**WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER**

**WHAT NOT TO SAY TO THE SUFFERING**

**Job 4:1-7:21**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we come to the beginning of the longest section in the book of Job. This section runs from Chapter 4 to 31, and consists of a series of dialogues between Job and his three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. We will move through this section at a faster pace. After beginning this series by covering three chapters in three sermons, today we will cover four chapters in one. Today, we will address the first of Eliphaz’s three speeches, and Job’s reply to it.

We know that these three friends came with the best of intentions. They came to “show him sympathy and comfort him” (2:11). They showed their patience and compassion when they sat with him on the ground in the town dump for seven days and nights even though they had nothing to say.

But after Job finally speaks in Chapter 3 by cursing the day of his birth, longing for death, and complaining that God just won’t let him die, these three friends feel compelled to address him. What follows is a master class in bad counselling.

These three friends who came with the best of intentions gave Job some of the worst counsel. But it wasn’t because their hearts were in the wrong place. It was because their theology was in the wrong place. Their system of understanding God, man, and God’s ways with man was so fundamentally flawed that they were incapable of adequately counselling and comforting their suffering friend.

Their treatment of Job’s suffering gives us an opportunity to examine our own thoughts and attitudes towards suffering, because one day, each of us will find ourselves in the same position. Each of us will be given the responsibility of comforting and counselling a beloved family member or friend who is suffering. And when we do, will we counsel them like Job’s friends because we held the same flawed assumptions about suffering? Or will we understand that there is more to suffering than they knew, a gospel-centered way of understanding suffering, that completely transforms what we say and how we say it?

The title of this sermon is **What Not to Say to The Suffering.** We will divide our text today into three points:

1. A Kind Man’s Counsel
2. A Broken Man’s Response
3. A Hopeless Man’s Prayer

(1) **A KIND MAN’S COUNSEL**

The first of Job’s friends to speak is Eliphaz the Temanite. Teman was a place in Edom that was renowned for its wisdom, and it appears that Eliphaz was known for his wisdom as well. He speaks as the first of the three friends who have gathered to comfort Job, which indicates that he was the most senior among them. God also addresses him in Chapter 42 as the representative of the three friends which is another indication of his seniority and experience.

This wasn’t a young man who was inexperienced with suffering. This was an older man who had a reputation for wisdom, which meant that his views didn’t just represent his own personal opinions. They reflected the prevailing views of his culture and time, and in many ways, they reflect our own culture’s views as well.

Eliphaz also appears to be a kind man, especially when he’s compared to Bildad and Zophar. Those two are rash and direct, but Eliphaz takes a softer approach. We see that in verses 1-4:

**1**Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said:

**2**“If one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient?
    Yet who can keep from speaking?
**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.

He begins by gently probing Job with a question. And even as he prepares to offer Job some mild correction, he begins with encouragement instead. This is typical for Eliphaz. He asks questions rather than drawing conclusions. He makes suggestions rather than telling Job what to do. And he tries to encourage Job with the hope that everything is going to get better if he would but seek the Lord and receive his discipline.

But behind his gentle words lie several fundamental flaws. The first is in verse 5:

**5**But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;
    it touches you, and you are dismayed.

Eliphaz is saying, “You helped others, Job. Can’t you help yourself? If you taught people to wait on the Lord, can’t you be patient?” Eliphaz doesn’t grasp the depths of Job’s pain. He calls Job “impatient”, like a spoiled child having a temper tantrum because he didn’t get what he wanted.

It’s true that Job was “impatient” for death, but impatience isn’t his problem. His problem is that everything he loves in this world has been suddenly taken from him without explanation. To characterize Job’s response as “impatience” was to completely mischaracterize and minimize his pain.

This is one of the most significant challenges for those who are trying to counsel sufferers. We just don’t understand their pain. We use words to describe their pain only to hear them say, “You think *that’s* how I feel?” We try to assure them that everything’s going to be ok without realizing that there are some scars that we will bear until the day that we die.

We don’t understand, because we don’t take the time to wait, to listen, and to try to feel what that suffering friend must be feeling. We don’t take the time to feel empathy, because we come at people’s problems with solutions rather than compassion. We say, “This is what you need to do” rather than “This is how I know you’re feeling.” It’s unlikely that we will ever fully understand another person’s pain, but we can try, and that does far more to comfort that person than we know.

Eliphaz’s second flaw is in verses 7-8:

**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 are two of the most important verses in the book of Job, because they reveal the essence of what Job’s three friends believed about the world. Eliphaz sees the world as a place of perfect justice, where the innocent live long and the upright prosper, and the wicked die young and the guilty suffer. In verse 8, he basically says, “You reap what you sow”. You plow iniquity, you reap trouble. You do what is right, you reap prosperity. In Eliphaz’s world, people only get what they deserve, so if you suffer, it’s because you deserved it.

Eliphaz doesn’t say outright that Job deserved his suffering. He’s too gentle for that. But he is implying it. He’s saying, “Come on, Job, you know how the world works. Bad things don’t happen to good people. So if all these bad things have happened to you, what does that say about you?”

But is it true? It’s certainly true as a general principle. You live without self-control and your life will become chaotic. You treat people poorly and you’ll receive the same. Both the Old and the New Testament affirm that there is a direct connection between how we live and what we receive.

But this isn’t always the case. The Bible is replete with examples of suffering saints. At the very beginning of history, it was righteous Abel who was murdered by his angry brother Cain. It was innocent Joseph who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and thrown into prison for a crime that he didn’t commit. It was faithful Uzziah who was murdered by his king because he lusted after his wife. It was the prophet Jeremiah who was thrown into a well for preaching God’s Word. It was Christ himself, the spotless Lamb of God, who was crucified by wicked men.

And it was blameless and upright Job, a man who feared God and turned away from evil, a man who was held up by God as his finest servant in all the world, who lost everything.

Eliphaz is wrong, and we know he’s wrong because of what God said about Job in Chapters 1 and 2. Job was innocent, but his children perished. Job was upright, but he was cut off from his wealth and his health. Job didn’t plow iniquity, but he reaped trouble all the same.

This was the fundamental problem with Job’s three friends. They had no category for innocent suffering. They didn’t know what to say when the righteous suffer except to say that they must not have been righteous, and that is why they were completely incapable of comforting and counselling Job.

Eliphaz then describes a mystical experience he had in verses 12-21 that seems to confirm his point. You don’t need me to point out that this wouldn’t have been helpful. Job feels abandoned by God, even cursed by God, and here is Eliphaz talking about this intimate spiritual experience he just had. It was yet another reminder to Job of just how bad things were for him. God is speaking to his friends, but he’s not speaking to him, so there must be something wrong with him.

One of the worst things we can do as counsellors is talk about ourselves in such a way that we remind the person we’re counselling that they’re not like us. The goal in suffering is solidarity, not separation. It’s entering into the pain of the other person and sharing it with them.

Next, Eliphaz describes “the fool” in 5:1-7. The fool’s children are crushed in the gate, his harvest is eaten by the hungry, and all this affliction comes to him. It’s like he’s speaking of some imaginary man “out there”, but the clear implication is that this is Job. Job is the fool here. We know that because he says in verse 2:

**2**Surely vexation kills the fool,
    and jealousy slays the simple.

Job is vexed. He is vexed about what has happened to him. And Eliphaz says, “Job, vexation kills the fool. You may be feeling jealous right now – whether of the rich, or of the dead, or of me – but remember that jealousy slays the simple. Don’t be overwhelmed by your emotions, because only fools let their emotions take over.”

Eliphaz ends his speech with some good advice, but it’s given for the wrong reasons:

**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…”

That is good advice. Seek the Lord, Job. Commit your cause to him, because he does great and marvelous things. But why?

Because of all the good things it will bring you. Verses 19-27: “he will deliver you from six troubles; in famine he will redeem you from death, and in war from the power of the sword; you shall laugh at destruction and famine; your tent shall be at peace; your offspring shall be many; you shall come to your grave in ripe old age. In other words, “Seek God for his gifts. Bless him, and he will bless you. Submit to his will, and you will prosper.”

Do you see what’s happening here? Eliphaz is urging Job to seek the Lord for the very reasons that Satan accused him of in Chapters 1 and 2. Satan may have disappeared from the narrative, but he’s still at work tempting Job. He tempted Job through his wife, and now he’s tempting Job through his friend. He’s tempting Job to give up his integrity to replace it with a mercenary faith, the kind that says, “God, I will follow you, but only if you give me what I want.”

Eliphaz had good motives, but he had bad counsel; and this bad counsel was the fruit of bad doctrine. If we are to give people the right counsel, we must first have the right doctrine. We must have right views of suffering, justice, and ultimately of God himself, because if we don’t, we may find ourselves doing Satan’s work rather than God’s work.

(2) **A BROKEN MAN’S RESPONSE**

Now we get to hear Job’s response, leading to our second point.

Verses 1-3:

**1**Then Job answered and said:

**2**“Oh that my vexation were weighed,
    and all my calamity laid in the balances!
**3**For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea;
    therefore my words have been rash.

Job is replying directly to Eliphaz’s warning that “vexation kills the fool”. Job replies, “Do you want to talk about vexation? If you could weigh my vexation, it would be heavier than all the sand of the sea.” Job is saying, “Eliphaz, you have no idea what you’re talking about. You have no idea what I’m feeling. Don’t talk to me about what all the things I’m going to lose because of my vexation. My vexation has already consumed me!”

But what is it that Job is most vexed about? Verse 4:

**4**For the arrows of the Almighty are in me;
    my spirit drinks their poison;
    the terrors of God are arrayed against me.

Job’s vexation doesn’t come primarily from the loss of his health, or his wealth, or even the loss of his children. It comes from feeling like God is at war against him. God has fired his arrows at him. He has sunk his poison-tipped darts deep into Job’s flesh, so deep that the poison seeps into his soul. That’s what vexes him most.

David Clines writes,

“It is not the physical pain or the mental torment that weighs him down; it is the consciousness that he has become God’s enemy.” – David Clines

There is nothing more terrifying than the thought that you are God’s enemy, that God has declared war against your soul and is committed to your destruction.

Job can’t bear the thought, and so he repeats his longing for death from Chapter 3 in verses 8-10. But here, he adds another reason for why he prefers death over life:

**8**“Oh that I might have my request,
    and that God would fulfill my hope,
**9**that it would please God to crush me,
    that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!
**10**This would be my comfort;
    I would even exult in pain unsparing,
    for I have not denied the words of the Holy One.

Do you see what he’s saying? He’s saying, “Lord, take me now. Take me from this life, for I haven’t denied you or your words, but I’m close. I’m running out of strength, so take me before I give up on you.” The only thing Job has left is his integrity: his integrity of faith, his integrity of blessing God and not cursing God. But he’s on the brink. He’s near the tipping point of losing the final shreds of his integrity. Before that happens, he begs God for the final release of death.

In verses 14-23 Job tells his friends what he thinks about their advice so far. He begins with these scathing words:

**14**“He who withholds kindness from a friend
    forsakes the fear of the Almighty.

The word for “kindness” here is the same word used elsewhere for “steadfast love”, God’s *hesed* love, his faithful commitment to his covenant people to pursue them and restore them. Job is saying that friends owe each other *hesed* love, but these friends have withheld it. They have withheld kindness from their friend, and in so doing they have forsaken the fear of the Almighty.

Job uses a picture to describe what they’ve done. He describes what is known today as a *wadi*, a valley or ravine in the desert that only has water during certain seasons. This *wadi* is supposed to be refreshing, with torrential streams passing through it There’s even ice and snow from the high-up mountaintops to refresh the weary travelling through the desert. But then the snow melts, and the water evaporates in the heat. As the travelling caravans turn aside from their course to find water they find a dry and barren wasteland instead.

That’s how Job felt. He was hoping to find refreshment from his friends, but they offered him death instead.

**20**They are ashamed because they were confident;
    they come there and are disappointed.
**21**For you have now become nothing;
    you see my calamity and are afraid.

Rather than seeing him and having compassion, rather than refreshing him with their sympathy, Job’s friends are afraid. They have pulled back from him in fear as if they might be struck with the same calamity.

His friends are trying to do the right thing, but they not only failed to do good. They managed to make things worse.

The prologue to the book of Job in the 1560 Geneva Bible says,

“These friends came unto him under pretense of consolation, and yet they tormented him more than did all his affliction.”

Job ends Chapter 6 with a plea to his friends to actually say something of substance:

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

**28**“But now, be pleased to look at me,
    for I will not lie to your face.

He pleads with them to just turn and look at him, to look him in the eye, because they were avoiding his gaze. They were looking anywhere but at his boil-infested countenance because they couldn’t bear the sight. But he says, “I won’t lie to you. Ask me if I’ve done anything wrong and I’ll tell you the truth.”

1. **A HOPELESS MAN’S PRAYER**

As we turn to Chapter 7, Job’s reply ends in a surprising way as he turns his attention away from his friends and back to his God, leading to our final point.

It’s not clear who Job is speaking to as the chapter opens, but we find out it’s God as the chapter unfolds:

**12**Am I the sea, or a sea monster,
    that you set a guard over me?

**14**then you scare me with dreams
    and terrify me with visions,

**20**If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind?

Job says “you set a guard over me”, “you scare me with dreams”, “you watcher of mankind”. These descriptions clearly don’t apply to Job’s friends, but to God.

And so, what we have in Chapter 7 is Job’s first recorded prayer following his devastating losses, and it begins with a description of his pain:

**1** “Has not man a hard service on earth,
    and are not his days like the days of a hired hand?
**2**Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
    and like a hired hand who looks for his wages,
**3**so I am allotted months of emptiness,
    and nights of misery are apportioned to me.
**4**When I lie down I say, ‘When shall I arise?’
    But the night is long,
    and I am full of tossing till the dawn.
**5**My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt;
    my skin hardens, then breaks out afresh.
**6**My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle
    and come to their end without hope.

This is a man who has lost all purpose in life. Time has no meaning for him. His nights are sleepless, and his days run by without change and without hope. He has been given “months of emptiness”. His body is in an endless cycle of pain as his skin hardens in “loathsome sores” only to break out afresh and start all over again. Job doesn’t even bother to wash the dirt off himself or wipe away the worms that are crawling all over him, because he’s like a man who has already died.

Job is a bitter man, and he freely admits to that in verse 11:

**11**“Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;
    I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
    I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.

Then he gets to the point, and to the essence of his complaint in verse 16:

 **16**I loathe my life; I would not live forever.
    Leave me alone, for my days are a breath.

That’s what Job wants to say to God. That’s what it sounds like for him to not restrain his mouth. “Leave me alone! I hate the life that you’ve given me. Just leave me alone, let me die, and stop hurting me.”

Job wants God to leave him alone, because he sees God as the cause of his pain. He sees God as the author of all his suffering. God’s presence used to bring him comfort. God’s thoughts of him used to make him feel loved. But now they torment him.

We see that in verse 17:

**17**What is man, that you make so much of him,
    and that you set your heart on him,
**18**visit him every morning
    and test him every moment?

Doesn’t that sound familiar? Doesn’t that sound like the famous words in Psalm 8? “What is man, that you are mindful of him; the son of man, that you care for him?” Job takes those opening lines of wonder and turns them into a nightmare. “Who am I, that you would spend so much of your attention to torment me?” Job doesn’t want God to draw near to him. He wants God to leave him alone.

Job’s prayer reaches its climax in verses 20-21:

**20** Why have you made me your mark?
    Why have I become a burden to you?
**21**Why do you not pardon my transgression
    and take away my iniquity?
For now I shall lie in the earth;
    you will seek me, but I shall not be.”

Job asked these questions not knowing how God would answer, but for the Christian, we know.

Why has God made us his mark? He marks us with the seal of the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of our inheritance.

Why have we become a burden to him? Because Christ willingly took our burden of sin upon himself.

Why does he not pardon our transgressions and take away our iniquities? He has, because Jesus was pierced for our transgressions. Jesus was crushed for our iniquities. Jesus died in our place for our sins on the cross, so that we could be pardoned.

Because of Christ, none who trust in him as Lord and Saviour ever have to wonder if God will pardon their sins. None who trust in him have to fear that God has become their enemy, because Christ has come. He has come to pay for the sins of his people – past, present, and future – so that we could be friends of God forever.

**CONCLUSION**

So how do we counsel those who suffer? Not with the self-righteous, moralistic, condescending words of Job’s friends, but with the saving power of the gospel. We don’t tell people that the righteous don’t suffer. We tell them that the Righteous One *did* suffer. The innocent one *did* perish, and the upright one *was* cut off, so that even if we suffer in this world, even if we do what is right but experience what is wrong, we would still be rich: rich with faith, rich with hope, and rich with the love of God.

If we are to counsel those who suffer, we must look to the one who *did* suffer, because that’s the only way we can persevere. When we sow righteousness but reap sickness, or when we do good but are repaid with evil, or when we live in the fear of the Lord and then lose what we love the most, we find in Christ a Saviour who understands, because he went through it first.

And so, if you’re suffering, come to Jesus and you will find rest for your soul. Feel him leading you by the hand to himself. And when our friends are too weak to go to him by themselves, let us help them find their way back to the One who suffered and died for their sins, so that they may rest in his arms.