

Job: When Counseling Doesn't Help

Job 4–7

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Job's friends have so far said nothing. They have sat in silence with Job as he grieved the loss of his children, and felt the pain take hold of his body (2:11-13). Sometimes it is right to say nothing.

But the situation changes from this point onwards. Job's friends can keep their peace no more. What is it that they say? There are some subtle nuances in the various contributions of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar: Eliphaz is probably the oldest and therefore speaks first, he is the philosopher of the three. Bildad is a traditionalist and a little boring. Zophar is the young and somewhat arrogant bully. He doesn't mind hurting with his words. He is determined to be heard.

Their message, however, is essentially the same throughout. "They only have one song and they sing it to death," says Calvin. They are like a broken record stuck in a groove that endlessly repeats itself.

There is a wonderfully amusing Peanuts cartoon. Lucy, in that priggish manner of hers, says to Charlie Brown, "There is one thing you are going to have to learn: you reap what you sow, you get out of life what you put in to it, no more and no less." In the corner of the cartoon, Snoopy the dog is muttering, "I'd kind of like to see a little margin for error."

Job's friends know exactly what the problem is. He claims divine revelation for it (4:15-16). It is all very simple and straightforward:

"Who, being innocent, has ever perished?
Where were the upright ever destroyed?
As I have observed, those who plow evil
And those who sow trouble reap it." (Job 4:7-8)

Job has reaped what he has sown. He has brought this trouble on himself. He is responsible for the situation he now finds himself in. It is one of life's most basic principles.

This is a view that is widely believed today. Christians who follow Jesus Christ with all of their hearts should not find themselves in trouble. God doesn't want His children to be sick, or hurting. "He wants the best for you," we are told. We need to believe it. And it is our unbelief that accounts for the reason we find ourselves floundering. The "Health and Wealth Gospel," "Prosperity Gospel"—call it what you will, makes this very thing their central theme: God does not want His children to be in trouble. Christians must "name it and claim it," or "gab and grab it" as one euphemistically puts it.

And that is exactly what Eliphaz is saying here. Job may well be a godly man (Eliphaz gives a grudging acknowledgment of it in verse 6), but Job has only himself to blame for his predicament. His fault may be minor (at least, in comparison to what Bildad will say later), but fault there is, make no mistake about it.

It is all very subtle—at least, this time around it is. Eliphaz says things that sound true; and they are true—up to a point! Things like:

"Can a mortal be more righteous than God?
Can a man be more pure than his Maker?" (Job 4:17)

There is a dispute about this translation, but that aside, Job has never claimed to be more righteous than God!

No, what Eliphaz is hinting at, politely of course, is that there is a problem with Job's righteousness. His claim to "blamelessness" —a word which Eliphaz has used already (4:6) and perhaps had heard bandied about a great deal about Job (c.f. 1:1,8; 2:3)—is suspect. There may be something *wanting* in Job after all. At least, that seems to be a good place to start. Things like:

"For hardship does not spring from the soil,
nor does trouble sprout from the ground.
Yet man is born to trouble
as surely as sparks fly upward." (Job 5:6-7)

Trouble doesn't just happen! There's always a reason for it. And that reason has to have something to do with Job. Things like:

"Blessed is the man whom God corrects;
so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty." (Job 5:17)

Correction! That's what lies behind Job's predicament. God is correcting him. And any fool knows that correction implies error, transgression, *sin*!

And speaking of *fools*, things like:

Resentment kills a fool,
and envy slays the simple.
I myself have seen a fool taking root,
but suddenly his house was cursed.
His children are far from safety,
crushed in court without a defender. (Job 5:2-4)

Biting words. Particularly the reference to children being "crushed." Job would have been reminded of his own dear ones, now dead. And the words would have wounded somewhere deep within.

Perhaps, it isn't Job's wife who has been foolish (Job 2:10), but Job himself. What are we to make of this?

First, it is partly right! Yes, what Eliphaz says is partly true. His theological analysis has merit, painful as it is to admit. God does punish wickedness and transgression. Sometimes that comes immediately. Think of stories like that of Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6 where poor Uzzah is "struck down" (v.6) for stabilizing the ark. And if we are tempted to think that this is something that God does in the Old Testament only, turn to Acts 5, and the story of Ananias and Sapphira, both of whom die – all over the price of a piece of Real Estate! Instant retribution is a very disturbing fact.

Second, it is also partly wrong! Eliphaz has applied a truth without distinction. He has failed as a counselor to discern the facts. His theology is water-tight, rigid and principled; but it also misapplied and inept. It has failed to discern exceptions.

Eliphaz had no room in his system for the story, as recorded in John 9, of the man born blind. In answer to the query of the disciples as to who had sinned, the man or his parents, Jesus said it was neither. The reason for his suffering lay in another direction altogether. It had nothing to do with the man's past, but everything to do with his future.

He had been born blind in order that the works of God might be made manifest in him, and thereby have an effect upon generations of people who would thereafter read the story and profit from it. He suffered not for any sin of his own, or any inherited guilt resulting from the sin of another; he suffered in order to bring a blessing to someone else.

As a counselor, Eliphaz is inept. He has failed to listen to Job. He has rushed in where angels fear to tread.

And Job's response? – Anger! Eliphaz is nothing but a bag of wind! (6:26); his contribution about as insipid as "the white of an egg" (6:6). His words are of "no help" (6:20).

Anger with his friends, yes. But, anger with God, too. "I despise my life..." he cries, "Leave me alone; my days have no meaning" (7:16). Pain has evacuated any sense of purpose to his existence. Nihilism has gained a foothold. There is no point to his life anymore.

In what sounds almost like a parody of Psalm 8, Job felt the loss of his *dignity*. His condition is worse than a slave. Sleeplessness has added to his agitation. He feels victimized. His body is racked with pain. His open, dirty sores are a constant reminder of the frailty of his life.

"Why me?" Job says (c.f. 7:20). And we can understand why he asks it.

Towards the end of Job's reply he says something quite extraordinary. Like a child who is angry with its parents and storms out, Job seems to say, "You'll be sorry when I'm gone!" (7:21).

"Why do you not pardon my offenses
and forgive my sins?
For I will soon lie down in the dust;
you will search for me, but I will be no more." (Job 7:21)

He is bruised, his relationship with God under severe strain, and he throws out one final retort to the Almighty. Knowing that God essentially cares, Job says, "You'll be sorry when I'm gone". Even in his pain, Job is still talking to his God. His words may be angry. He may be saying things now that are very different from those sanguine expressions in the opening chapters. But he hasn't lost his faith in God, even though he thinks God is being unfair.

And Job has begun to believe Eliphaz' accusations. Maybe, after all, sin is the problem and forgiveness the resolution.

The Devil is attacking Job. He is attacking his mind with doubt. But Job knows nothing of that. He can only think it is God's doing. And he wants to know one thing: "why"? We can understand that all too well.

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