

Sermon AMC- Grief Counseling Gone wrong: Eliphaz and Job

Scripture: Job 4:1-17

Sunday, April 19, 2020

We are going to turn our attention back to the book of Job. In our first sermon on Job we looked at the opening where the scene was being set for us, with God and Satan setting up a trial for Job in heaven. We also looked at how the trial plays out here on earth and we looked at the question that the book of Job is exploring. One way of framing the question is, is God just? The other approach to the question is, if God is good, then why do good people suffer? This is where Job's friends come in. Because Job's three friends soon appear to console him. Now each of Job's friends have a slightly different take on how they respond to Job's laments. These responses represent different philosophical perspectives to the question of God's justice and human suffering. We are going to look at how these perspectives are formed and what is helpful and unhelpful about each of these perspectives when dealing with a grieving friend. Today our focus is going to be on Eliphaz, the Temanite.

Towards the end of chapter 2, we are told that when he comes with his two other friends to see Job they do nothing but sit in silence for 7 days. They could not say anything because they saw that Job's suffering was too great. During this time, it is Job who is speaking. He curses the day he was born and laments his suffering.

After 7 days, Eliphaz' cannot hold his tongue any longer and launches into the first of 3 speeches. His first speech covers chapter 4 and 5. The second speech is in chapter 15 and his third speech is in chapter 22. His approach in all three speeches is similar so I am going to highlight the elements from his opening speech covering chapter 4 and 5.

Now as Eliphaz starts speaking, he opens with humility and respect by highlighting the good that Job has done in the past. However by the time you get to verse 6, he has run

out of positive things to say and tells Job that, now that difficulty has touched Job, he has lost heart and is terrified. In other words Eliphaz has lost patience for Job's grief. At that point all Eliphaz can think of is what you see in verse 7. He says to Job, ***"Stop and think! Do the innocent die? When have the upright been destroyed?"***. In other words, Eliphaz is asking Job, "do innocent people face calamities in their life?" Now he answers his own question by saying, ***"those who plant trouble and cultivate evil, reap what they have sown"***. That means he is saying. If something bad happens to people, they are only reaping what they have sown. And to add authority to his view, he uses his life experience as proof and he also claims to have had a vision about this where a spirit revealed a secret truth to him in a dream. I want to address both these claims.

First, his life experience. Eliphaz says, in his life he has seen that bad things only happen to people who have sown evil in their life. Now certainly people have done evil things that has come back to bite them later on. For example an individual takes to dealing in drugs to earn extra cash. But in the end the drugs get him and his own family addicted and that leads to a series of tragic events. Of course such things happen all the time. But there are many many people who sow evil and nothing seems to happen to them. They seem to escape every attempt to hold them accountable. Jer 12:1 says this, ***"Righteous are You, O LORD, when I plead before You. Yet I wish to contend with You: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?"*** Ecc 8:14 says this, ***"There is a futility that is done on the earth: There are righteous men who get what the actions of the wicked deserve, and there are wicked men who get what the actions of the righteous deserve. I say that this too is futile"***. There are many Biblical passages that I could quote and many examples even from our own lives. People are killed by stray bullets or drunk drivers. Babies who are not yet old enough to know right from wrong die in all kinds of circumstances that they are not responsible for, every single day in all parts of the world. So what life experience is Eliphaz talking about? Well, here is the thing. Each of us, perceives our experiences through the filter of our

worldview. Because of this filter, we tend to pick up things align with our worldview and we discard information that don't agree with our worldview. This human tendency is called "confirmation bias". Confirmation bias keeps us comfortable because everything we see is as we expect it to be. There is nothing to ruffle our thinking. But conformation bias also prevents us from learning. And if we don't learn, we can't grow. Eliphaz touts his experience as he tried to make Job take him seriously. But by touting his experience of seeing only evil people suffer, he is also demonstrating the worthlessness of his experience.

But Eliphaz also tries another technique to be taken seriously. In 4:12 he touts the fact that a spirit revealed a secret to him in a terrifying dream. What was the secret? In verse 17 he says ***"Can a mortal be innocent before God? Can anyone be pure before the Creator?"*** I will not quote everything Eliphaz says, but his argument goes like this. No one can claim to be sinless before God. Therefore, you are not innocent Job, no matter what your claims and protestations may be. The speech runs into the next chapter and by verse 17 of the next chapter he tells Job, to not "despise the discipline of the Almighty". In other words Eliphaz tells Job, you must have done something wrong and you are being disciplined for what you did.

Now here is the thing about Eliphaz's initial statements. Taken in individual nuggets, everything that Eliphaz is saying to Job is true in general, right? Sure, "there is no one who is innocent before God! It is also true that we are instructed to not despise the disciple of the Almighty. But is it applicable in this case? Is this God really disciplining Job for something he did wrong? Not at all. We know that because we have read the prologue in chapter 1 and 2. We know the big picture. Job may have committed some sins in his life but this suffering is not the result of anything he did. But by Eliphaz saying so, instead of being a comfort, all he is doing is stabbing an open wound.

So the second lesson I want to point out from Eliphaz's speech is this, it is not enough for a statement to be true in general when you are counseling someone. You have to make sure that the truth you are presenting is applicable to the situation. If I were to add a word in the dictionary it would be "trufism" for this kind of situation. It is a variation of the word "truism". A "truism" is something that is just obvious and banal. Like the phrase, "you get what you pay for". But you take that obvious thing and use it in a way where it is not applicable or even false in a given context, like what Eliphaz is doing. That is what I want to call a "trufism". Like a medicine that is good in general like ibuprofen and telling someone to take it for a heart attack. It does no good and in fact it only causes harm.

Eliphaz uses both his oversimplified life experiences, as well as some "trufisms", and dumps them like boiling oil on Job's already aching head. And why does he do it? To prove that Job is guilty of wrongdoing and that is why misfortune has come to him.

Now, think about this. Why does Eliphaz have to go to such lengths to make Job look like he has committed something terribly wrong? Because he is actually trying to defend God's innocence in this whole situation with Job.

This brings me to my third point. Should a believer be defending God? First, some basics about the court of law. You see a defense lawyer is one who is an expert in the law and has been certified by the court to argue cases before the judge on behalf of a defendant. You see a defense lawyer is more qualified and credentialed and therefore has a special standing before the judge that the defendant by themselves does not have. So if you or I go about trying to defend God, it is like saying, we have some special credentials recognized in some court that God himself does not have. To make matters worse by defending God in front of some individual, we are giving that individual the power to play judge who will decide the guilt or innocence of God himself. This is obviously ridiculous. Therefore we are never to be so presumptuous as to appoint

ourselves as God's defense attorney. God can chose to defend or not defend Himself. Our role is to be a witness to who God is in our lives, nothing more and nothing less. We don't need to be judge over God or a defense or prosecuting attorney for God. We are to be witnesses, nothing more and nothing less.

But it goes even beyond that. Because while it looked like Eliphaz was defending God, at the core he was defending not God but his own simple worldview that anybody who suffers a calamity in their life is reaping evil that they sowed at some point.

Now to be fair, life would have been so simple if this was the case right? You do everything well and great things happen to you and you sin and calamities come upon you. This way life would be super predictable and anybody who sinned would in the end be eliminated. We could call this kind of world, a "survival of the holiest 😊". But we know that that is not how the world works. And thank God because I would find myself eliminated by that process as well 😊 Life is certainly not the survival of the holiest.

But here is the thing, if you have not yet faced some big challenge in your life you can start believing that things are going well with you because you are a good person and a smooth life is what you deserve because you are a good person. So when someone else goes through something terrible, instead of sitting with them through their suffering, some people feel the need to explain away their suffering by defending God or defending their oversimplified worldview that gives them comfort. But you see defending you own simple world-view is a move in the end not for the benefit of the one suffering. It is a move for one's own benefit. Imagine going into the presence of someone who is suffering and saying things to make yourself feel better even if it makes the sufferer feel worse!

If we really want to comfort anyone, we can only comfort with the comfort that we have been given. And our comfort is this. When Jesus Christ comes to our comfort, He does not always tell us *why* we are going through what we are going through. But he does assure us **that He is there with us**. He is Emmanuel. God with us. But he is not just with us. He will help us overcome. In John 16:33 he says, “in this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.” So the way it works is this. When we start with walking with God, we come across a lot of uncertainty and challenges in that walk. But God is with us and he comforts us with his presence. Then with that comfort, we are called to go comfort others.

When we have that opportunity to comfort others, our job is to do what God would do. Which is not to give explanations to those who are suffering but just be with them and let them know that they are loved by you and by God. You can't blame Eliphaz for not being able to give Job what he did not have. He gave what he had which was his limited thinking and easy explanations. What Job and anyone who is really hurting really needs is the presence and love of Jesus that is the only thing that can overcome the suffering of this world. I hope we can be there for those who are hurting by being a channel of Jesus' overcoming love. Let us pray.