We are in the third show of our Job series and we’re looking at the mystery of suffering. Today’s show is called the Uselessness of Platitudes. We’re going to look at what happens to and through the people around Job as he is plunged into this deep suffering.

We know that Job is a pious and blameless man. That word pious was a strange word for me as a non-Catholic. I didn’t hear it very often. Typically, if we did hear it, it was understood to mean something along the lines of legalistic, which means a rule follower. That’s not actually what the word means. The word means religious but not in a rote way; religious in a very devoted and reverent way. So, he was both pious and blameless, he was happy and content. Then the adversary, Satan, accuses him before God in front of the whole court. He argues that Job’s virtue is selfish, that it’s not genuine and so God permits Job to be tested. Blow after blow falls, and Satan finally deprives Job of his possessions and of his children, but Job remains faithful and then he’s attacked physically and we’re going to kind of begin there.

He becomes ill and disfigured and he accepts that, with the same resignation that he accepted the other events through which he suffered. What we’ll see, ultimately, is that God removes the hedge of protection around Job and when he does, he allows Satan to attack him. At this point then, Job’s three friends hear of his predicament and they all come together and they’re going to comfort Job, right? So, for 7 days they just sit with him and they don’t say a thing and that’s pretty interesting. Seven, we know, is the number of completion or divinity. It’s a perfect number, or a complete number. We see Job’s suffering is so deep, at this point, that he starts to cry out in lamentation but, he’s not despairing, he’s just confused.

So, his three friends try to console him after they have been sitting in silence with him for 7 days. Job begins the dialogue and it’s provoked by his friend’s failure to understand why he’s suffering. Of course, he doesn’t understand it either, but they consider his suffering to be a punishment for sin and we know from the first show; that was the general view at the time that, all suffering is punishment. Actually, that’s how I grew up too. So, it was a whole new idea for me and God used the book of Job to teach me that it’s not always that way. So, we’re looking at that, through his story. We know also that Job, this book, or the author of Job was probably basing the story on a man that actually lived, but it doesn’t mean, necessarily, that all of the details of the story are exact. It’s meant to be a work of wisdom genre. So, it’s a literary device that teaches something moral or religious and that’s what we’re looking at.

So, Job insists that he has not sinned, that he’s blameless. His friends in turn invite him to humbly recognize his fault and beg God’s forgiveness. Job never actually says that he’s completely free of sin. What he does say though, over and over, is that his suffering is greater than any his faults deserve, at least in his estimation. On the surface it seems like he’s accusing God of injustice but that’s not really so; he’s in pain, he’s confused, he can’t make out why God is sending him all these calamities. We know by the privilege of living after Christ, and his crucifixion and resurrection that in fact, in this life, God doesn’t always reward everyone according to his or her merits; that will happen in the life to come, if it doesn’t happen here. That’s why Jesus says that many of the last will be first and the first will be last. So, if God sometimes allows suffering to someone who seems
to be blameless, or even is, as Job was said to be by God himself and we know that he hadn’t sinned at all to deserve it - it wasn’t a punishment, is what I’m saying - the suffering that he was experiencing was not a punishment for sin. So, if God does do that, then his purpose in doing so is to train us in virtue and to make our merits evident; not only to other people around us but to ourselves.

Job is often commended for his patience and it’s kind of interesting that people credit to Job this sort of extraordinary patience because he doesn’t just suffer in silence. That was one of the things I was told in my early formation as a Christian, I was told over and over, ‘you should never ask God why’ and I thought, “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” I mean “I would ask anybody why. Why can’t I ask God why? Is it a lack of faith to ask him why? I don’t think so.” And I think that’s kind of what we see here with Job and that’s, as I said, that’s where I learned it really.

But Job’s three friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, they keep interrupting him because they want to try to convince him that he is at fault. But Job knows otherwise, and he refuses to plead guilty to sin that he didn’t commit and that’s to his credit. But before even the friends enter the scene Job’s wife shows up and it is, boy she is a piece of work. But, what’s interesting for us I think as part of our discussion today, is that job’s wife and his friends are all being used to tempt him. It’s like the sufferings that he has endured so far are not even enough, so Satan is going to use his wife and his friends to tempt him further to sin. So, we see the dialogue between Job and his friends is actually the meat of the whole book. Between chapters 3 and 31 we have this poetic discourse between Job and his wife and his friends.

Eliphaz speaks first in chapters 4 and 5 and he is thought to be older. He speaks with the moderation of advanced age and experience. Then Bildad, he is in chapter 8 and actually they show up a couple of times. It’s sort of a back-and-forth but we see him first in chapter 8. He is kind of prosy it’s almost like he’s proud of his vocabulary or at least the beautiful way he can speak. Then Zophar; he kind of shows us this excitability of youth. He’s pretty adamant, as many young adults can be. Then Elihu; his monologue is in chapters 32 through 37 and all of that is poetry. It’s presented to us in poetry. Elihu’s monologue is actually thought by scripture Scholars to be an insertion, a later insertion to the book; probably to sort of wrap up the last parts and to maybe prepare Job to hear God. Then God speaks in chapters 38 through 41 and then Job responds to God and both of those are also poetry and then there’s what’s called an epilogue in chapter 42 verses 7 through 17 and that’s in a narrative format. We talked about this last week, but I just wanted to kind of reiterate it to sort of give us some structure to our discussion.

So, his reaction to begin with is, you know, he’s mourning, of course; he tears his robe, he shaves his head, he falls to the ground and then he worships. So, even in his grief he is still praising God. That’s what we call a sacrifice of praise actually; you know when it’s hard to praise, that’s when you know for sure that your praise is real. Even in his grief he’s praising God and he considers God as the one who has done all this to him. But he still blesses the name of the Lord and he does not charge God with wrong and that was the part that both Job’s wife and Satan assumed that he would do, and he didn’t. So once Satan takes away his children, his property, his wealth, all of that, he attacks Job a second time and he goes before God again in chapters 2 verses 1-6 and the Lord says, “Have you considered Job?” again and despite being punished without cause, God says to Satan “He still holds fast to his integrity.” He says in chapters 2 verse 3 and then Satan claims then that the temptation hasn’t been severe enough, that it’s just not enough yet because if it were severe enough then Job would surely curse God. So, Satan says “Touch his bone and his flesh and he will
curse you to your face.” And so, God accepts the challenge and he allows Satan to do anything accept take Job’s life. Then we get this second series of Job’s misfortunes in Ch. 2:7-10 and he gets this disease. It could be elephantitis. It could be leprosy. It could be leukemia of the skin, but it’s characterized in Ch. 2 by boils and itching and this drastic change of appearance. It has worms and running sores we see in Ch. 7:5. In Ch. 30:17 it says that his bones are corroded, he has this gnawing pain, then his skin is blackened and he has a fever in Ch. 30:30 and so the indication is that this horrible condition continued for months in Ch. 7:3 and in Ch. 29:2. So, Job’s wife then seeing all this, she loses her faith entirely and she calls upon him to curse God and die. We know that word curse means to amputate, to withdraw or to separate. I don’t know about you but when I feel hurt by God or anybody really that’s the first thing I do, like a wounded animal, right? I just want to get away and I don’t want anything to do with them and in a way that’s kind of what she is telling Job to do. So maybe she’s not of the same spiritual caliber as Job, who knows, but she also believed that death ended it all and so she encouraged Job to curse God and die.

So, Job’s wife has lost her faith and she kind of begins the dog pile. She accuses Job of having sinned or having done something to deserve all that has come upon the two of them and their family and then Job’s three friends enter. At the beginning of chapter 3 Job laments the day of his birth. He wishes he had never been born and then for the next 28 chapters we see this conversation that occurs between Job and his three friends. So, they arrive at first to mourn with him and to comfort him and at first, they didn’t even recognize him, it says. They are so overwhelmed at the sight of Job and his grief that they too cried out and tore their robes. They put ashes on their heads and then they sat down, and they remained speechless with him for 7 days and nights. We don’t have time to read the sections and look at it all in detail, so I just want to summarize for you kind of the approach that each of the friends takes.

Eliphaz, the Temanite, he is considered something of a little mystic, kind of a gentle mystic he’s older, he’s wiser. We know that the Temanites of Edom were famous for their wisdom. We see that in Jer. 49:7, Obadiah 5 and Baruch 3:22. Eliphaz was probably one of these sages we see in 15:9 of Job. He was far advanced in years in Ch. 15:10 and he was already much older than Job, who was elderly himself, as we see Ch. 30:1. So, Eliphaz claims to speak the absolute truth and he is a proponent of this traditional theory of retribution that God punishes the sinner and he rewards the righteous. We see that most clearly in Job 4:7 where he says ‘remember: who that was innocent, ever perished?’ or ‘where were the upright cut off?’ So, he’s probably the oldest, he’s definitely the most prominent of the three friends. His name as I said is of Edomite origin which would’ve been south east of the Jordan river, in the land of Edom. He was probably one of Esau’s descendants. One of Esau’s sons was named Eliphaz we see in Genesis 36:15. He was from Teman; a city of Edom known for its wisemen, as I mentioned through those earlier references. He lacks a little bit of compassion, but he at least accepts Job as a pious man who’s maybe gone astray. His basic message is pretty much ‘Job, just repent and the illness will go away, and God’s blessing will return’.

So, we know people all over the place that are like this, they don’t want to see you as a person when you’re suffering and it said, you know, they throw out these platitudes, these spiritual truisms, you know; ‘you reap what you sow’ and that’s true, that actually appears, that’s one of the things that he says in chapter 4:8. Those people tell us you know if you just clean up your life or ‘if you just have enough faith then God will take away all your pain and restore your blessing’ or that ‘he will bless you’ but just like that approach brought no comfort to Job, it doesn’t bring any comfort to us or to the people that we try to offer it to either. In Ch. 5:18 this is actually in his speech, Eliphaz, and it’s one 091718_The Uselessness of Platitudes
of my favorite verses, it says, 'for he bruises but he binds up, he wounds but he makes whole' and of course he’s speaking of God himself.

And then there’s Bildad, the firm traditionalist. Like Eliphaz, Bildad has this unbending allegiance to this traditional idea that all suffering is a result of sin. But, because he’s also observant of Job’s situation he takes it even further, he adds even to job’s suffering because he says to Job that his children died because they too were guilty of sin and that unless Job repents, he’s going to suffer the same fate. So, for Bildad, even the fact that Job questions God’s action is, to him, evidence of sin and like I said, I was always kind of told the same thing; you sin if you ask God why and that’s kind of what Bildad says. In his opening words, there in Job chapter 8, he says ‘How long will you say these things and the words of your mouth be a great wind? Does God pervert Justice or does the almighty pervert the right? So, you know, he’s pretty hard core. We don’t know a whole lot about him. He may have been a descendant of one of the sons of Abraham. Basically, of him it says that he lived in the east. So, Bildad’s approach isn’t all that different from Eliphaz but he is even less compassionate, and he views Job as inherently evil rather than a faithful man who has kind of gone astray.

So, this was a huge thing for me as a non-Catholic, wrestling with suffering, because Catholics are privileged to have a theology of suffering. As a Protestant I just didn’t, I mean, there are so many different kinds of Protestantism, denominations and practices and things like that. So, in the Pentecostal strains you get this name it and claim it thing and if you just have enough faith, you’ll be prosperous, and God will bless you. We see that on TV all the time; TV preachers. So, any bit of suffering is seen as something sort of correction or a lack of faith. In a way that’s kind of the approach, that Job’s friends take and so we want to be careful not to do that.

I mean, there is a sense in which we do reap what we sow and there are times that we see people around us and we can for instance; say addictions, right? You can pretty much bet that if you have a meth problem, you’re going to lose your teeth, you’re going to lose your looks, you’re going to lose your money, you could lose your family, you could lose your life, right? And so, as those kinds of things spiral further and further out of control for people we can look from the outside in and predict some of what’s going to happen, we just know, but that’s not necessarily going to help. It could, because if we don’t offer truth with love then we haven’t really loved. So, there’s a sense in which we would want to offer truth.

But what happens here is that job’s friends don’t give God room to be God. You know, they have it all wrapped up and people who approach suffering people this way are laboring under a lack of charity. So, I want to caution you, and I had to learn this the hard way with my friend, who I talked about in my book Unleashed, who lost her son after having prayed for him and his safety. She lost her son in an accident and I had no idea what to do. I mean, there was no way I would have ever said anything like it was her sin because I knew her to be a very holy woman. Maybe she had hidden sin, but I doubt it. But, in any case, we see, well in the book of wisdom, I actually love what it says that, you know, it seems that God is punishing sometimes when those people die, when people die around us, especially when they’re young. But actually, it’s God bringing them home to be with him it says in the book of wisdom and so I guess my point is: we don’t know why people suffer. We don’t know why we suffer and so to charge them or God with some sort of wrong, is wrong itself. That’s part of what we see here. But as a Protestant we didn’t have a whole lot of a theology of suffering. So, we didn’t know that we could offer it back to God as a sacrifice and ask him to combine it with Jesus sufferings, for not only our own benefit and purification but even, possibly for other people’s. I mean we didn’t have that teaching at all, so it’s a real privilege to have a Theology of suffering.
If you are not Catholic some of this may even seem new to you and if it is welcome because it was a beautiful thing for me to realize that my suffering is not wasted. Never, never, never is it wasted if you offer back to God in union with Christ's suffering. Then he can change it and he can make it eternal and he can make it redemptive both for us and for other people around us. But there are people like that all over the church, they view every form of suffering as God's retribution for sin and they're not afraid to let other people know what they think about it. But usually those same people fail to recognize their own sin in their lives. Or else a lot of times they're projecting their sin on other people and even if they do pause long enough to remove the log from their own eye they immediately turn around and then they want to beat somebody else over the head with it. So, they don’t bring any comfort, you know that, so let's not do that to other people.

Then we have Zophar he’s a dogmatist. I mean he’s a straight talker. As I said, he’s probably the younger of the three friends. He believed in speaking the truth, but he didn’t do it in love. He presumes to speak for God very dogmatically and we see that in his opening words. He says, ‘Should a multitude of words go unanswered, and a man full of talk be judged right? Should your babble silence men and when you mock shall no one shame you? For you say, ‘my doctrine is pure’ and ‘I’m clean in God’s eyes’ but oh that God would speak and open his lips to you and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom for he is manifold in understanding. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.”

I mean how comforting is that?! When he says babble, that word actually means empty talk. It means lies or boastings. So, he’s accusing Job of bragging about his ‘sinlessness’ which Job didn’t actually do. He just, as I mentioned earlier in the show, he’s just saying he’s suffering out of all proportion to what he possibly could deserve. So, we don’t know a whole lot about Zophar. He might have been from Naima; a city to the border of Edom in the south as, all of the friends are thought to have been. But there’s no mystery in the nature of God for this guy. Everything’s black and white and he’s going to tell Job exactly how things are and he’s even going to take him into the secrets of wisdom he says, in chapter 11:6. So, he’s got a lot of wisdom for Job, right? And so, we want to counsel people all the time. We want to insert ourselves and counsel people without having any idea and without being in the Holy Spirit when we do it, we just open our mouths and most of what we say is nothing but platitude or useless or even hurtful.

We have a whole lot of Zophars in the world today, some of us are Zophars. We claim to know the mind of God in every situation and so we presume to present a correct solution to someone else’s suffering. All that really is, is pride. And that goes along with certain temperaments. I can confess that because I have been guilty of it. I’ve been guilty of every one of these approaches to be perfectly honest. Part of it is my teaching gift and so a lot of times I presume to teach somebody else something that they might need to be learning through their sufferings, you know, instead of possibly inviting. So, we have to be careful because poor Job, he’s not comforted at all by these friends and he says “I have heard many such things. Miserable comforters are you all” he says in Job 16:2. So, as the conversation continues then, with his friends. Job defends himself by pointing out this evidence from the world around him that the wicked often prosper and the righteous often suffer. He’s trying to just say ‘look you yourself have seen evidence of this and so it’s possible that I might not have sins.’ So, apparently, it’s pretty effective as a defense because as the conversation continues the speeches of his friends, they get more hostile and they get shorter and so finally, the conversation ends in chapters 26 through 31. Job makes his final defense and they don’t say anything at all, they don’t interrupt him. So, job wins the argument, it looks like, but he still has no answer to his questions and they haven’t comforted him at
all. So, he feels like he needs to answer this question about why bad things happen to good people and yet he can’t so he, sort of, concludes that God must just be arbitrary and maybe not even care.

And then enters a young man named Elihu in chapter 32. His name means ‘he is my God’. And he’s younger than the others and it seems he’s been listening to the entire conversation. It’s almost like he’s waited to speak until everyone else is done and then his speech or discourse continues all the way through the end of chapter 37 and Job doesn’t interrupt and neither do the friends. He does say some of the things that the others said and he’s tough on Job too, probably harder than he should have been, but it’s possible he was angry with Job and his three friends because he presents something new. He disputes the argument of the friends that job’s trials are a result of sin but also job’s assertion that God is arbitrary. So, he kind of adds something and that’s part of why scholars believe that this was an insertion into the original story because he, sort of, points out the wrongs of both. So, he rebukes Job’s friends. So, I’m going to read the section.

He says in 32:1 So these three men cease to answer Job because he was righteous in his own eyes. Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became angry. He was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God; he was angry also at Job’s three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong. Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he. And when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouths of these three men, he became angry. And Elihu answered: “I am young in years, and you are aged, therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you. I said let days speak, and many years teach wisdom. But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the almighty, that makes him understand. It is not the old that are wise, nor the aged that understand what is right. Therefore, I say listen to me let me also declare my opinion. I waited for your words. I listened for your wise sayings, while you searched out what to say, I gave you my attention, and, behold, there was none that confuted Job, or that answered his words, among you. Beware lest you say, we have found wisdom; God may vanquish him, not man. He has not directed his words against me, and I will not answer him with your speeches. They are discomfited, they answer no more; they have not a word to say. And shall I wait, because they do not speak, because they stand there, and answer no more? I will give my answer; I also will declare my opinion. For I am full of words, the spirit within me constrains me. If you have anything to say, answer me, speak for I desire to justify you. But if not listen to me, be silent and I will teach you wisdom.

I mean these guys are just so proud, right? So, according to Elihu, God intervenes in men’s lives in two ways, through dreams and visions and also through suffering. In both God, means to save; not to punish. So, Elihu doesn’t picture God as an angry judge but as merciful and that’s kind of a new approach. So, he goes on to explain that sometimes God uses suffering to reveal and root out sin in a righteous person. So, affliction then and sufferings should make even a righteous person sensitive to the sin in his life and lead him to reject that sin and repent. And that really happens if you look at your own life. It’s not until we begin to suffer that we are willing to leave behind the smaller sins, right? Because, well first of all we want to be sure that we are not being punished. But also, all suffering makes us tender and makes us softer and more open, or it can, not always, some people just grow bitter, but it can, and God promises that he can do that with it. But it still doesn’t provide Job with a good answer to his question because as he’s about to find out; it’s not even the right question to ask.

The greatest contribution that Elihu makes to the story is that he kind of gets Job prepared to listen to God speak in the last part of the book. It seems that he’s kind of wanted to talk to God directly ever since about chapter 9 and we’ll look at that next week in the show called ‘The Gospel According to
Job’. And then Elihu encourages Job to listen to the voice of God that he’s about to hear; he says in Job 37:2 Hearken to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth. So, he has his faults, but it looks like Elihu generally has things right, which is interesting because he’s the youngest of all of them, right? That’s why he’s not condemned along with Job’s three friends at the end of the book. And as we think about how Job’s friends tried to comfort him in his trials, we can see some stuff we should do and then some other stuff we shouldn’t do, when we do that, when we try to comfort other people.

So, lets look at, you know, what not to do. We might have something to say or offer in the way of truth, but we want to offer it without becoming a temptation ourselves. That’s really the danger in any attempt to either correct or advise or counsel another person as you may have it wrong. And God forbid you have it wrong, because if you lead someone astray or if you add to their misery, I mean, we don’t want to do either of those things. So, all of his friends tried to preach to him, they all did. And we saw earlier that some of what they claim to know about God wasn’t even true and it was only because it hadn’t been revealed to God’s people at this point. Remember that wisdom is a genre of literature and so at this point in Israel’s history they didn’t have a fully formed theology of suffering yet. It wouldn’t be until Christ came that we had that second book end to that theology. So, even what was true though, even what they did say that was true, wasn’t helpful for him. So, we should keep in mind that when other people are going through trials, that the last thing they need is for us to tell them what we think we know about God or try to speak on God’s behalf. We just need to be very careful about that. Now if we’re prompted by the Holy Spirit that’s different but most of the time, we just go off half-cocked, right? And we’ve always felt helpless in the presence of people who are deeply suffering; a broken-hearted widow, you know, or a person who’s lost a family member or a child, or maybe they’ve just been diagnosed with a disease.

I mean we know how that feels. Some of us have been through those things ourselves. We have to remember a couple of things about those who are grieving. First of all, their emotions are completely out of control, so they have feelings that they are ashamed of and that might even scare them. Number two, their basic need is just that other people understand and accept them as they are. Their unruly emotions are very hard for other people to deal with so understanding and acceptance are hard for those who are grieving, a mourner, to come by. They just, you know, the death of a loved one or a divorce or having your child leave family or church to maybe join a cult or something, I don’t know. But in short, any sort of alienation, it unleashes this chaos of unexpected, irrational and unexplainable emotion. They might be angry maybe at someone who has died, they might be angry at God, they may be jealous of people who are still happily married or who still have their faith or still have their family member. They might lose their faith, they might desire to even die themselves. They know that there’s no rational basis for their feelings, but they don’t need rationalization, whether in their own minds or from a priest or from you, a friend, they don’t need that, because none of that is going to make their feelings go away. The emotion is impossible to dissipate without the grief process so there’s not going to be any kind of cool philosophical conversation. It’s just pain, pain that is so pervasive that the mourner feels like they’re drained of all their energy, they are overrun, they’re overwhelmed, they’re indecisive, they can’t enjoy the comfort of anybody’s love, they might feel hopeless, they may even feel crazy.

We’ve been talking about what to do and not do in the face of other people’s sufferings. So, we know for sure when someone is in deep mourning or suffering around us that we don’t want to preach at them, we don’t want to offer them some sort of philosophy or even common sense, you know, because
especially even in the early stages, the emotion is so overwhelming, it’s irrational and it’s illogical but they have to have those emotions. They have to work through them in the grief process or else they can’t heal. We just have to be present with them like Job’s friends were for those 7 days. I don’t know if maybe they just got bored or maybe they expected Job to repent and when he didn’t, they got angry, I mean, who knows? I don’t know but it was good that they were present to him so there’s not going to be any sort of common sense in these sorts of situations and we shouldn’t offer it to them, so platitudes are not going to help. The person may have offered those themselves, you know, but if they haven’t ever suffered deeply before they have no baseline and so the emotion that they feel is so overwhelming they are afraid. They are unaccustomed to it and so they are may be worried that they are going to worry other people, being so out of control.

So, then a lot of times people will try to put on a brave face, right? And, so people like that, because they don’t like us to be out of control. We’ve had some of these overwhelming emotions on our Bible Study Evangelista Facebook page, you know, where people have been through some stuff, right? And we maybe have been through something and we’re angry and we’re lashing out and or we’re bawling and just inconsolable. It’s okay. It really is okay. So, in those situations where you know we want to pat them on the back because you know they have such a brave face, that’s not actually good for them. So, we shouldn’t expect people to act differently than how they feel. That might be useful for short term survival but the price of that is that they become ashamed. And they doubt their own sanity and sometimes even their own faith. We don’t want them to feel guilty, right?

So, the feelings are negative, they might be ungrateful, they might feel unfaithful but because of that they feel guilty already and that’s where we, being well-meaning, with all our words of faith and reassurance and comfort, you know, all of that is just designed to help or even push the mourner into a more hopeful attitude and that’s just really not fair. All of that sounds, to a person who is grieving, like a scolding for how they feel. It’s just like saying you’re wrong or your sinful with your tears and your anger, snap out of it, shape up, where’s your faith, you know? And we don’t mean anything like that, we don’t mean to be cruel in that way, but they are already plagued with this guilt because of the overwhelming emotions they have so they’re likely to twist what is faithful and hopeful and just say see, you know so-so and-so thinks I should be over at too so what’s the matter with me right? So, we make it worse by trying to make them feel differently or even speak differently, I mean really, I guess the point is, just let them be who they are.

What we can do is so obvious that a lot of times it’s just completely overlooked and that is, we just communicate that we understand, that we accept them as they are right now and not as they want to be or how they will be later, but as they are; messy, tearful, unreasonable, angry, faithless and irrational. They need to know that it’s okay with us if they are that way, we still love them, and we still accept them. They are desperate for somebody to be able to communicate that to them because you know, and I know that when you’re suffering you just want to feel better. And so, there’s not anything that anybody is going to be able to make you feel better. Only we’re going to see; the only thing the book off Job shows us is that the only thing that can possibly make us feel better in these situations. We’ll see that in the very last show. But how do we do it, we just stay with them bite your tongue, let them express their feelings and don’t respond in a way that sounds like it’s a correction or a judgement. Very few remarks even need to be made. And if we do make them then we should be reflecting back their own feelings so that they know that we are understanding them so when they say they’re in pain, we shouldn’t say ‘well you’ll feel better soon’ but instead we can say, ‘I know, it must hurt worse than anything you’ve ever felt before, doesn’t it? So if they’re raging against God and His unfairness, just stifle the impulse to say, ‘Well God’s ways are mysterious and his ways are not our ways..."
and we probably shouldn’t question his wisdom or something silly like ‘well God needs that person in heaven more than we do on Earth, instead just say “you know I bet you feel like Jesus felt on the cross, when he cried out; my God, my God why have you abandoned me, right? So, if your response a begins with ‘yes but’ then just don’t say it.

If grieving people said what they first felt and thought, no Bishop could probably even hear it, right? What they say, or what they feel like saying is offensive. It’s offensive to anyone who’s faithful. But it’s temporary so acceptance of that loss and the peace will come in due time. All we do in the beginning is just understand and accept them where they are. They need just understanding and they need that from the beginning if they’re going to make any progress through the grief process. Feeling like they’re being judged or been pushed through the grief process actually delays the early stages of grief and it adds actually to their pain and loss, it slows down the progress rather than speeding it up. So, they just want us to be patient with them. Maybe it’s great patience, right? Maybe they mope, maybe they’re depressed, we just have to be careful though to not do the whole job friend thing, the counseling and the fixing, right?

So, we just, we try to be compassionate and the word compassionate actually means to suffer alongside and so we enter into their pain and we live with them there however briefly or tentatively they invite us. And we are powerless, we can’t fix them, we can’t fix their situation, and they can’t fix themselves either, so we just accept being stuck, right? So, they don’t enjoy it we don’t either, but it is genuine human communion. It’s more honest than most of what we say, that is alone what will help heal. We can feel our impotence and it is frightening and it’s humbling but it’s humanizing and so it’s salvific.

I remember when my friend lost her son and I fell to my knees. She called about 4 o’clock and we had been praying for him and I fell to my knees and I was so mad at God I said I cannot believe you could do this to her. How could you do this to her? And I didn’t know what to do for her. What could I? And I was young, you know? My husband just said you have to go and so I went and the only thing I could do through the whole week of her making funeral preparations and all that. I’m sorry it was just so hard to watch her go through it. The only thing I could do is just take her dirty Kleenex and give her a clean one. You know every time she would get it wadded up or whatever and so I just stayed near enough that I could do that, you know? Through the wake, you know, when all the people were coming through the line and she, you know, she stood there for hours and hours and you know that’s the last thing people probably want to do. And her son was burned beyond recognition in the casket and it couldn’t even be opened. I mean it was just so difficult, but I was so close to her after that and I think that’s the thing that God really wants us to learn here is that suffering can bring you together, not just you and God, but you and another person. And as I said it is healing and its humanizing even though it is uncomfortable and it’s difficult.

So, maybe this is the way we imitate Christ. Is this not communion in suffering? I mean isn’t that what Jesus offers all of us? I mean think about all the ink the Evangelists used on the passion, compared to Jesus’s teachings and healings, and all that. So, Jesus shows us; he is willing to dine and die with sinners. He becomes like us in all things except sin. So, he could have saved us in so many different ways, but he didn’t. He just abandoned himself to our human condition of suffering and he’s willing to join us in the business of being tempted and misunderstood and falsely accused and spat upon and victimized even unto death. If you’re suffering right now, I hope you will ask God to deepen your relationship with him. Tell him that you don’t want to seek answers, but you want to see him. If you know somebody who’s going through a trial, I hope you’ll pray for that person. I hope you’ll come
alongside them in compassion and if you think it’s appropriate to ask God to remove the trial maybe you can but also pray that God will deep in that person’s relationship with him through that trial. Until next week dear one this is Sonja Corbitt your Bible study Evangelista.