

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(September 22, 2013)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: GOD...in the Storm

(Studies in the book of Job)

Unfriendly Heresy

(The friends of Job, part 1)

Study #4

Introduction: Cosmic forensics...

You may recall the tragic accident that occurred in Midland, Texas, last November during a patriotic “*Hunt for Heroes*” parade.

A parade float with twenty four passengers on board was traveling on Garfield Street when it went over an at-grade railroad crossing. The truck hauling the float was going 5 miles per hour - and was struck by a train going 62 miles per hour. Four people on the parade float were killed and five were seriously injured.

I remember reading about this accident and wondering, “*How could something like this happen?!*”

Well, I wasn’t the only one wondering. The National Traffic Safety Board has not yet issued their final ruling, but they are investigating. That’s what the NTSB does.

This independent government agency looks into mishaps on land, on sea, and in the air. Wherever there is a major traffic pile-up, collision between trains, boating disaster, or plane crash, you will find the NTSB.

Among the many things that NTSB workers at the crash site are doing is looking for clues to explain *why* what happened, happened.

This searching for clues is the science of forensics. The National Traffic Safety Board is looking to find the reason for the crash. It wants to know *why* - not only to affix blame, but also to avoid the same kind of tragedy from happening again.

We are all fascinated with forensics. We all want to know why.

Just look at some of the most popular shows these days. Besides the original and spin-offs of Law and Order and CSI, there is Sherlock, Elementary, Bones, Criminal Minds, Castle, The Mentalist, Psych, and Cold Case.

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

This morning we encounter three men who are very interested in forensics. It’s cosmic forensics. There has been no car or rail or plane crashes. But their friend, Job, has been in a wreck. And they think they know why.

Reviewing Job’s trials...

Job’s story began with a mouth-watering look at his earthly wealth, his large and happy family, and his God-honoring life.

The scene quickly shifted, though, to Heaven, where we listened in on a conversation between God and Satan. The upshot of that conversation was that God allowed Satan to afflict Job. The point of the afflictions was to prove to Satan that Job would continue to love and worship and trust Him even if all of God’s blessings were taken away.

Satan’s afflictions were extreme. They consisted of the loss of his flocks and herds and his ten children - all on one day. Shortly after these devastating losses, he lost his health when he was struck with sore boils from the sole of his feet to the crown of his head.

When Job’s three good friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite heard about his plight, they visited him. They came together to comfort him and sat with Job, silently, mourning, for seven days and seven nights.

Reviewing Job's lament...

At the end of these seven days, Job lamented his life. And his lament, recorded for us in chapter three, was very dark.

It included his wish that he had never been born *and* his wish that he could, even now, find death.

Job's lament - its frankness and pessimism, his death-wish way of talking - made his friends VERY uncomfortable. So, they cleared their throats and spoke - and spoke and spoke and spoke.¹

Previewing the structure of the debates...

The debates between Job and his three friends make up the largest section in the book of Job. And it is very easy to get very lost in these debates (chapters 4-27). In fact, if we don't back up and see the overall structure, much of what follows can look like, "*Blah, blah, blah...*"

So here is what we have.

Job's three friends give speeches. Eliphaz delivers three speeches; Bildad gives three speeches; Zophar speaks only twice.

They speak in order: Eliphaz-Bildad-Zophar, Eliphaz-Bildad-Zophar, Eliphaz-Bildad.

After each of these men's speeches, Job replies.

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.

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. The intensity of Job's anguish should heighten our curiosity about God's purposes in permitting such suffering and vilification by others.

That's a lot of speeches! And as you will see, or as you already know if you are familiar with Job, there is a lot of repetition in these speeches.

It doesn't just SEEM like they say some of the same things over and over and over again. They DO say the same things over and over and over again! That repetition drives home the message of the speeches.²

Now, my plan is not to move through all of the speeches today. But I do want us to pay attention to what the friends have to say so that we "get" the point of the speeches.

We'll spend a total of four Sundays in these debates between Job and his friends.³ On two Sundays we will focus on Job and on two Sundays we'll look at his friends.

Next Sunday we'll especially see how horribly *insensitive* these guys were to Job. But this morning, we'll evaluate their theology. Today, we'll see their belief system, especially when it comes to what they believe about suffering.

Job's gut-wrenchingly honest lament prompted them to speak and their words are designed to correct him. They want to set Job straight, open his eyes, and explain to him *why* what has happened to him has happened to him.

They are going to counter his grief-deranged thinking by offering a rational, reasonable explanation for his suffering.

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. 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.

And, we'll listen to one of Job's friends at a time, giving the most attention to the first of his friends to speak, Eliphaz.

The "Wise" and Dignified Leader: Eliphaz

Who is Eliphaz?

His name means "*God is victorious*" and he was an Edomite from the region of Teman. That means that he was a descendant of the unchosen son - Esau - of Isaac and Rebekah.

Eliphaz was (probably) the oldest and the most mature of the group. He is articulate and speaks clearly. I picture a dignified man. Several commentators suggest that we think of a wealthy, well-dressed, well-fed, and well-spoken man.⁴

As the first speaker, he is probably the leader. And as soon as he opens his mouth, we see him also as a man of courtesy.

His first words affirm Job for how helpful he had been to others in times past.

Eliphaz' First Speech (Job 4-5)

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

[4:1] Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered,
[2] "If one ventures a word with you, will you become impatient?
But who can refrain from speaking?
[3] "Behold you have admonished many,
And you have strengthened weak hands.
[4] "Your words have helped the tottering to stand,
And you have strengthened feeble knees.
[5] "But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;
It touches⁵ you, and you are dismayed.
[6] "Is not your fear of God your confidence,
And the integrity of your ways your hope?⁶

Very nice touch, Eliphaz. Very comforting words. Those words would have meant a lot to Job.

But Eliphaz has only just begun to talk. We keep listening as he reflects on his own long life. He tells his suffering friend, Job, what he has learned about suffering.

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

[7] "Remember now, who ever perished being innocent?
Or where were the upright destroyed?

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

Think on that one. Think of the harvest his friend, Job, is reaping. Remember to whom Eliphaz is speaking.

Then Eliphaz goes on to relate an encounter he had with a "spirit" (a night spook) that disturbed him. The spirit left him with a clear message: Nobody can be righteous before God. (4:14-21)⁷

And what was Eliphaz' "point" in bringing up this encounter with the spirit? He is gently telling his friend, "*Job, everybody sins. You, included. Nobody is pure.*"

Now, to his credit, Eliphaz has a good handle on the reality and depth of human sinfulness. He's right. Nobody can stand before God on his or her own merits.

And, Eliphaz reasons, because of that sinfulness, people suffer.

[5:6] "For affliction does not come from the dust,
Nor does trouble sprout from the ground,
[7] For man is born for trouble,
As sparks fly upward.

⁶ Commendably, Eliphaz calls Job to the fear of God and to hold fast to his integrity (the opposite of Job's wife's counsel).

⁷ The spirit explained that a man's punishment reflects his lack of righteousness before God.

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

⁵ Refers to Job's afflictions as a "touch." What an understatement!!

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

It's sort of like one of the songs from "The Sound of Music." (And have you heard that there is a remake of The Sound of Music in the works?)

You may remember the scene where Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer are singing to each other. At one point in the song, because they have found each other, they sing "...*somewhere in [our] wicked, miserable youth, [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 continues with some friendly advice for Job.

A way forward (5:8-27)

Turn to God (5:8-16)

**[8] "But as for me, I would seek God,
And I would place my cause before God..."**

**[11]...He sets on high those who are lowly,
And those who mourn are lifted to safety.**

**[12] "He frustrates the plotting of the shrewd,
So that their hands cannot attain success..."⁸**

Eliphaz' meaning is clear. "*If I were you, Job, I'd turn to God. He's telling you something through your trials. He did something to upset Him. Listen to Him. Repent.*"

And coupled with that thought is a wonderful promise.

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

⁸ Here, he confidently asserts that God rewards the righteous and frustrates the plans of the wicked. Job's plans/life have been frustrated. Therefore, Job must be wicked.

**[17] "Behold, how happy is the man whom God reproveth,
So do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.**

**[18] "For He inflicts pain, and gives relief;
He wounds, and His hands also heal.**

**[19] "From six troubles He will deliver you,
Even in seven evil will not touch you.**

The speech ends as this confident older man, who has seen a lot of life, pats the somewhat younger 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. Trust us in this.

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

And that is Eliphaz' first speech.

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

Now it's time for Round Two and we come to Eliphaz' second speech (chapter 15). We immediately notice that it is much more intense.

Job has rejected the counsel of his friends, and Eliphaz, for one, is offended. The earlier gentle 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?"⁹**

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

He had been trying to be oh-so-gentle with Job. But Job hasn't responded well to the soft approach. Eliphaz decides to be a bit less gentle.

⁹ See especially verses 7-10.

You're just getting what you've got coming to you (15:12-35)¹⁰

**[20] "The wicked man writhes in pain all his days,¹¹
And numbered are the years stored up for the ruthless.**

**[21] "Sounds of terror are in his ears;
While [he is] at peace the destroyer comes upon him...¹²**

**[34] "For the company of the godless is barren,
And fire consumes the tents of the corrupt."¹³**

Bottom line? Job has evidently defied God and he deserves the suffering that has come his way.

Following this speech, there are more speeches from the other two friends and more responses from Job. When we turn to Job 22 we find Eliphaz' final - and his shortest and most vitriolic - speech.

He starts out sarcastic.

Eliphaz' Third Speech (Job 22)

Starting out sarcastic (22:1-4)

[22:1] Then Eliphaz the Temanite responded,

**[2] "Can a vigorous man be of use to God,
Or a wise man be useful to himself?**

**[3] "Is there any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous,
Or profit if you make your ways perfect?**

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

Dripping with sarcasm, Eliphaz' message is, "OK, Job, 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."

Then he goes on the attack, first accusing Job of being a wretched, ungodly, fiend!

Moving to aggression (22:5-20)

Attacking Job's lifestyle (22:5-11)

**[5] "Is not your wickedness great,
And your iniquities without end?**

**[6] "For you have taken pledges of your brothers without cause,
And stripped men naked.**

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

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

Then, Eliphaz accuses Job of a faulty view of God.

Attacking Job's theology (22:12-20)

**[13] "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 charge is that Job believes that God doesn't know what is going on. Heaven is so far removed from earth that He can't see. So...Job has behaved badly, confident that he would 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)

**[21] "Yield now and be at peace with Him;
Thereby good will come to you...**

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

¹⁰ You will notice that Eliphaz withholds his previous promise of God's restoration in exchange for Job's repentance.

¹¹ And what is Job doing as Eliphaz speaks? He is writhing in pain.

¹² Remember the attacks of the Sabeans and the Chaldeans against Job's flocks and herds.

¹³ Remember the "fire of God from heaven" (1:16) that consumed Job's 7,000 sheep.

Summarizing Eliphaz:

After all these speeches, what can we say about Eliphaz and his view of suffering?

There is a very certain and very consistent theme that runs through what he says. He consistently voices three thoughts.

First, when explaining the *why* of Job's suffering, there is only one explanation that comes to mind: 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 that there has to be a reason. God's moral universe is a zero-sum game: One sin merits one punishment; one misbehavior merits one trial. Job is suffering, therefore he must have done something bad.

Two, if sin is the reason for the problem of Job's suffering, the solution to the problem is repentance. Turn from your sin; turn to God.

Three, if you repent, God will bless you again as He had blessed you in the past.

It is a nice system he has put together. A nice formula for how life works. And we, who know the back-story to Job, know that Eliphaz is all wet.

Not that we can sin with impunity. No, sin comes with a price. And not that God doesn't judge sin. Of course He does. Not that repentance isn't important for the child of God after we sin. It is. And 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 is dead wrong. Job was, in fact, singled out for affliction because he was righteous. Eliphaz was wrong in accusing Job of gross sin and of turning away from God. Job never did any of the stuff he was accused of and he never did turn away from God.

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

Now, since Eliphaz was the leader of the gang of three friends, we have spent more time listening to him than we will to either Bildad or to Zophar. Job interacts with what they say and their speeches are important. But they both mostly echo what Eliphaz has said.

All I want to do is highlight some of the lowlights of their heretical counsel to Job. First, we'll listen to Bildad.

The Serious-Minded Traditionalist: Bildad

Who is Bildad?

Bildad is a Shuhite, perhaps descended from Shua, the friend of Jacob's son, Judah (see Genesis 38).

Picture Bildad as the staunch, ramrod straight traditionalist, the one who sees all issues in black and white and who prides himself on a straightforward, no-nonsense approach to solving life's dilemmas.

His first speech follows Eliphaz' first speech and Job's response. Job has completely demolished Eliphaz' arguments, but Bildad doesn't care. He just plows on ahead with exactly what Eliphaz has just erroneously said.

Bildad's First Speech (Job 8)

Reasoning just like Eliphaz (8:4-7)

***[4] "If your sons sinned against Him,
Then He delivered them into the power of their transgression.***

***[5] "If you would seek God
And implore the compassion of the Almighty,***

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

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

And 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)¹⁴

How can you get your life back? Repent. Seek God. (vv. 5, 7)¹⁵

It's Eliphaz' teaching one more time. That's Bildad's first speech. And his second speech is, again, same old, same old.

Job has rejected everything his friends have told him. Now Bildad, as Eliphaz had been, is deeply offended.

Bildad's Second Speech (Job 18)

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

[18:1] Then Bildad the Shuhite responded,

[2] "How long will you hunt for words?

Show understanding and then we can talk.

[3] "Why are we regarded as beasts,

As stupid in your eyes?"

So, 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)

*[5] "Indeed, the light of the wicked goes out,
And the flame of his fire gives no light..."*

[13] "His skin is devoured by disease,¹⁶

The firstborn of death devours his limbs..."

[18] "He is driven from light into darkness,

And chased from the inhabited world."¹⁷

¹⁴ Implies in verse 20 (and not subtly) that Job is not a man of integrity.

¹⁵ Also vv. 21-22.

¹⁶ Remember Job's affliction, a disease of the skin.

*[19] "He has no offspring or posterity among his people,
Nor any survivor where he sojourned."¹⁸*

*[21] "Surely such are the dwellings of the wicked,
And this is the place of him who does not know God."¹⁹*

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

Bildad's Third Speech (chapter 25)

[25:1] Then Bildad the Shuhite answered,

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

[3] "Is there any number to His troops?

And upon whom does His light not rise?

[4] "How then can a man be just with God?

Or how can he be clean who is born of woman?

[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 the son of man, that worm!"

The third friend sitting among the ashes with Job is Zophar, the Naamathite. We'll spend the least amount of time listening to Zophar.²⁰

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Remember that his ten children were all killed (chapter 1).

¹⁹ Like Eliphaz, Bildad withholds the previous promise of God's restoration upon Job's repentance at the end of this second speech.

²⁰ Zophar's *spiritual* heritage is traceable to the line of Cain (See Genesis 4:22), Naamah being a daughter four generations out from Cain. 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.

The Blunt and Tactless: Zophar

Who is Zophar?

Zophar is the least diplomatic and the least sophisticated of the three friends. He seems to be the kind of guy who shoots first and asks questions later. And he resorts to the most insulting word pictures yet to convey Job his perspective that Job is a wicked, wicked man.

It's not hard to imagine that Zophar has been chomping at the bit for a chance to put his two cents' worth into the debate.

Zophar's First Speech (Job 11)

He starts off by accusing Job of being a windbag with this,
[11: 1] Then Zophar the Naamathite answered,
[2] "Shall a multitude of words go unanswered,
And a talkative man be acquitted?

And then he expresses his longing for God to put Job in his place.
[5] "...would that God might speak,
And open His lips against you,
[6a] And show you the secrets of wisdom!

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

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

In other words, he is saying to his agonized friend, "*Job, you got off light!*"

And Zophar has the same perspective on the source of Job's troubles as Eliphaz and Bildad. It is SIN that brought about this terrible situation. And it is repentance that will bring about God's blessings.

[14] If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away,
And do not let wickedness dwell in your tents;

[15] "Then, indeed, you could lift up your face without moral defect,
And you would be steadfast and not fear.

That's the first speech. Now, listen to 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:

[4] "Do you know this from of old,
From the establishment of man on earth,
[5] That the triumphing of the wicked is short,
And the joy of the godless momentary?
[6] "Though his loftiness reaches the heavens,
And his head touches the clouds,
[7] He perishes forever like his refuse;
Those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?'...
[29] "This is the wicked man's portion from God,
Even the heritage 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, we are to picture Zophar sitting there, beaten. "*I got nothing.*"

So, what do we say to the counsel of Job's three friends? What do they say to us, today, who want to know why?

Conclusion:

Earlier this summer, we spent several weeks working our way through the book of Proverbs together. Over a couple of months' time we developed a few of the themes that Solomon addresses in Proverbs.

We saw that there is a wise way to live and we should pursue that wise way. I said that to do so is to "cultivate a 'knack' for life." Practicing wisdom - with respect to friendships, finances, sex, work, or marriage - is smart. Figuring out the wise way to navigate life is important.

Back on one of my bookshelves here at church is a book on Proverbs - a very good book, by the way) titled, Making Life Work.²¹

The book doesn't actually teach this, but you could get the idea from the title that IF you live a certain way THEN you can expect certain results.

And, of course, to a certain extent, that is true. Wise living does allow us to avoid some very avoidable problems.

But, life won't be reduced to scientific formula. There are few formulas that guarantee a long, healthy life, accident-free driving, financial security into retirement, or a conflict-free home.

Great planning is great, and may or may not result in your hoped-for outcome.

That's because "stuff happens."

And there is a deep longing within the human heart to know WHY what has happened has happened.

Job's friends believed that every loss was a proof of sin which was a call to repentance which would guarantee a promise of renewed blessing. What a nice, neat formula! Clearly, though, in Job's case their formula was dead wrong! Theirs was a two-part heresy.

One, they were **certain** of the cause of Job's suffering - and certainty is not available! Two, they **trusted** in their formula - and they should have trusted in God.

We can all give thanks for the work of the National Traffic Safety Board. And by all means, continue to enjoy NCIS and Elementary. But let's agree to put away our cosmic forensics.

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

²¹ By Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago.