

I. Intro.

A. “So you think you have it tough?” It seems everywhere I’ve traveled people love to tell hardship stories

1. They love to describe how rough their childhood was and how rugged you have to be to live where they live

a) So people in Kansas or Nebraska talk about the winds that practically knock you over, and people in Mississippi scoff if they hear Northerners complain about summer humidity around the Great Lakes

b) People from Minnesota & upstate New York like to brag to Southerners about the snow drifts and subzero temperatures they endure, but the hardy folks in Alaska or Manitoba just laugh at those stories

c) And then there are the stories of hardship through poverty ...

when I was a kid, my mother would talk about her days growing up during the Great Depression. She wasn’t joking when she said sometimes the lunch she took to school was just an apple and an onion sandwich.

2. Sometimes there are amazingly unlucky people who have one calamity after another happen to them all at the same time.

B. But none of us, no matter what we have endured, (not even preaching w/ a cough & froggy throat) can match the hardships and losses faced by the biblical character Job ... let’s review his story, because we only heard snippets of it in our Scripture readings

II. Overview of story of Job

A. Imagine you are a great, wealthy & respected man who reveres God, way back in the days of Noah or Abraham.

1. You have huge herds of livestock, a wife and ten vibrant children who live a full life holding large family parties at each others’ homes

2. In one terrible day you lose all your oxen, donkeys, sheep & camels and most of your servants ...

a) all your wealth has vanished

b) Then as if things couldn’t get any worse, your oldest son’s house collapses while he’s hosting a party for your children. All ten of your children are suddenly dead!

3. This came after the angels in heaven had a powwow with God, and one among them, called The Accuser, also showed up.

a) When God started boasting to The Accuser about how righteous his man Job was, the Accuser questioned Job’s reasons for being so good. In fact he believed that if suffering hit Job, he would curse God to his face.

b) Because God believed this Job was an intrinsically good man, he gave permission for the Accuser to strike Job with calamities, which I just described.

c) When even those tragedies did not cause Job to sin, the accuser told God it was because of God’s blessings & protection on Job.

So once again God allowed the Accuser to strike Job, this time harder, by removing his good health, sending him painful boils & blisters all over his body.

This would make anyone miserable enough to lose the badge of righteousness.

B. So now we have set up the first of today’s Scriptures

1. In the face of unimaginable losses of nearly everything he held dear, Job still maintains faith in God. Despite losing absolutely everything except his wife & his own life, he won’t give up on God

2. Hearing of Job’s terrible misfortunes, 3 of his friends from out of town all come to try and cheer him up

a) Most of this book is taken up with a theological debate of sorts:

His 3 well-meaning friends try to console him ... but they end up just challenging & disputing with him in his grief

b) Job, on other hand, responds with laments ... against his friends, and also against God

3. Later God has a disputation with Job, who has questioned God’s judgment ... Eventually Job gives in to the mystery of God’s great love and knowledge, even when he can’t explain it

C. In the end, God is displeased with Job’s 3 friends, but he allows them to be restored to good standing when 2 things happen:

1. 1st they have to offer up burnt offerings to the one true God, in the presence of Job

2. 2nd, Job intercedes for them in prayer (pay attention in book of Job to the interactions between the one who grieves and those who seek to console him ... We’ll come back to that)

3. The story closes with a reversal of fortunes for Job ... a happy ending of sorts where he is made wealthier than he was before, while he & his wife have 10 new children!

a) But I didn’t choose these passages from Job so I could preach that God will restore your losses, & make everything right for you after you suffer. You know that doesn’t always happen, and Job knew that too.

b) I recently heard a real life story that reminded me, on a much smaller and less catastrophic scale, of someone with a faith like Job’s, even in the face of heartbreaking loss

III. Story of “Pierre” (not real name)

A. A friend of mine recently had a conversation with “Pierre” a prominent Mennonite church leader from a foreign country

1. Known internationally as an apostle, but now basically retired, in recent years Pierre has usually declined any preaching invitations so that he could care for his ailing wife “Marie”.

a) A series of strokes over 2 decades had left her more & more dependent on him, to the point that one day she asked him to pray for God to let her go to heaven because he (Pierre) still had an important ministry for the churches in their country, & she didn’t want to hold back this ministry.

b) But Pierre said, “No I cannot do that. I made vows to you before God on our wedding day, & I will keep them.”

c) Then she insisted to go with him on some of these preaching trips so that his ministry would continue, even into some politically dangerous situations.

d) So with a few adjustments to his schedule and arrangements, they traveled together, Pierre & Marie, even to places where she slept through the gunfire outside and he showed her the next morning the bullet holes on the hotel room walls

2. This past Easter morning Marie was by then in a coma under the watch of her children, so Pierre was in an airport preparing to board a flight to preach Easter messages somewhere.

a) He had already said his goodbyes to Marie earlier, but it was unclear how long she might yet live.

b) While still in the airport, he got a cell phone call from his son to say that Marie was about to pass away & asking Pierre to talk to her.

With the other phone held to his wife’s ear, he told her it was OK to let go and go be with Jesus

With that, she took one last deep breath and was gone.

B. Now just recently, **some long-time American friends sat & listened to Pierre retell the story of his recent loving years of caring for Marie in her steadily declining health**

1. They sat with him to listen to the story of her death

2. They had many stories of their own they hoped to tell their friend, whom they hadn’t seen for years ... but instead they just listened, sympathized with him, and marveled at God’s work.

3. It was in retelling this love story that Pierre uttered some remarkable words that my friend remembered clearly:

a) In describing his long gradual journey of losing Marie, he proclaimed, “God lives in broken hearts.” (repeat)

4. Certainly at the time of this conversation, Pierre was still intensely feeling the pain of losing his wife ...

- a) yet this long-time apostle of Jesus Christ could see the imprints of God at work in all of this.
- b) Through his deep reliance on the power of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, Pierre was living out “a hopeful grief” (as we have called this series)

IV. I’d like to close this message reflecting back on subject of grief as Job illuminates it in the Bible

A. What can we learn about the experience of grief from the story of Job?

- 1. I’m suggesting 2 pairs of learnings ...
- 2. 1st has to do with how we relate to God when we’re grieving
- 3. 2nd has to do with how we relate to people around us in situations of grief

B. 1st pair of learnings asks “What does Job teach us about relating to God when loss has rocked our world?”

- 1. We learn that Job is fully human: he feels real pain & does not suppress negative feelings
 - a) Listen to his words in 3:11 – “*Why wasn’t I just born dead? Why didn’t I die as I came from the womb?*” ... this is raw & not whitewashed!
 - b) He goes on in 7:11, to make it clear he won’t shut up -- “*I cannot keep from speaking. I must express my anguish. My bitter soul must complain.*”
 - c) Job is not stuffing his feelings and those negative feelings even get turned toward God

Job does not “play nice” with God. Instead he blames God in angry terms.

Listen to his words from chapter 10 and consider if you ever talk to God like this --

*I will say to God, ‘Don’t simply condemn me—
tell me the charge you are bringing against me.*

What do you gain by oppressing me?

*Why do you reject me, the work of your own hands,
while smiling on the schemes of the wicked?*

- d) You & I may have learned we must always talk reverently to God, but there are plenty of godly characters in the Bible who modeled honesty over political correctness ... God can handle our painful honesty.
2. Now despite Job’s harsh & raw words toward God, the 2nd thing we learn is that in the midst of all this overwhelming loss, he does not turn his back completely on God

- a) Deep into his defense of his own innocence and lashing out at God, we find perhaps the most well-known quote in the whole book,

*“But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,
and he will stand upon the earth at last.*

*²⁶ And after my body has decayed,
yet in my body I will see God!^a*

²⁷ I will see him for myself.

Yes, I will see him with my own eyes.

I am overwhelmed at the thought!

- b) Amazing isn't it? Even when he's angry & despairing, at the bottom of the barrel, Job still pursues the God who seems to have abandoned him!

Could you & I do the same, if our world were falling apart?

When strong, robust faith seems too much for us to muster, Job inspires us that maybe it's possible to have that little tiny mustard seed of faith & that will be enough to get us through

C. 2nd pair of learnings is not about us & God in the midst of grief – It's about us & our friends or family in the face of grief

1. First of all, from Job chapter 2 we learn the ministry of presence with someone who's grieving

- a) When Job's 3 friends first arrived to comfort him, they made their smartest decision in the whole story: they said nothing at all
- b) For 7 days, they sat with him in silence, they gave him the gift of their presence, rather than the unwanted gift of well-meaning but hurtful words
- c) I invite us to follow the example of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar in chapter 2: 12 & 13, but not the example of the rest of their behavior

When our friends & loved ones are grieving, let us be spare with our words of advice or explanation about why the loss happened.

But let us be generous with our time & sympathetic presence if they are open to it ...

(a) As Cheryl Snyder and JD Smucker noted 2 weeks ago in their own stories, don't presume that grieving people are “over it” a year later, or 3 years later, or longer than that ...

(b) One of the greatest gifts you can give is to sincerely inquire or check in with them periodically about their grief journey, even if they appear to have returned to “normal” life

2. The final lesson I found from Job about human relationships in the midst of grief surprised me some: It's that grieving is a mutual process in relationships.

- a) It's not just a one-way action where the one who suffered the loss is the receiver, and the one doing the comforting is the giver.
- b) Did you pay attention to what happens in Job ch. 42 after Job admits that God knows best?

God comes down hard on Job’s 3 friends for their misguided words to Job ... So just how do Eliphaz, Bildad & Zophar get back in God’s good graces?

(a) They have to offer burnt offerings but even that’s not enough because Job has to pray for them

(b) *Reread 42:8b-9*

c) The actions of the one doing the grieving have a strong influence on how healing & restoration turn out ... This is true not only for themselves but for those supporting them.

As the story is told here, the faithful prayer of Job not only helps his friends, it also helps himself because God only restored Job’s fortunes, WHEN he prayed for his friends.

It’s as if there was one last test for the sincerity and depth of Job’s righteousness.

d) Sometimes the supporters actually need the one in grief to help themselves to live more fully.

Grieving people are not only recipients of gifts. They also have gifts to share with those who came bearing casseroles, cards, childcare, and the gift of supportive presence.

When Pierre met with local Goshen friends to retell his story, both sides gave & received life-affirming gifts.

Two Sundays ago I think most of us here in worship received profound gifts from JD Smucker and Cheryl Snyder even though they were the ones who had lost so much.

V. Conclusion

A. Grief educator Stephen Jenkinson has said, **“Grief is a way of loving the world anyway. Love [is] a way of grieving what has not yet passed away. Both are skills of the heart, and both have to be learned.”**

(from “Way of Grief”, www.orphanwisdom.com)

1. As Xians, where else do we learn the twin skills of grieving, and loving life if not in the community of faith?
2. And who else can better be our grief teachers than those already walking that journey, IF we actually hear their stories & allow them to teach us

B. The shared work of hopeful grief is one of the purposes for which God created communities of faith.

1. Let us bravely enter the spaces of loss in our own lives and, when invited, in others’ lives
2. In that way, together, those spaces may be transformed by the love & hope that comes only thru the resurrection power of Christ.