

“Comfort Fail”

Job 4-6

Intro: Melvin Tinker recounts the story of the Reverend Joseph Parker, the minister of Christ Temple church in London from 1874 until his death in 1902. Parker said that up to the age of 68 he had never, ever had a religious doubt. But then his wife died and, in the anguish of her loss, his faith all but collapsed. He wrote,

“In that dark hour I became almost an atheist, for God had set his foot upon my prayers and treated my petitions with contempt. If I had a seen a dog in such agony as mine, I would have pitied and helped the dumb beast. But God spat upon me and cast me out as an offense; out into the waste wilderness and the night - black and starless.”

Last week we learned that dark nights of the soul are not ‘un-Christian’ experiences. God’s people really do have moments of deep despair, times when they feel overwhelmed by loss, overcome by evil, and abandoned by God. The Psalms make clear that David did. So did Elijah and Jeremiah and our Lord Jesus.

The question before us this morning is this: How do you comfort someone like a Joseph Parker – who says hard things about God in the night of his grief? More specifically, how do you comfort a man like Job, sitting in the abyss of all that he has lost? What do you say to this apparently God-forsaken man, rotting way on an ash heap – though he did nothing wrong. How do you comfort *him*? That is the question facing Job’s three friends. They’ve come to comfort Job.

I. The Comforters

We need to begin by introducing Job’s infamous three friends.

Job 2:11 Now when Job’s three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him.

These men have received a lot of bad press over the years and, unfortunately it is mostly earned. But we miss the drama of the text if we demonize them. They are not evil men. They are good men, respected and devout men. You will most likely meet them in heaven. They believe in Job’s God and strive to give Job godly counsel.

They are Job’s closest and dearest friends – not mere acquaintances, not Facebook friends, but sworn allies and confidants. When they heard of Job’s calamity, they have

dropped their plans, their schedules, and have come to “show him sympathy and to comfort him.”

The word “to comfort” here is important.

Ash, “To comfort involves speaking to the mind and heart of the sufferer in such a way as to change his or her mind and heart....(it) intends to bring about a change in how the sufferer thinks and feels about his or her suffering.”¹

It’s like a mother comforting a young child grieving a broken toy. “Honey, I’m sorry. Daddy can fix it when he gets home.” That changes how the child thinks and feels.

When God calls Isaiah to comfort grieving Israel in Isaiah 40, he gives him these words,

“Comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned and that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”

These are words of hope and encouragement for Israel in this midst of their trial.

That’s what Job’s friends have set out to do. They have come to give him hope and encouragement. To help strengthen his spirit and give him a new perspective. Of course, they fail, and miserably. In fact, their ‘comfort’ heaps insult to injury on the head of poor Job. But why did they fail? What, specifically did they get wrong?

II. The Counsel

When the three friends first came upon Job, they sat silently with him for a week. That was good. But then Job poured out his curse and lament in chapter 3 – and now the friends feel obligated to respond. For the next 27 chapters we have a heated discussion between Job and his friends – all in dramatic poetic form.

Eliphaz begins. He is the oldest of the three and represents the wisdom of the aged. His words are kind and reasonable and biblical. They are the kind of things we might say as we seek to counsel someone who was struggling with a devastating trial.

A. Be Consistent (4:3-6)

- ³ Behold, you have instructed many,
and you have strengthened the weak hands.
- ⁴ Your words have upheld him who was stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble knees.
- ⁵ But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;
it touches you, and you are dismayed.

Eliphaz reminds Job that Job himself has counseled others. He has reminded others of God's purposes and ways – but now when calamity happens to him, he seems to have forgotten it all. Job needs to be consistent, willing to receive counsel he had once given.

B. Be Wise

Remember the moral order of the universe. **(4:7-11)**

⁷ "Remember: who that was innocent ever perished?

Or where were the upright cut off?

⁸ As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.

These two verses are critical because they reveal the moral and religious worldview of these men. Eliphaz gently reminds Job of how the world works: the innocent don't perish – those who sow trouble reap the same. Good things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. It's a simple law of moral reality.

The basic outline of their world view goes like this.

- a. God is absolutely sovereign. He actively ordains **all** things.
- b. God blesses the righteous and judges the wicked.
- c. Application: If someone is suffering, they must have sinned.

Job is clearly being punished – and the only reason possible is that Job has sinned. That's just the way it is. That's how the system works. There is no other explanation for what has happened to him.

However, God is good, and sinners can turn to him. And so Eliphaz continues with his final two words of encouragement.

C. Trust the Lord. (5:8-16)

5:8 "As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause,

⁹ who does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number:

This is good counsel. How often haven't we encouraged someone with Prov 3:5-6?

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

Once again, this is good counsel. These are true words. We must trust in the Lord.

D. Submit to God's Discipline. (5:17–27)

¹⁷“Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproves; therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty.

¹⁸For he wounds, but he binds up; he shatters, but his hands heal.

¹⁹He will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no evil shall touch you.

Again, this is good, biblical counsel. It is precisely the encouragement given to the suffering believes in Hebrews 12.

“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

And so, we can see that the speech of Eliphaz is, by and large a very good speech. A Biblically sound speech. But it fails miserably in the task for which it was given. Job is not comforted. In fact, he’s is deeply offended by it! Job’s response is taut with astonished anger and grief. He’s devastated by this speech. He’s angered by it. Wouldn’t you be?

- In 5:4 Eliphaz confidently speaks regarding the fool, “His children are far from safety, they are crushed in the gate and there is no one to deliver them.”

Well, Job’s children were crushed in the gate. All 10 of them. No one was there to deliver them. Is Job a fool?? Is that why this has all happened?

- In 5:25, Eliphaz is waxing eloquent concerning the blessings God gives to those who accept his discipline and he says,

²⁴ You shall know that your tent is at peace, and you shall inspect your fold and miss nothing.

²⁵ You shall know also that your offspring shall be many, and your descendants as the grass of the earth.

But Job’s tent wasn’t at peace – it was in shatters. His folds weren’t just missing a few goats and camels – they were completely entirely gone. His offspring **weren’t** many – they were dead. All of them. It’s no wonder that Job responds as he does!

III. Job’s Response

Job begins by reminding his friends that his rash words flow from the vexation and desperate calamity of his life! God has assaulted him!

:4 “the arrows of the Almighty are in me and my spirit drinks their poison.”

His words are not without reason.

:5 Does the wild donkey bray when he has grass?

Instead of critiquing my words – recognize the devastating reality from which they flow!

In verse 8-13 Job shows that his heart's desire is not to speak against God or dishonor God. In fact, this is why he wishes to die – so that he will not deny the words of the Holy One. He doesn't want to curse God and die, as his wife had suggested. He wants to die precisely so that he **won't** curse God! But his strength is running out (12). He's not made of stones and bronze. He's just a helpless man whose resources have been taken away.

As it is, he believes that Eliphaz has sinned against him with his cold, orthodox counsel!

6:14 "He who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty.

Job challenges them to show him his supposed error.

²⁴ "Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone astray.

Deal with the reality of my experience, my loss, my abandonment by God!

Eliphaz had confidently recited the tradition of wisdom – but it rings painfully false in the presence of Job's suffering. It doesn't suffice. Their counsel is like a desert stream bed (25). In the rainy season filled with water. But when it's hot – when it's needed, there's nothing there. Just religious platitudes.

The offense of a platitude is not that it is false – but that it is a thoughtless. Eliphaz ended his speech by saying "these things are true". And they are true! The offense is that they are not **sufficiently** true. They don't adequately engage the reality of the matter or face the reality of Job in his grief. Job's friends are busy applying "the system" but they aren't "seeing" him!

This is at the heart of Job's plea in 6:28.

"Look at me." See me. Look into my face and deal with the reality of my integrity and my devastation at the hand of God.

:30 "Is there injustice on my tongue?" Am I lying about what God has done to me? Am I lying about my innocence? Look me in the face and tell me. Show me my sin!

The wise principles of religion can't answer the profound reality of Job's suffering. All these orthodox truths fail to comfort him. The system isn't sufficient. Something is missing.

Now you might be thinking, wait a minute – those are **biblical** truths!

- “You **do** reap what you sow”. Galatians 6:7 “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”
- God **DOES** discipline those he loves! (Heb 12)
- God does bless those who honor and obey him.

The fact is, we could find Biblical support for nearly every single thing Eliphaz says. So where did he fail?

That’s a great question. The common suggestion offered by preachers and commentators is that the error was in application. Eliphaz and his friends said true things, biblical things – but they failed in that they didn’t show sufficient compassion. They shouldn’t have attempted to correct Job, they should have just empathized. The time for correction would maybe come later.

But the failure is vastly greater than that. Their failure was a failure of **content** – not just context. In other words, their counsel didn’t fail merely because it was poorly timed, it failed because it was in error! That’s what God says at the end of the book.

Job 42:7 After the LORD had spoken....to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.

God’s anger burns against Eliphaz for this speech. Why? Because Eliphaz hasn’t spoken of God correctly! God doesn’t rebuke him for his poor timing, he rebukes him for false teaching.

How could God charge Eliphaz with failing to “speak what is right”, when most of what Eliphaz says is in the Bible? Well, as with most false teaching, the error isn’t so much in what is said as in what is left out. There are several critical things missing in the System.

First of all, it lacks the perspective of eternity. Yes, God is just and he unerringly and infallibly blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked – but not until the day of judgement. In this life the wicked will often flourish. Job will wrestle with that in a later speech. In this life the righteous will have trouble. Jesus promises it. Peter tells the early church, “Do not be surprised by these fiery trials as though something strange were happening to you. To this you have been called.” In this life, wrongs will often not be made right. Any theological system or worldview that loses an eternal perspective is doomed to fail those who hold it.

Maybe some of you need to be reminded of this today. You look at the circumstances of your life here and now and are depressed, anguished, despairing. But you've lost sight of the eternal. These trials are all real, and they certainly do hurt. But they are part and parcel of this life. And they are truly temporary.

But secondly, the system doesn't account for suffering that is simply for the glory of God. Job **isn't** suffering for his sin. He's suffering, by God's own purpose and plan, for the glory of God.

There's a great exchange in John 9 between Jesus and his disciples. They see a man born blind and the disciples apply the system. "Who sinned? This man or his parents?" But do you remember how Jesus responded?

John 9:3 "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."

That's the reality of Job's suffering. His sorrows have nothing to do with his sin – but everything to do with the works of God. God is at work in Job's sorrows to reveal something of his glory.

All suffering of God's children is, to one degree or another, not about our sin, but about the glory of God.

We often live by the system – you reap what you sow. If we are suffering, it is because we have sinned. Rick Thomas nails this in his book "Suffering Well". He talks about 'Karma Christians' – people who live by the conviction that if I do well, the Lord will bless me, and if I do not do well, the Lord will not bless me. He says, "I counsel people like this all the time. Here are a few manifestations:

- I missed my daily Bible study and something terrible happened to me. I see a direct correlation between my lack of devotions and the trouble in my life.
- My child is not walking with the Lord, and I was not a good parent. If I had been a better parent, the Lord would have motivated my child to love and follow him.
- I am stuck in habitual sin. I know the Lord is going to get me for this.
- We fornicated while we were dating and now have a miserable marriage. The Lord is punishing us. You reap what you sow.

Most of us, to some degree, act like Karma Christians. We make direct links between our behavior and God's dealings with us. And in the process we crush our own soul. But we are leaving something out, just like Eliphaz.

The most critical thing the system leaves out is the one and only thing that actually brings comfort. The great irony of the system is that it asks a great question –

“Who that was innocent ever perished?”

Eliphaz meant it rhetorically. God meant it prophetically.

Who, being innocent ever perished? Who being innocent was cut off; condemned and crushed by God? You know the answer. Jesus was. Jesus perished – though he was perfectly innocent. Jesus was cut off. It pleased the Father to crush him and cause him to suffer.

And in Jesus’s suffering, in his perishing, bearing our sin, we find the only comfort possible for God’s suffering saints.

Job didn’t need a proverb, a wisdom saying, he needed a person. Someone to join him in his sorrows and mediate for him before God. “O that I had one to mediate for me.”
And a Mediator is what God has provided us.

In your sorrows. God doesn’t give you a theological system. He doesn’t give you religious maxims or wise proverbs. He gives you Jesus in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col 2:3)

And God promises you, in Christ Jesus, you do not ultimately reap what you sow. You reap what Jesus sown.

He does NOT deal with us as our sins deserve or reward us according to our iniquities.

God **always** deals with us according to his steadfast, unchanging grace and kindness in Jesus Christ! Even when you have sinned grievously. This is the gospel. An innocent man perished – so that you, the sinner, could live. Our righteous Jesus was condemned precisely for this reason – so that you, his precious and forgiven child, could know the oceans of His grace and love.

¹ Christopher Ash, *Job: the Wisdom of the Cross*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 59