

With Friends Like These...Bildad's Moralism

Grappling with God: The Gospel According to Job

Job 8-10

David Sunday

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From what I've been hearing, God is doing more than I expected through this book, and I expected that He would do much in the life of our church. I am thankful for how He is speaking deeply into our hearts through this book and that He gave us this book in the Scriptures. At the same time, I realize this is not an easy book to work our way through, so, as we turn here to this passage, let's pray afresh for grace and mercy.

Father, as we look into this portion of Your Word where there is so much darkness, we pray that You would shine the light of Jesus into our hearts. May we consider Him Who endured such hostility from sinners so that we will not grow weary and faint-hearted. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

In Job 8-10, we meet a second friend of Job, an Old Testament "man of sorrows." It is his friend, Bildad. Someone has said, "There are two problems with suffering. One is that God goes silent. The other is that God's people don't." We are going to consider those two problems in reverse order. God's people don't go silent, but God does.

Problem #1 with Suffering: What happens when we try to fill the silence?

The first question I want to ask is, "What happens when we try to fill God's silence?" What happens when God is silent and we try to add words to make sense of something that God hasn't given us sense about? What happens when we try to fill God's silence?

Enter Bildad the Shuhite, the second of Job's so-called "comforters" in Job 8. Bildad was listening to Job grapple with God, and, while Job prayed, Bildad fumed. He had all he could take by the end of chapter seven. In 8:2, Bildad said to Job, "*How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind?*"

"Your words are a blustering wind. You're just a big old wind bag, Job." That's what he's saying. Bildad did not suffer fools gladly. He called Job a blabbermouth. Bildad was angry. He was frustrated with Job from the start. Beware of confronting a friend out of anger. You may have a very important point to make, but beware of speaking out of anger. Remember, "Softly

and tenderly, Jesus is calling.” “... [A] bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench” (Isaiah 42:3). Jesus is merciful to the broken.

Beware of speaking out of anger. Bildad could not resist. He was fed up and felt it was high time to come to God's defense. For Bildad, there was a fundamental theological axiom at stake here, and he defined it in verse three. Someone needed to speak up for the truth, and here's the truth according to Bildad: “*Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right?*”

The answer is, “No, of course not.” Bildad said, “That's what you need to understand, Job. God is fair.” This is the fundamental truth that rules the universe: God is fair. Listen to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:4: “*The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.*”

Bildad said, “Do you see, Job? God never perverts justice. He never twists it; He never bends it. He never makes crooked what is straight. God is fair. You can always count on it, Job. There are no exceptions. ‘World without end, amen and amen.’” That's the truth. Does the Almighty pervert the right?

What about you? Do you have a strict sense of justice? Are you a person who tends to see things black and white? Are you a person who has little tolerance for gray areas and a high regard for the traditions of the past? Are you someone who stomps his foot and claps his hands when you sing, “Give me that old time religion; it's good enough for me”? If so, meet your friend, Bildad. Here's someone you would love to go to Starbucks with and have a cup of coffee. You could spend all morning talking about what's wrong with the world and what's wrong with the people in the world. You could talk about how to set things straight.

For Bildad, the rules of life are pretty simple. The righteous are blessed, and the wicked are punished. There are no exceptions. Anything that looks like an exception is a temporary illusion. Justice will fully and quickly prevail. Therefore, we can basically find out who is right and who is wrong by how their life is going. If their life is messed up, it is because they are somehow messed up.

“God is just. God is sovereign. Life is fair, plain and simple. That is the end of the discussion.” This was basically Bildad's philosophy, worldview and theology of life. It sounds close to the truth. The righteous are rewarded; the wicked are punished. These things are taught in Scripture. However, look how Bildad applied his worldview to Job's wrecked world. Look how Job worked this truth out, and you will start to see that something was off with Bildad's trajectory.

In verse four, Bildad said, *"If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression."* Bildad did not intend for there to be any question whether or not Job's children had sinned. Bildad said they had sinned.

The NIV translates this verse like this: *"When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin."* Well, that's a fine thing to say to a man who just lost ten children! "They just got what they deserved." Where is the mercy? Where is the compassion in that?

But then in verses five through seven, Bildad said, "Cheer up, Job! There's still hope for you. Obviously, you're not as bad as your kids were because you're still alive." The text says, *"If you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore you to your prosperous state."* In the NIV, verse seven says, *"Your beginnings will seem humble, so prosperous will your future be."*

Where is the blunder in verses five through seven? There is one in verse six for sure. Bildad said, *"... [I]f you are pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you."* In other words, "Job, you must be pure before you can approach God." But what did Jesus say? *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners"* (Matthew 9:12-13).

Just as I am without one plea,
but that Thy blood was shed for me.

(Just as I Am by Charlotte Elliott & William Bradbury, 1835)

That's my access point into the presence of God. The implication of what Bildad said in verses five through seven is where there is smoke, there's fire. "Job, the fact that you're not restored yet and back in your prosperous estate proves that there is something off in your life; there is something that needs to be confessed." Bildad functioned like a secret police squad with spiritual blackmail trying to illicit a false confession. We know from the beginning of the story that there was nothing Job did to cause this suffering to come into his life. In fact, if he did anything, it was his righteousness and blamelessness that caused his suffering. But Bildad put so much pressure on Job, it was almost like he tried to manipulate him to make a confession of a sin he never committed. We are going to see that more as we work our way through the book of Job, and we're going to think about manipulation, spiritual abuse and how important it is that we avoid this kind of behavior in the church.

Look at verses eight through ten. Bildad appealed to the weight of tradition. He was someone who loved to study the people of the past and pull in the authorities of bygone ages. In verse eight, he said, *"... [C]onsider what the fathers have searched out. For we are but of*

yesterday and know nothing, for our days on earth are a shadow. Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding?"

In other words, "The whole weight of religious tradition is on my side, Job. I'm not just speaking from my own authority. I'm speaking from generations and generations of God-fearing people who will tell you, 'Whatever a man reaps, he sows.' You get what you deserve."

Then in verses 11 through 19, he said that nature itself illustrates these truths, giving three illustrations from nature. In verses 11 through 13, he spoke of the faint of the papyrus, a branch that can grow, flower, look beautiful, but if the water underneath it dries up, it dies instantaneously. In verse 13, Bildad said, "*Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish.*"

Then in verses 14 and 15, he turned to the frailty of a spider's web. He said, "*His confidence is severed, and his trust is a spider's web. He leans against his house, but it does not stand; he lays hold of it, but it does not endure.*" This is what it is like for the Godless. "Job, the reason that everything you had came crashing down on you is because your hope was like a spider's web. Your life was unable to support the prosperity God had given. It needed to come crashing down to teach you a lesson about yourself and about your sin."

But take heart, Job! In verses 16 through 19, Bildad said there are garden plants that can grow despite great obstacles. Look at verse 16:

¹⁶ *He is a lush plant before the sun,
and his shoots spread over his garden.*

¹⁷ *His roots entwine the stone heap;
he looks upon a house of stones.*

¹⁸ *If he is destroyed from his place,
then it will deny him, saying, 'I have never seen you.'*

¹⁹ *Behold, this is the joy of his way,
[here's the encouragement from Bildad] and out of the soil others will spring.*

In other words, "Job, there is hope here for restoration."

Then he wrapped up his argument in verses 20 through 22 by basically saying, "Buck up, Job! You can be sure God will not reject a blameless man. He will not bless the wicked."

²⁰ *"Behold, God will not reject a blameless man,
nor take the hand of evildoers.*

²¹ *He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,
and your lips with shouting.*

²² *Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,
and the tent of the wicked will be no more."*

Sure enough, this happened to Job by the end of the story, but it did not happen because Job followed Bildad's advice. Bildad was saying, "Confess your sin, Job, and God will bless you again. God will not reject the blameless. God will not bless the wicked. Life always conforms to this set pattern."

It's nice and tidy, simple and clear. It's a philosophy of life that makes a lot of sense. Many religions, including Islam, follow this philosophy of life. "Everyone gets what they deserve." But is this true? If what Bildad said is true, then there will be no undeserved suffering in the universe. If there is no undeserved suffering in the universes, then there can be no redemptive suffering in the universe. There can be no sacrificial substitutionary suffering in the universe. If there is no sacrificial substitutionary suffering in the universe, then there can be no grace in the universe.

What Bildad said to Job sounds eerily like what the religious leaders said to Jesus as they mocked Him when He hung on the cross. Matthew 27:42 records their mocking: "*He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.*" In other words, "If He is the innocent, holy Son of God, He shouldn't be hanging up there on that cross. Let Him come down from that suffering, then we will believe Him. He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now if God wants Him, for He said, 'I am the Son of God.' God will not reject a blameless man."

If this is all there is to be said, then the cross makes no sense. There is no grace for sinners. Bildad's counsel was trite and its effect was cruel. It was dogmatic and lacking in compassion. Counsel devoid of grace will always be counsel that is devoid of comfort. This brought no comfort whatsoever to Job.

Before we move on to the next section, I want to ask you a few questions:

- Does your worldview or theological tradition leave room for mystery?
- Do you leave room for things that are beyond your ability to understand or comprehend?
- Do you try to speak when God is silent?
- Do you try to explain things for which God has given us no explanation?
- Do you try to fill the silence?
- Is there room in your theology or worldview for new insights into the truth? For light to break through where you haven't understand things yet?
- Does your worldview or theology have a place for irrational evil? For incoherent suffering? For suffering that makes no sense?
- Do you try to make sense of everything and try to explain things with glib solutions?
- Is there room in your worldview for stuff that does not make sense?

If we want to be instruments in the Redeemer's hands for one another, I think it's very important that we make room in our thinking for this.

D.A. Carson tells the story about a woman he knows. To me, this speaks reality; this is what people in our lives, in our church and in our community are going through.

I know a woman who served as a productive missionary for some years in a Latin American country. She returned home to marry a graduate of a Bible college, a man she had known for some years who promised to return to the mission field with her. She had not been married to him for more than a few hours before she suspected she had married a monster. Although couching himself in pious language, he turned out to be psychologically brutal. He was an insecure little runt who publicly maintained a veneer of religious respectability, but who in the intimacy of his own home could live with himself only by savagely demeaning everything his wife did, said and stood for.

The mission board caught on pretty quickly, and refused to send them out. Years passed and the abuse worsened. The woman tried talking to friends and counselors; some of them simply sided with her husband and told her to try harder. Eventually she turned to drink; a couple of years later, she was a confirmed alcoholic, herself brutal with her two children. She hated herself, she hated her husband, and she hated God. Why had she gone through so much? She was, after all, simply trying to serve the Lord—fallibly, no doubt, but sincerely.

Of course, it would have been theologically correct to tell her that, whatever her husband was or did, she was still responsible for her own conduct. But she knew that and hated herself because she found she could not cope. And in any case, this sort of reproach did not answer her question; it merely compounded her sense of guilt.

Like I said, that story rings true. That's reality for many people. Would Bildad have anything to say to that woman? What effect would this kind of counsel have on someone going through something like that? If things are as simple as Bildad made them sound, what is the effect? The effect is that it leaves people who are facing senseless suffering disoriented, confused and disillusioned with God.

Christopher Ash says, "[In the face of senseless suffering,] the first mark of a believer is to feel keenly the pain of an unfair world." That's the first mark. It's not the final mark. You have to deeply feel the pain of an unfair world.

When people ask you, "Have you ever wondered why the world is so unfair?" how do you answer that question? I hope your first response is not to give them a philosophical treatise on God's sovereignty and human responsibility, trying to explain it all with glib solutions. I hope your first response is to say, "Yes, I wonder all the time."

As believers who trust in a good and sovereign God, we wrestle with this. We wrestle precisely because we believe in a God Who is both good and sovereign. If there wasn't a God

Who is good and sovereign, suffering wouldn't be a problem. It's only because of Who we believe in that we struggle with all the suffering in this world.

The first mark is "to feel keenly the pain," and then the best response when you feel that pain is to go to God and cry out to Him for justice. I'm reminded of the persistent widow in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:1-8) who cried out day and night to the judge, "Grant me justice against my adversary!" That's the way believers respond. We shouldn't try to fill the silence with shallow, superficial answers. Instead, we go to God, cry out to Him, and stand in His presence, saying, "Oh, God, Your Kingdom come! Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:9-13). That's what Job longed to do. He longed to cry out to God for justice and vindication.

Problem #2 with Suffering: Is heaven silent when we scream? This leads to the second great dilemma Job faced. Not only did his friends give him unhelpful counsel, but heaven was silent. The second question we need to ask is, "Is heaven silent when we scream?" Believers do experience: the silence of God.

Let's look at chapter nine, verses one through three. It begins, "*Then Job answered and said: 'Truly I know that it is so.'*" Remember what D.A. Carson said, "You can tell this woman theological truths, but you wouldn't be telling her anything she doesn't already know." What Job said was, "Bildad, you haven't said anything I don't already know. I know God doesn't pervert justice. Of course I know that is true. The question I have is, 'How can a mere mortal like me get into the presence of God and make my case before Him?' How can I stand in God's presence? How can a man be in the right before God" (verse two)?

Job longed to appear in God's presence to argue His case. He longed to stand in God's courtroom and prove his innocence, so that he may be declared just in the presence of a holy God. But the very prospect of appearing in God's presence was terrifying to Job, even though he wanted to do so. He was worried that if he did speak to God, he would get his words all tangled up and look like a fool in God's presence. Even if his argument was correct, he wouldn't be able to express himself properly.

What if you had a big case to prove and you actually gained a hearing before the Supreme Court of the United States of America? Would any of you want to show up and be your own advocate before the Supreme Court? I'd be so nervous. Even if I had a great case, I don't think I could argue it clearly and compellingly in the presence of such an august tribunal.

Job had that fear. In verse three, he said, "*If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times.*" In verses four through 13, Job described God's

profound wisdom, strength, creative power, anger, might, as well as His great and marvelous deeds. In light of all this, Job said, "I tremble before the presence of God." Trembling in God's presence is something we rarely get from Job's friends.

Listen to how Job described God, beginning in verse four:

- ⁴ *He is wise in heart and mighty in strength*
—*who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?—*
⁵ *he who removes mountains, and they know it not,*
when he overturns them in his anger,
⁶ *who shakes the earth out of its place,*
and its pillars tremble [describing earthquakes];
⁷ *who commands the sun, and it does not rise;*
who seals up the stars;
⁸ *who alone stretched out the heavens*
and trampled the waves of the sea;
⁹ *who made the Bear and Orion,*
the Pleiades and the chambers [or the constellations] of the south...

Job was obviously a well-traveled man who knew a lot about creation and science. I don't know how he ever got into the southern hemisphere, but he knew about the constellations of the south.

He continued in verse ten, "[God] does great things beyond searching out, and marvelous things beyond number." But here's the thing: according to verse 11, God is invisible. Job said, "Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not; he moves on, but I do not perceive him." In other words, "I'm just a man. I can't comprehend the ways of Almighty God!"

Verse 12: "Behold, he snatches away; who can turn him back? Who will say to him, 'What are you doing?'" Is God accountable to men? Does He have to answer to us?

Verse 13: "God will not turn back his anger; beneath him bowed the helpers of Rahab." Job was referring here to the dragon, Rahab, the mythical monster of the deep seas, who was chaotic in her forces of evil. But even this dragon could not stand before God. She cowers at His feet. "What hope do I have in God's courtroom?" Job was saying. "Even if I could get into His presence, how would I ever argue my case before Him?"

Verses 14 and 15: "How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him? Though I am in the right, I cannot answer him; [here is a key phrase:] I must appeal for mercy to my accuser." It is as if Job was saying, "That's my only hope in the presence of this majestic God. His mercy is my only plea. Even if I'm innocent in this particular situation (which Job was), I still have only one plea in the presence of a holy God. It is mercy! Have mercy on me. That's the only thing I can ask of Him."

Verse 16: *"If I summoned him and he answered me, I would not believe that he was listening to my voice."* In other words, "I don't have the right to say to God, Who rules the universe and all the stars, 'Hey! I need to have Your attention for a few minutes.' I don't have the right to demand that."

Verses 17-20:

- ¹⁷ *For he crushes me with a tempest
and multiplies my wounds without cause;*
¹⁸ *he will not let me get my breath,
but fills me with bitterness. [I do not have any strength before Him!]*
¹⁹ *If it is a contest of strength, behold, he is mighty!
If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?*
²⁰ *Though I am in the right, my own mouth would condemn me;
though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.*

In other words, "God knows far more about me than I know about myself. Even though I am unaware of any sin that has brought me into this situation, I know that if I were to stand naked before the gaze of a holy God, it would take no time at all for Him to prove I am guilty, perverse and undeserving of His righteousness and reward."

In verse 21, Job said, "I am blameless, but basically, I don't care. I hate my life. What difference does it make?"

In verses 22 through 24, Job teetered right on the brink of blasphemy. He was about to fall off but thanks be to God that he didn't. He said, *"It is all one; therefore I say, 'He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.'"* In other words, "I can't make any sense of the operations of God in this world. I see blameless men dying and I see wicked men dying. From what I can see, I don't know how God's judgment is working itself out."

Verses 23 and 24 say, *"When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the faces of its judges—* [here is a key phrase:] *if it is not he, who then is it?"* How else do you explain what's happening in the world if you do not believe God is sovereign over everything. How else are you going to explain it? Job didn't understand the workings of Satan in this whole scenario, but he believed in the sovereignty of God.

I'm going to skip the next few verses for just a minute. Glance at chapter ten because Job turned directly to God. He began praying again to God. In verse one, he said, *"I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, 'Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me.'"*

Job wanted to know what charges God brought against him. He wanted to know if God was pleased with the way He was treating the work of His hands. In verse three, he said, *"Does*

it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the designs of the wicked?" In other words, "Are You happy with the way I'm being treated right now, God? Is this fair, Bildad? Really? Is that all You have to say about this?"

In verses eight through 12, Job gave one of the most beautiful descriptions of God's created work. This rivals Psalm 139. It is about the majesty, wisdom and wonder of God's creativity in the womb. Starting in verse eight, he said:

- ⁸ *Your hands fashioned and made me,
and now you have destroyed me altogether.*
⁹ *Remember that you have made me like clay;
and will you return me to the dust?*
¹⁰ *Did you not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese?*
¹¹ *You clothed me with skin and flesh,
and knit me together with bones and sinews.*
¹² *You have granted me life and steadfast love,
and your care has preserved my spirit.*

If that's all there was to those verses it would be beautiful to put on a postcard somewhere. These are wonderful words. This is the truth about God's masterpiece—humanity—in the womb. If you ever doubt the sanctity of life in the womb, passages like this speak very powerfully to the reality of God's work in unborn human beings.

But then, in the remaining verses, Job basically said, "Why did You do it, God? Why did You make me? If You were just going to treat me like this, if You were just going to destroy my life, why did You even let me be born?" Chapter ten ends the same way as chapter three and it's not the last time Job said things like this.

Here is the point: no answers come from heaven. This man poured his heart out in the presence of God, and what did he hear? Only silence.

It's enough to drive a man crazy.
It will break a man's faith.
It's enough to make him wonder
if he's ever been sane.
When he's bleeding for comfort
from Thy staff and Thy rod,
And the heavens' only answer
is the silence of God.

(The Silence of God by Andrew Peterson)

Chaos careened across the landscape of Job's life and he was confused. He was shattered. He could not tell why and there was only silence. Why? Why the silence of God?

Frederick William Faber wrote a poem called, "The Desire of God." He said:

Yes, pine for thy God, fainting soul! ever pine;

Oh languish mid all that life brings thee of mirth;
Famished, thirsty, and restless—let such life be thine—
For what sight is to heaven, desire is to earth.

Why is God silent? Why does water always taste better when you're really thirsty?
Because you had to long for it.

I read an article on the Desiring God blog, in which Jon Bloom was wrestling with this silence of God. His answer for why God is silent is because, "Deprivation draws out desire. Absence heightens desire. And the more heightened the desire, the greater its satisfaction will be... Longing makes us ask; emptiness makes us seek; silence makes us knock" (Luke 11:9).

Job cried out to God. He longed for an answer but he didn't get it. All he got was stuck in a desert, feeling disoriented and in despair. It felt like God turned away from him but God did not. God was with him and God did answer him. When He did, that answer was all Job needed.

Jon Bloom says, "If desire is to earth what sight is to heaven, then God answers our prayer with more desire. It's the desert that awakens and sustains desire. It's the desert that dries up our infatuation with worldliness. And it's the desert that draws us to the Well of the world to come."

In other words, sometimes God goes silent to make us more thirsty for His presence. Sometimes God doesn't answer so that in the desert of deprivation, our desires for Him will be intensified. When those desires are finally satisfied, it will be all the greater because of the silence—because of the desert.

That's what Job experienced here. Look back at the part we skipped in chapter nine. In verses 25-29, Job said, "Listen, I'm not just going to put on a happy face about this." Verse 27: "*If I say, 'I will forget my complaint, I will put off my sad face, and be of good cheer'* [it doesn't work], *I become afraid of all my suffering, for I know you will not hold me innocent.*"

Job also said, "I'm not going to just try to clean myself up. I'm not going to listen to Bildad and Eliphaz tell me, 'Just confess your sins. Make yourself clean and it's all going to go well.' I'm not going to do that."

Look at how he answers that in verse 30: "*If I wash myself with snow and cleanse my hands with lye, yet you will plunge me into a pit...*" In other words, "My friends, even if I did get all cleaned up, you would put me in a pit right after I took a shower. I'd be so filthy my own clothes would want to jump off my back. They would abhor me. So I'm not going to just put on a happy face; I'm not going to just try to clean up my act. I've only got one hope here. I've only got one plea. This is the only thing I can cling to: maybe there's a mediator. Maybe there's someone who can stand in the presence of heaven and plead my case. Maybe there's hope. I

can't get up to heaven, and I can't bring heaven down to me. But maybe there is someone who can go into the presence of God in heaven and represent me there as my advocate."

This hope and desire began to arise in Job's heart. At first it was just a faint desire but once it quickened, the pulse of his desire got stronger and stronger throughout the book. Let's read it together from verse 32:

- ³² *For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him,
that we should come to trial together.*
- ³³ *There is no arbiter between us,
who might lay his hand on us both.*
- ³⁴ *Let him take his rod away from me,
and let not dread of him terrify me.*
- ³⁵ *Then I would speak without fear of him,
for I am not so in myself.*

He was saying, "I cannot make my case before God in myself. The only way I could do it is if there was an umpire, a mediator—someone who is one with me and someone who is one with God—who can lay his hand on both of us, take away my dread of God, remove God's rod from me and open the door of access to allow me to speak without fear to God Himself." Job said, "I don't see that mediator right now." But as soon as he began talking about it, Job began hoping, "Maybe he will appear."

Here is one final quote:

In the furnace of suffering, when the heavens are as brass and God seems silent – when even the Scriptures seem like a barren wasteland bringing no comfort or cheer (and there are such times for the believer)—we have to know that our Mediator stands before the throne of God and speaks for us. We may feel like a child waiting outside the room while others decide our fate, but the one on that throne is our Father and the One Who speaks for us is our Brother—and this is the place where justice is done and truth prevails.

(David Jackson)

We might hear silence, but there is a voice in heaven Who pleads on our behalf. We have an Advocate with God—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

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