

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(September 29, 2013)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: GOD...in the Storm**

(Studies in the book of Job)

### **Insensitive Clods**

(The friends of Job, part 2)

Study #5

#### **Introduction: The universal society of sufferers...**

Jerry Sittser is a professor of religion at Whitworth University, a Christian institution in Spokane, Washington. Sittser has written a number of books, most of them of a more scholarly nature.

The book for which he is best known, though, is A Grace Disguised, which details his own very personal journey through grief and loss.<sup>1</sup>

Early in the book, Sittser describes the night back in 1991 when he suffered his lifetime loss.

*“...it was dark. Ten minutes into our trip home I noticed an oncoming car on a lonely stretch of highway driving extremely fast. I slowed down at a curve, but the other car did not. It jumped its lane and smashed head-on into our minivan.*

*“I learned later that the other driver was drunk, driving eighty five miles per hour. His pregnant wife, who was with him, was killed in the crash.”*

Sittser goes on to describe watching, helpless, as his mother, his wife, and his youngest daughter all also died.

In the chaos that followed at the site of the collision he remembers *“the realization sweeping over me that I would soon plunge into a darkness from which I might never again emerge as a sane, normal, believing man.”*

Suffering and loss come to everybody, even if does not come as it did to Jerry Sittser. For him, in one instant, his life was irrevocably changed. For many, loss comes more slowly, less dramatically. But, again, loss - significant loss - is an unavoidable part of life for us all.

What does a Jerry Sittser need from his friends? More generally, what do people who have suffered loss, need, from their friends?

Losses come in all shapes and sizes.

You have lost a husband or a wife to cancer. You have lost a marriage to divorce. You have lost your health. You have lost a child. You have lost a job. You have suffered the loss of a cherished dream. You have lost your innocence.

You may remember the very day when you were given news - by a doctor, a family member, a friend - and thought to yourself, *“Life will never be the same. I wonder if I’ll ever be the same.”*

You are a card-carrying member of the Society of Sufferers. And so is your friend.

The people with whom you rub shoulders every day are among the walking wounded. They are hurtin’ units. What do they need? What do you have that you might offer them that would really help them?

The question is important because we who are followers of Jesus want to help. We want to be His hands and feet to the broken, hurting people who make up our broken world. You want to come alongside those who are suffering and be a healing presence.

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

<sup>1</sup> A Grace Disguised - Expanded Edition, Jerry Sittser, Zondervan, 1995, 2004.

### *Unfriendly heretics...*

Last Sunday we observed 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."*

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

God had allowed Satan to afflict Job to prove that Job would keep on loving God even if all of God's blessings were removed.

The theology of Job's friends was exactly wrong! Every piece of suffering someone experiences in this life cannot be tied to some particular sin they have committed.

That was last week. Today, while we won't ignore his friends' belief system, 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 a number of gifts our suffering friends would appreciate receiving from us, actually too many to list in one message. But the story of Job reveals two gifts - actually three - that Job longed to receive from his friends, one of which was given, two of which were cruelly and selfishly withheld.

We're going to look carefully at those gifts this morning and will resolve before God to not leave our suffering friends hanging.

First, let's look, briefly at the one really good gift that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar did give 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**

#### **Exhibit A: Job's Friends (Job, chapter 2)**

*[2:11] Now when Job's three friends heard of 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 lifted up their eyes at 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.

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 in a city trash heap for seven days and nights while a good friend who has lost everything scrapes himself with pottery to relieve the pressure from the boils that cover his body, head to toe.

But these three friends did give that gift. It was a priceless gift. We applaud them for this week-long service of silence.

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

#### **Exhibit B: YOU!**

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 1980. This was shortly after Kathy and I got married and before any of our kids were born. The church in Dallas where the funeral was held was full to overflowing, as Mom had lots of friends.

Being her son, I was standing at the door to the church as people filed out after the service was over. Lots of people had lots of things to say to me - and I don't recall one well-intentioned word.

I will never forget the tears streaming down the face of my friend, Bob, as he gave me a hug, spoke not a word, and then left.

It was his silence that touched me. 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 showing the way to help our own suffering friends by the gift of silent presence.

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

However, as our friends' suffering continues, or as their losses mount, or as their pain becomes chronic, they will need to hear words from us.

At some point words will be appropriate, necessary, and helpful. There is a limit to the help that wordlessness can provide.

When that time comes what do we say? What do our friends need to hear?

Once again, Job's friends ride to the rescue. They help us see what our friends need to hear. Sadly, they guide us by way of a very negative example.

Before we turn to Job's friends, though, think with me about the power of words to bless.

## **Our Suffering Friends Need Wise God-Words**

### **Exhibit A: From Solomon - Beautiful Words**

Some words are beautiful. They are beautifully crafted and are put together like a piece of art. These words satisfy the hungry heart. King Solomon describes these words in Proverbs.

***[25:11] Like apples of gold in settings of silver,  
Is a word spoken in right circumstances.***

Other words, not so much.

Some words are thrown together haphazardly. Some speeches are ugly because they are untrue and are filled with inappropriate words. They tear down rather than build up.

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

Think, too, about the power of friendship. We read in the Bible about a friendship where a friend spoke *God-words* that met the need of the moment for his friend.

### **Exhibit B: From David and Jonathan - God-words**

The ten years before David became KING David were filled with terror and hardship as he 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 Jonathan, the son of King Saul. At a certain point, when David was near his lowest point, Jonathan went to David's fugitive outpost.

***[1 Samuel 23:15] Now David became aware 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, arose and went to David at Horesh, AND ENCOURAGED HIM IN GOD.***

What a wonderful phrase.

Jonathan **“encouraged [David] in God.”** Jonathan reminded David of God’s promises. He urged David to put aside fear. He assured David of God’s goodness and of His presence.

From that one phrase, Jonathan **“...encouraged him in God”** you and I get 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 dream of speaking words that can draw our friend to trust God.

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 because, for one thing, they were untrue.

### Exhibit C: Job’s Three Friends (NOT!)

*Words that are unhelpful because UNRUE*

Mistaken in their “meta-narrative”...

Remember that the narrative around which they had built their theology was this:

*God’s moral universe is a zero-sum game. Commit a sin, suffer. Commit a big sin, suffer a lot.*

That is exactly what Eliphaz, the leader of the three friends, said in his first speech.

**[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 iniquity**

**And those who sow trouble harvest it.**

Message? If you’re suffering, you’re just getting what you deserve. The other friends, Bildad<sup>2</sup> and Zophar<sup>3</sup>, said much the same thing in their own speeches.

<sup>2</sup> [18:9] **“A snare seizes him (i.e. - the wicked) by the heel, And a trap snaps shut on him.**

**[10] “A noose for him is hidden in the ground,**

**And a trap for him on the path...**

**[19] “He has no offspring or posterity among his people,**

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, blessings would flow.

**[5:20] “In famine [God] will redeem you from death, And in war from the power of the sword.**

**[21] “You will be hidden from the scourge of the tongue, And you will not be afraid of violence when it comes.**

**[22] “You will laugh at violence and famine, And you will not be afraid of wild beasts...**

**[24] “You will know that your tent is secure, For you will visit your abode and fear no loss.**

**[25] “You will know also that your descendants will be many, And your offspring as the grass of the earth.**

**[26] “You will come to the grave in full vigor, Like the stacking of grain in its season.”<sup>4</sup>**

(And, again, Bildad<sup>5</sup> and Zophar<sup>6</sup> fell right in line with much the same thoughts.)

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*Nor any survivor where he sojourned.*

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

<sup>3</sup> [20:23] **“When he (i.e. - the wicked) fills his belly, God will send His fierce anger on him**

**And will rain it on him while he is eating.**

**[24] “He may flee from the iron weapon, But the bronze bow will pierce him...**

**[27] “The heavens will reveal his iniquity, And the earth will rise up against him.**

**[28] “The increase of his house will depart; His possessions will flow away in the day of His anger.**

**[29] “This is the wicked man’s portion from God, Even the heritage decreed to him by God.”**

<sup>4</sup> As one of my commentaries has it, “The friends lavish Job with false optimism (6:15-20) that is only swallowed up by his boundless grief.”

<sup>5</sup> [8:5] **“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**

The problem with these ideas is that, while it makes sense that they would be true, it's 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>7</sup>

Don't listen to me. Listen to Jesus on this one.

One time, some folks brought a report to Jesus about a horrible crime committed against some Galilean Jews who had been murdered by Pontius Pilate while they were offering sacrifices to God.

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 suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? [3] “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”***

Jesus warned against jumping to any conclusions about the sinfulness of people based on something bad happening to them.<sup>8</sup>

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*And restore your righteous estate.*

*[7] “Though your beginning was insignificant,*

*Yet your end will increase greatly.*

*<sup>6</sup> [11:17] “Your life would be brighter than noonday;*

*Darkness would be like the morning.*

*[18] “Then you would trust, because there is hope;*

*And you would look around and rest securely.*

*[19] “You would lie down and none would disturb you,*

*And many would entreat your favor.*

<sup>7</sup> Some might 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 quite 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.”*

<sup>8</sup> These guys are wrestling with the issue of theodicy. To deal with theodicy is to deal with the theme of God's righteous rule on earth. Of all the theories about the

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

Remember that when you hear someone proclaiming that someone else's suffering is the judgment of God. Jesus didn't go there.

Jesus wants us to know that in this life, stuff happens.

In His sovereign ordering of history, God causes ***[Matthew 5:45]...His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.***

So, the friends' premise was flawed. It is not possible to look at someone's bad fortune and come to an ironclad conclusion that they must have sinned to have deserved that outcome.

BUT, since that was their premise, they felt forced to come to a conclusion about what kind of a guy their friend, Job, really was to fit their premise!

...therefore, mistaken in their accusations (22:4-9)

When Eliphaz spoke for the third time he accused Job of great wickedness.

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 on their way without help, and that he had taken advantage of orphans.<sup>9</sup>

Of course Job never did any of this stuff. He was a model of godliness and charity. (See God's assessment of him, ch. 1)

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book of Job out there, we can at least say that this book sets out to defend or explain theodicy.

<sup>9</sup> All three of the friends speak vaguely about the wicked, but there is no question that when they do so they are speaking about Job.

This is simply a classic case of someone who has adopted a narrative and then, rather than adjusting the narrative to fit the data, changes the data to fit the narrative!<sup>10</sup>

Despite Job being the man of integrity they had all known him to be, he was suffering; therefore he must have been secretly committing all kinds of sins for which God GOT HIM!

So, their words weren't helpful because their words weren't true. Additionally, their words weren't helpful because they weren't appropriate.

They weren't like "*apples of gold in settings of silver.*" They were exactly the wrong words spoken in precisely the wrong way.

*Words that are unhelpful because INAPPROPRIATE*

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar were giving philosophical explanations about the reason for suffering to a man whose world had fallen apart at the seams.

That is inappropriate. It is the rare person who is sitting on life's ash heap scraping her boils who wants her friend to wax eloquent on the cosmic reason behind her suffering.

The words of Job's friends didn't help because they were untrue and because they were poorly-placed.

If you would be helpful, when you are with your suffering friend you will avoid falsehoods like the plague AND will keep in your mind that beautiful image of "*apples of gold in settings of silver.*"

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<sup>10</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).

## Exhibit D: YOU

*Leave off explanations and unfounded promises*

There are the falsehoods of trite phrases and worn-out clichés. When we join our friend on the ash heap of loss, let's all agree to keep our trite sayings and clichés to ourselves.

- It's always darkest before the dawn.
- When God closes a door He opens a window.
- I know just how you feel.
- Time will heal.
- Life goes on.
- Everything happens for a reason
- Look around. You can always find someone worse off than yourself.
- Count your blessings.<sup>11</sup>

And what about explanation? The time will come for that - but later. Not now. Not when the wound is fresh. Probably not until your friend asks you, "*How could God allow this to happen to me?*"

And then, for what it's worth, my counsel would be to wade into the explaining pool slowly.

I have tried, on occasion, to explain, to the best of my ability and based on my understanding of Scripture's teaching on the subject, the reason for evil in the world today.

I've tried in lots of one-on-one conversations. I've tried in small group settings. I've even given it a shot during sermons.

Engaging in these kinds of discussions and trying to explain why and how our broken world works (or doesn't work!) is important. I think we benefit when we talk about these and other "first order of magnitude" kinds of issues.

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<sup>11</sup> Or these: Think of all your precious memories; God needs him more than you do; He is happy now because he's with God; It's better to have loved and lost than never loved at all.

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

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

Throw out, too, guarantees of perfectly restored blessing - unless you know of a promise that I haven't found in Scripture that God's people won't die of disease, starvation, or persecution.<sup>12</sup>

One thing we learn from Job's story is that we don't know why this or that suffering has come to someone.

So, among the statements we should be willing to make to our suffering friend is a clear, unequivocal, "*I don't know.*"

Clearly, if Job's experience is any guide, suffering may have little or nothing to do with personal guilt. And if we've been thinking that God will always bless the generally good person and will punish the generally bad person, well, Job's experience turns that thinking on its head!

We will rarely be able to discern for certain the actual causes of suffering we endure or that come to our friends. So, we'll put aside clichés. We'll be cautious with explanations. We'll throw out easy formulas.

And we'll learn to point our friends toward a transcendent God who can be trusted.

#### *Point to a transcendent God*

There is no higher calling than this. Dream about the possibility that your words could point your friend past her sufferings to God.

It'll happen that in the middle of a session of listening to your friend pour out her heart to you, expressing her pain, you sense that the time is right to simply say: "*God.*"

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<sup>12</sup> Jeff Harrison told me that Dallas Seminary professor, Buist Fanning said to be careful to not over-promise what God will deliver in this life, remembering that it is impossible to over-promise what He will do in the life to come.

And saying "*God*" means that you speak about your own experience with God. You point out what you know of His character from Scripture. You tell about His works. You talk about His Son, and what we learn about God from Jesus' life, His love, His death and resurrection.

And your friend is touched by your wisely chosen, long-awaited for, "*apples of gold in settings of silver*" God-words.

In about three more Sundays, we'll get a wonderful lesson in how to speak God-words to our suffering friend when we come to the speech of the young man, Elihu.

Early on in his journey of grief and loss, Job expresses his desperate need for what he calls "an advocate." He longs for someone who will help him, will speak up for him.

Elihu becomes that 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.

Our friends who are passing through deep valleys will greatly benefit from our silent presence, from our refusal to give trite formulas or too-early explanations, and from our wise God-words.

But we won't be willing to give silence and we won't find the words that bless if we aren't moved by compassion. Nothing touches 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.

**Conclusion:** And beyond all these things, put on love...

#### *Oh, the love of Jesus*

Love is what gets an exhausted mom or dad out of bed over and over in the middle of the night to care for a sick or distressed child. Love motivates us to help like nothing else can.

Love is what drove Jesus to teach and heal and cast out demons and wash feet.

It was what drove Him to offer Himself on a Roman cross for you. He said, [*John 15:13*] **“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”**

And that is what Jesus did. He laid down His life for you and for me because He loved us.<sup>13</sup>

What a contrast when we look from Jesus and His dealings with hurt and needy people to the friends of Job.

Watch as they interact with Job from beginning to end and you will see that they did not help him. But, as bad as their people-helping technique was, you would never conclude that their unhelpfulness was because of bad technique.

No. The primary problem was that they didn't love. Following that initial seven day stretch of silence we are MOST struck with the absence of any offer of comfort or compassion to their friend.

Job calls them all **“sorry comforters”** (16:2). Amen. They were. I don't really even need to say a lot here. It is patently obvious.

The further we move into their speeches, the more these three remind us of cold-hearted Pharisees, not compassionate friends.

They went to Job because of their desire to comfort him (chapter 2), but increasingly seem incapable of showing him any comfort at all.

What happened? Why did three guys who started so well on the path to helping end so poorly? Why did three friends' fail at the test of love?

Well, I think I know why. They were scared.

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<sup>13</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.**

*Perfect love casts out fear*

Job knew that his friends were shackled by fear as they dealt with him (See 6:21ff). He saw that they considered him a **“terror.”**<sup>14</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, hey, if calamity struck YOU, it could strike ME, too.

It can be a frightening thing to look raw suffering square in the face.<sup>15</sup>

Our New Testaments tell us that [*1 John 4:18*] **... perfect love casts out fear.**

True enough. But the converse is just as true. Fear will cast out love. And if we would help our suffering friends we will learn to enter the battle to defeat fear with love.

Not surprisingly, Jesus, the most loving Person who ever lived, shows us the way to join that battle.

*A final thought about the gift of presence*

We watch as a fascinating scene unfolds near the mid-point of His three year ministry.

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<sup>14</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).

<sup>15</sup> Job exposes the selfish motivation that drives their attempted reassurances. They are so terrified by his suffering (6:21) that they seek to appease it with unsolicited simplistic solutions intended merely to assuage their own terror (6:22-23).



The Lord had been traveling throughout all the cities and villages of Galilee, *[Matthew 9:35] ...teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.*

That is a description of a full and active life. Jesus is on the go. Life is good. The kingdom is advancing.

Immediately before the report of all of this activity, though, Matthew tells us that Jesus cast a demon out of a man. The report of that exorcism is followed by a statement by those who were increasingly opposed to Him, the Pharisees.

*[34] But the Pharisees were saying, “He casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons.”*

These two events, placed one right after the other, are perfect contrasts. One contains the news of the kingdom’s progress; the other, news of opposition to the kingdom.

Opposition can be scary - and there would be every reason for Jesus to focus on the opposition of a powerful group like the Pharisees. They could certainly ruin a party but they could also ruin a life! And focusing on opponents can very easily lead to a shackling fear.

Jesus, though, wasn’t shackled by fear of the Pharisees’ BECAUSE He saw (i.e. - looked at!) *[36] the people, [and] He felt compassion for them because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.*

That focus on the needs of hurting people propelled Him forward into a life that continued to be all about loving, all about serving, all about giving.

As we close, look at the two models we are given: Jesus and the friends of Job.

The friends allowed fear to gain a foothold in their hearts. That fear forced them to construct a belief system that controlled all outcomes: Obey and get blessed; disobey and get whacked.

Their fear also led to self-absorption and killed love. Fearful, they were no help to their friend.

Jesus looked beyond scary opponents to the needs of hurting people and found freedom to love. His emotional investment meant that He was not only physically present, He was personally present.

Following Jesus, you can be a powerful force in the life of your suffering friend.

Ask God to use you in your friend’s life. Look past your fear to his or her plight. Put yourself in your friend’s shoes and invest yourself fully in their trouble. Be PRESENT,

When you approach your hurting friend in that spirit you are putting yourself in a position to know when to give the gift of silent presence, when to speak, and even what to say that will really help, in Jesus’ Name.