

The Testing of Friends Without Discernment

Scripture: Job 11, John 11:17-37

Sunday, April 26, 2020

Last week we focused on Eliphaz the Temanite and his worldview. His view was that God is good and because God is good, he only lets good things happen to good people and bad things for bad people. So if something bad happens to someone, he concludes that it is the result of some sin that they have committed. So in the end, Eliphaz's initial intent of comforting Job in his tragedies, turns into an exercise of protecting his worldview. In that process, he tries to be God's defense attorney and ends up telling Job that there is only one possible explanation for Job's tragedy and that is that Job must have done something wrong. Last Sunday we looked how when you try to comfort someone without Christ's help, then like Eliphaz the comforter can turn into the tormentor. Last Sunday we looked at how **to be** a real comforter, it takes the power of Christ in us.

If that was an unfortunate turn in an attempt by Eliphaz to comfort Job, things get even worse after that. Because immediately after Eliphaz speaks we get two other friends, Bildad and Zophar taking their turns with Job. Today we are going to examine the approaches of these two.

We start with Bildad. Now Bildad takes Eliphaz' message to the next level. Eliphaz, remember, had said, the only possible explanation for Job's plight was that it was the consequence of some sin. Bildad takes that further by being specific about the sin, saying that his children had sinned and therefore they were killed as a punishment for their sin. That is like putting a knife into Job. We have come a long way from the idea of comforting Job. Now as if that was not painful enough, Zophar takes his criticisms even further in his speech in chapter 11. In verse 6 he says, ***"Listen! God is doubtless punishing you far less than you deserve!"***

That is one painful zinger! But before we get to those zingers that are three things that set up these zingers. Let me point them out to you. Firstly, when they begin, both Bildad and Zophar demonstrate impatience with Job. Bildad starts his speech in verse 8 with ***“how long will you go on like this? You sound like a blistering wind”***. Zophar also starts his speech with ***“Shouldn’t someone answer this torrent of words? Is a person proved innocent just by a lot of talking?”***

But after impatience you get some theology. Things that are actually true about God and things that Job would agree to. Both talk about the goodness of God and the transcendence or “above and beyond our thinking” nature of God. Bildad in verse 8:3 says ***“Does God twist justice?, Does the Almighty twist what is right?”***. Zophar in 11:7 says, ***“Can you solve the mysteries of God? Can you discover everything about the Almighty?”***. Pay careful attention. Both these people start off with saying things about the justice and greatness of God that Job would agree to. It is true that God does not corrupt justice. God is perfectly just. God is also mysterious. ***“God’s ways are above our ways, God’s thinking is above our thinking”*** says Is 55:8 and 9.

Now besides saying things that Job would agree with, they also seem to say that Job has a way out of his predicament with God. Listen to these statement from Bildad, 8:20-21,

***²⁰But look, God will not reject a person of integrity,
nor will he lend a hand to the wicked.***

***²¹He will once again fill your mouth with laughter
and your lips with shouts of joy***

And Zophar in 11:13-17

***¹³If only you would prepare your heart
and lift up your hands to him in prayer!***

¹⁴Get rid of your sins,

and leave all iniquity behind you.

¹⁵ Then your face will brighten with innocence.

You will be strong and free of fear.

¹⁶ You will forget your misery;

it will be like water flowing away.

¹⁷ Your life will be brighter than the noonday.

Even darkness will be as bright as morning

What we have seen so far are these guys are saying many true things about God being a just God and a mysterious God. In other words they talk like believers. They talk like they know God. They also talk like they have an answer for Job's situation and they are pleading with him to repent and turn to God. In other words, these two are saying true things about God and are pleading with Job as if they care deeply about him.

But when you say true things and things that seem to be for the benefit of the listener and then say other things like, Job you are suffering because "your kids sinned and they deserved to die because of their sins" or that what you are suffering is "much less than what you deserve" now when you put all those messages together you get what I would describe as the "blade" and the "handle" coming together. You see it takes both the blade and the handle to make a strong knife. If you have only a blade, it is not as effective because if you can't grip the blade well, you cannot do much damage with it right? So when nasty things are said which are connected to some true things and seemingly good intentions, now you have a sharp blade connected to a strong handle, which makes a powerful weapon. This is what Job's friends use to stab Job with.

I want you to step back and think about a big picture aspect of the Job story. When you think of the Job story, we think mostly of all the bad things that happened to Job. He lost most of his family. He lost his possessions and even his health. Those are big losses. But if you look at the book of Job, the parts that focus on the calamities that came to

him is about 1 chapter long. But chapters 3 to 37 are focused on the dialog between Job and his friends. That is a full 80% of the entire book. I bring this to your attention because I would say that what Job is suffering much more than his calamities is how his community is dealing with the situation. You see life is difficult and you and I will face many difficult situations, tests and temptations. But the community of those whose turn it is to undergo these trials have a great capacity to act as a support and comfort or to amplify the trial and become the main trial itself. This is what you see in Job's case. In Job's case as bad as Job's calamities were, his friends managed to make them much worse. Because the only thing worse than a terrible thing happening to you, is living with the guilt that it was your fault when it was not. Undeserved guilt is one of the worst things you can experience in your life. This is not something that God wants you to go through.

Today, I don't just want us to leave with a negative example, by saying don't stab someone who is mourning in the stomach. I want to finish with what makes a true Christlike friend to a Job in your life. Last week I had started talking about this by saying that we have to comfort others with the comfort we have been given from Christ. I had said that we have to make sure that the focus is on the one who is going through the suffering and not our own limited worldview or try to make ourselves feel better. It is very important to keep it "sufferer-centric". Today, I want to build on that from the dialog we are looking at today. So there are three specific ways we can be better comforters looking at today's speeches.

The first thing I would say, learning from Job's friends is "first do not make the sufferers pain worse". There are many ways to make things worse of course. One thing we see from today's speeches to avoid carelessly pinning the blame for the tragedy on someone. Some situations are hard to pin the blame on. Sometimes it may be impossible to pin the blame. So don't pin the blame. When Jesus was asked who was to

blame for the man born blind, Jesus refused to pin the blame and focused instead on what He knew was going to happen, which was that God was going to be glorified. Now you and I may not know either who is to blame or what is going to happen. So don't try to pin the blame randomly. You will only make the pain of the situation even greater. Even in situations where it is easy to pin the blame like in the case of a shooting or car accident, focusing on the person who caused the situation does not bring comfort to the sufferer. It just fans the flames of anger and thoughts of revenge which bring more pain and not less pain. So don't be like Job's friends and pin the blame on the wrong person or any person. It is only going to make a painful situation even more painful. The Christlike response is to not focus on the cause but be focused on what can bring healing. If you aim for healing, at least you might make the goal of not make things worse 😊

After making sure that we don't make the pain worse, the second thing we need to ensure is that the sufferer knows that we are standing with them. Rom 15:12 gives us an important principle in being community to someone. It says, ***“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”***. When you look at the example of Jesus with Lazarus, you see something remarkable. Jesus could have gone and resurrected Lazarus and gone home. He had the capacity to solve the problem and he was going to do it for Lazarus. But if all Jesus did was come in, solve the problem and leave, it would have shown the world his power but it would not have shown the world how to comfort the bereaved. Jesus in John 11, visits Lazarus house and grieves with his family, before he goes and deals with the problem. If it was important for Jesus to do that before he raised Lazarus from the dead, it should be important for us as well. If we are comforting the way Jesus did, we have to take time to sit with those who weep and even weep with them. That way those who mourn will not feel that they are alone in their suffering.

The third thing we can learn for our lives from Job's friends is to beware of cheap explanations for what they are going through. Everyone grasps for explanations and asks "why" questions when they are going through suffering. When the mourner asks the "why" question, the temptation is to offer your own answer. But even from the book of Job we can see that God wants us to be able to bring our "why" questions to Him. Now the person who is going through the suffering has a diminished capacity to do anything. So the role of the comforter is to help them do what they cannot do for themselves. In this case one of those things may be to be the one who takes their "why" questions to God. When you take their questions to God, it is like taking them to God with you, like the four friends who took the lame man to Jesus through the roof of the house. The four friends did for the lame man what the lame man could not do for himself. This is exactly what Jesus wants us to do as a comforters. Take their "why" questions to God for them.

Three ways we can be real friends to the "Jobs" in our life. Make sure that we don't make their pain worse by pinning the blame carelessly, especially not on the mourner themselves. Secondly, make sure to weep with those who weep so that they know that you are with them in the time of their suffering. Finally take their "why" questions to God for them. God can handle all questions and God promises that those who mourn will be comforted. If we have experienced that comfort from leaving our questions and problems at the feet of Jesus, then we will be able to pass that comfort on to those whom we are trying to comfort.

May God use you and us as a community to bring comfort to the hurting world around us. Let us pray.