

Sermon by Bob Brown on Sunday AM 3/15/09

"Gentle Gifts" - Job 32-37

I have been calling the book of Job "The Book of Joy" since we began this series in early February; now we only have two more sermons left, after today. In two weeks we get to the exciting and surprising conclusion of this book of joy!

For the last 29 chapters we have been reading about Job and his three well-meaning friends: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite. Notice that the writer left out Dadgum the Termite (thanks to John Ortberg for that one). They have been arguing about God's justice and man's response to suffering, in relation to His justice. For all of their talking, they have gotten absolutely nowhere. They still are accusing Job of being a sinner; Job is still saying that he did nothing to deserve what he is going through.

Sitting on the sidelines through all of this has been a young man named Elihu the Buzite. He begins speaking to Job and the others by saying, *"I am young in years, and you are old; that is why I was fearful, not daring to tell you what I know. I thought age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom. But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, which gives him understanding. It is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right."* (Job 32:6-9)

What Elihu is saying here is something that all of us have learned the hard way: Elders should be wise, but sometimes the elders are not wise. Sometimes the aged do not understand justice.

The theologian Martin Marty said, "We need a way of holding on to God when it feels as if God has let go of us."

That's how Job feels and that's how we feel at times. Job is stuck; none of the things that were so perfect about God a few weeks ago seem real anymore. It's like he is in brain freeze. We may feel frozen in our spiritual lives when we've lost a loved one, a job, or even when we can no longer do what we've always been able to do before. When we experience physical pain, spiritual grief and financial loss as Job has, we can even forget who we are.

Maybe we experience this kind of total melt-down when we get that "positive" report from the doctor that we were sure would be "negative". Those are the kinds of things in our lives that shatter dreams and devastate lives. We can feel like failures as a parent, a student, a worker,

or even a friend. It hurts worse if you feel like you have prayed and were sure it would work out as you had planned and it doesn't.

The question for each of us is this: Can anyone hold on to God, can any human hold on to His love in the face of insurmountable suffering? In the midst of that, the hardest thing to remember is that suffering is the real test of real love.

Job's question was not, "Why am I in such pain?" but rather, "God, why am I suffering, I have done everything required of me?" Here's where we get it wrong much of the time as believers; this is what we forget in the good times: If God answered every one of our questions, if He gave us what we want when we want it, how would we ever grow in our spiritual walk with Him? Testing is a way of learning to grow up spiritually.

In all of these chapters that this young man Elihu is speaking, he never accuses Job of any particular sin that would cause the predicament that he is in. He does, however, point out that Job is in error in the way he responds to God and His justice. This young man has figured out that God might just use suffering, not to punish a person, but through it help them find a larger purpose in life.

What a gentle gift this young man has found as a follower of God. His whole premise of life seems to have been pulled from the life of Jesus and the pages of the New Testament in which we find so much comfort. When we pay attention to the gifts that God has given us, and pay less attention to how other believers are living out their lives, we become better stewards of those gifts and better servants of our Lord.

For us, our greatest test just might be to learn to trust God's absolute amazing grace and goodness, even though we don't understand why our lives are going the way they are. We each have to learn to place our faith in a Great God, who is good beyond measure, not just in the good times and in the good things of life.

Remember Peter? After the resurrection of Jesus, when He met the disciples for breakfast on the beach, Jesus asked Peter three times, and "Do you love me"?

Peter was hurt, He thought Jesus should know the answer after the first time, but he was probably also having to swallow some pride at what the other disciples must be thinking about him. We are like that; we sometimes seem more concerned with what others think about us than what God thinks.

All of the disciples of Jesus sat at his feet as He taught, they walked with Him as he pointed out many lessons from life, they were with Him in the synagogue, on the streets, in homes and in other countries as He healed the sick, raised the dead, performed miraculous signs and wonders and even cast out demons, but they didn't get it.

Knowing about Jesus, even knowing who He is and what He has done is not enough. Reading His Word, teaching His thoughts and praying are all necessary, but that in itself is not enough. It has to be personal, between you and Jesus, or you miss the whole purpose for His coming to this earth to die for you so that you can have eternal life.

Job knew God personally, Elihu shows a tremendous knowledge beyond the mere traditions of his day, and he speaks of God as one who has met Him. Gaining wisdom is a life long pursuit for each one of us. No one can afford to assume that when we have found bits and pieces of wisdom that we have attained all we need. As Elihu said at the beginning of his talk, age and wisdom do not count for much if we fail to understand that God is always just.

Elihu's point to Job was that God had spoken over and over to him. He spoke in dreams (Job 33:15-18), through suffering (Job 33:19-22) and through angels (Job 33:23, 24), but Job was already aware of this. So Elihu accused Job of not listening to God, but in reality this was also untrue.

All four of these guys have an element of truth in what they are saying. Sadly, these nuggets of truth are hidden under layers of false assumptions and personal conclusions. Just because we have a wealth of biblical knowledge and a lot of life's experiences, it can't all be called wisdom. We each have to make sure that our conclusions are consistent with what the Word of God says. A partial theology of God can be very dangerous.

Once, when a teacher of the Law questioned Jesus about the greatest commandment, he commended Jesus for knowing the right answer. *"When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God'"* (Mark 12:34). There is another passage of Scripture in the New Testament that states *"But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves...having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them."* (1 Tim. 3: 1-5)

In this book of Job, there are 33 chapters of talk, by four different friends of Job, and only the youngest, the least expected of them all, gets the main issue of Job right. He states that Job does not understand how upright and just God really is in his dealings with Job.

Job eventually will admit that he missed it, that his sin was misunderstanding and misrepresenting the absolute righteous character of God, but only after he has heard from God Himself. Maybe that is where we need to start, realizing that we are more concerned with our own righteousness and pride, and put God on the back burner of our lives until He justifies Himself to us.

Prayer: Father, It is to You alone that we owe our lives. Thank You for Your righteousness, and justice. Help me to live in you and for you with my whole life. When things as though they can't get any worse in my life, allow me to see your hope and salvation, shining through your gentle grace and the gifts of wisdom and discernment in myself and others. Thank you for your precious gift of light and understanding, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.