley for a while first. There is often much to gain or learn from our time in the valleys. Like God will be with Job, God is faithful with us. From these experiences we grow in our faith and we become equipped to bring healing to others when they find themselves in the valley. It is then that we can stand with those who are lost, with those who doubt, with those who are grieving. We can stand with our brothers and sisters in Christ and with our neighbors and friends who might be struggling. When they are in the trial and suffering, in the valley, it is not the time to abandon them because of their doubt or anger or fear or grief. It is then that we must acknowledge that even in the emptiness and pain and grief, they are not alone. God is with them. We are with them. Even in the face of their bitter complaints, we can support and encourage those who are suffering, those who are hurting, those who are grieving. Even then we can remind them that God is right there too. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you have experienced times when God felt distant or absent, what reconnected you to God? How did this strengthen your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Who do you know that might be struggling to connect to God because of something going on in their life right now? Pray for them – better yet, pray with them.
- 3) *Study*. Read Job 33 through Job 37, where Elihu rebukes Job and speaks of God's justice, goodness, and majesty. What resonates with you? What speaks of who you know God to be?