

## Job 2:11-13, 4-31 'with friends like that, who needs ...?'

There's a familiar saying to all of us - 'with friends like that, who needs ...?' We know exactly what it means; when life takes a dramatic downturn and goes pear-shaped, then the doorbell rings and a few well-meaning friends turn up, they want to help us - alas, they disappoint us and let us down because of their attitude - they don't have all the facts, we feel worse after they've gone;

the chances are, we've waved them goodbye with a cheesy smile, and before they've reached the end of the driveway, we've said those same words! 'With friends like that, who needs ...?' Ah, that's where Job's comforters excel - in your life and mine, as well as in his!

And that's the reality of what's happening to Job - he finds himself in the crucible of suffering, and that's a horrible place for any one to be. His body is wracked with intense, agonising pain from the inflamed, ulcerous sores ... he feels cramped and crippled, pummelled and pounded ...

his faith is frail and fragile; there are times when he feels as though he's losing his grip, when he wonders how much more of this prolonged trial he can take ... then, from nowhere, a trio of his friends turn up ... uninvited, unexpected ...

We read about these 3 guys at the end of Job chapter 2 ... let's face it, some time would've passed before news reached them about Job's fate. Those were the days before WhatsApp and mobile technology - the truth is they are taken

aback when they hear about Job - and they all come to be with him to support him in his hour of grievous trial.

They have noble aims and aspirations - we read in verse 11 that they want to 'sympathise with him and comfort him.' Their goal is to bless him and be with him. And that's just great - that's the kind of thing that best friends do! This is what I would call, 'the ministry of presence' - just being there.

When they first saw Job, they were gobsmacked - they couldn't believe it was him - he was in a terribly bad way. He was a shadow of his former self. They had never seen him like that before. There he was, staring into space with a forlorn look and a dishevelled appearance - scratching himself with a piece of broken clay ... someone for whom hope seemed to have evaporated - he's up against a blank wall of hopelessness.

Their emotions got the better of them so they cried their hearts out - we read that they 'wept aloud.' They also 'tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads' - signs of heartfelt anguish. They were inconsolable.

All three of them - Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar - said nothing to Job for seven days - ok, that was the culturally acceptable thing to do ... one week of strained and stressful silence. The sound of silence was deafening. They say nothing because, at this point, they have nothing to say.

The whole exercise must've been so intense, so draining, so mentally exhausting - for them to sit there and watch their buddy, and say nowt, that took some doing.

There are times in grief and sorrow when silence is golden - in fact, the rest of the narrative clearly shows that this was their best contribution to the unfolding drama - just for them to be there and to say nothing would've meant so much to Job! It's clear at the end of chapter 2 that dark clouds have chased away Job's sunshine. And it's worth noting, the clouds will not part nor the sun shine again until the final chapter, chapter 42! That's on the distant horizon, it's a long way off.

You see, in your life and mine, suffering is a better barometer of our spiritual life than the pleasant times of prosperity - squeeze a sponge and what is inside will come out. Yes, it's in the storm that we are tested, not in the sunshine!

As I said earlier, there are three well-meaning friends ... and a big chunk of the book is taken up by them and what they have to say to Job. There is speech after speech, after speech - 8 of them in total - along with Job's response to all of them. It covers chapters 4-31 ... we don't have time to look at all three speakers, so we'll narrow it down to the first of three speeches given by Eliphaz in chapters 4-5.

He goes first possibly because he is the oldest and perhaps the wisest of the three friends - it seems to me that he, and his buddies, have one string to their bow, it underlines everything they

have to say - and it's played repeatedly in a minor key: 'Job, you are suffering; therefore, you have sinned!' In other words, 'You're getting what you deserve, Job!' This is the theology of retribution, so common in the ancient near east.

**But the won't go away fact is: Job wasn't suffering because he was a sinner; he was suffering because he was a saint!**

Before we lift the lid on this guy's first speech, it's worth noting that we have an inkling as to who he is ... in Job 15 he alludes to himself as a grey-haired, aged man ... he was probably anything from 75-80 years old - whilst Job was probably hovering around the 50+ mark ...

He was also a Temanite - and Teman was famous for its wise men and their profound sayings - we find that in Jeremiah 49:7 and Obadiah 8. His name actually means, 'God is fine gold.' More than likely, he was a powerful chieftain from this region, a wealthy man with a few dollars in the bank, and revered and respected in his own right. And so, right on cue, Eliphaz opens his mouth - but only after Job wished he'd never been born in chapter 3 - he plummeted to an all-time low when he frankly acknowledged that his worst fears had come to pass, for we read in verses 25-26, 'What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.'

**There are four pointers in these two chapters which expose the errors of Eliphaz - the first one: His bogus concern (4:1-6)**

If you look at verse 2, you can see that Eliphaz is batting on the front foot - I mean, let's face it, it's not the best start, is it! He says something like this: 'Job, are you going to get mad at me if I say something you don't like?' Not surprisingly, Job says nothing! This guy is the most sympathetic of the three amigos, but he puts his foot in it right at the very beginning.

Then he recovers in verses 3 and 4 ... here's he's positive and warmly commends Job for all the help he has been to so many down the years ... and that's so refreshing to hear - there are so many folks who had faltered along the way and Job picked them up, others had been sidetracked and he got them back on the straight and narrow, there were those who threw in the towel and called it quits and he supported them until they were back in a good place ... no doubts there, Job has a good track record and he was an immense help to so many strugglers and stragglers.

Now, Job's the one who desperately needs help - the shoe is on the other foot, as it were - he's in a bad way and he's sitting there at the city dump, and he's down in the dumps, and probably hoping that Eliphaz would say something like this to him:

'And now, dear Job, it's time for someone to come along and strengthen your hands - to put wind into your sails - to steady your frail body and strengthen your crushed heart.'

But he didn't ... see what he said in verse 5: 'But now trouble comes to you, and you are

discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed.' Simply put, he was saying:

'OK, Job, you can dish out advice, but you can't take it! You can tell others what to do to get back up on their feet, but you won't do it yourself. You can write a prescription for others, but you're not willing to take the medicine yourself ... and, because of that, you're on a downer, you're in a sweat, and you're in a panic.'

With friends like that ... what Eliphaz should be saying to Job is something like this: 'You know, Job, it's tough, really tough - you've been through the mill. Now it's my turn, my privilege, to stand with you, to encourage you, and to walk with you through this terrible trial.'

But he doesn't - he falls at the first hurdle! Why? Because he doesn't think Job needs a pick-me-up, he feels he doesn't need encouragement; he is convinced that Job needs divine discipline, a good rap on the knuckles! So that bogus concern leads on to ...

### **His biased condemnation (4:7-11)**

You can see the tactics of Eliphaz - he's upping the ante here in these few verses. He gets to the nub of the matter when he asserts that if Job were innocent then he wouldn't be in the mess he's in. For Eliphaz, that makes a lot of sense. In his eyes, Job had sown his wild oats and was now reaping a bitter harvest (Proverbs 22:8).

So far as he is concerned, he's stating the obvious - his rationale is, as I said earlier, righteous people do not suffer! It's only sinners who suffer. What

he failed to take on board is that Job was not sinless - no one is, but he was blameless. No one dared point a finger at him! Even God applauded him for his integrity.

Eliphaz has the blinkers on, he is so biased for he just can't see that suffering may come to those who haven't done anything wrong. As it often does. His thinking is warped. In essence, this is what he says: 'The good guys always win, and the bad guys always lose. No truly innocent person ever ended up on the scrap heap. Job, this is all your fault.'

I have to say that this guy's advice is seriously mistaken - it's appallingly bad. Warren Wiersbe makes the point that 'Eliphaz had a rigid theology that left little or no room for the grace of God.' It seems to me that Eliphaz wins a gold medal in tactless, heartless, unfeeling, uncaring, untimely counsel.

For you and me, when we engage with others, we need to remember that you do not heal a broken heart with logic; you heal a broken heart with love. That biased condemnation led on to ...

### **His boastful condescension (4:12-21)**

The big question is, what kind of evidence does Eliphaz bring to the table to prove that it is sinners who suffer and saints who succeed? I suppose we could say that Eliphaz was the first in a long line of prosperity preachers - the health and wealth preachers; one Bible commentator said that 'he has a bit of a charismatic streak.' So many have followed in his footsteps since!

It's a tad worrying that his first piece of evidence is from a vision he's had. It's all so flowery and so mystical, and to be honest, a tad spooky and sinister - you can read some of the colourful expressions he uses in verses 12-17 ... it was 'secretly or stealthily brought to him' and 'his ears caught a whisper of it.'

If that's a vision he's had, well, good on him, it sounds more like a nightmare to me, when he admits that 'fear and trembling seized me and made all my bones shake.' It all sounds so airy-fairy and plausible as he recounts it - 'a spirit glided past my face, and the hair on my body stood on end.' It was spine-tingling, even hair-raising. Bless him, that was some encounter. Hmm ... for me, that raises a few questions!

I mean, how do you argue with someone who says they've had a supernatural vision ... how do you feel when someone says that they know the truth about your life ...

So many people swallow this kind of thing, hook, line, and sinker - they buy into it big time ... I've met a lot of people all around the world who've told me with all sincerity and candour that they have heard directly from God. New insights about this, that, or the other - a fresh revelation for today - you know what I mean.

When someone declares that God told them something, there's really nothing you can tell them! Quite honestly, any time a conversation begins with the statement, 'the Lord told me, or God has spoken to me,' there's not much room

for discussion. Know what I mean? It's maybe happened to you - it's certainly happened to me. What can you say to someone who tells you that?

All that said, this condescending counsel has kernels of truth inside all the rhetoric. And that's the bit that's so hard to swallow. It is true that: no man is justified before God (4:17); men and angels err (4:18); we live in bodies made of dust (4:19); and life is short (4:20-21).

He's bang on there - he ticks all the boxes. But he's barking up the wrong tree when it comes to applying it to Job's condition. He misinterpreted Job's situation. How do we know? Because of what God said!

Go back to chapter 1 where God made it crystal clear that Job was not being punished for living a life of unrighteousness - he was going to suffer for no other reason than that he was a good man and a godly man. Eliphaz had twisted it around to suit his own theology and his own assumptions! Before we jump into chapter 5 for our final point, let me pause for a moment and ask the question, How can you and I be a good friend to someone who is hurting? Well, one look at Eliphaz and he shows us how not to do it! Let me suggest three characteristics ...

One, **be sensitive** - for us to befriend someone who is hurting, we must come alongside that person to comfort and console, not to correct and chastise; we must draw close to them if we're going to help them and brighten their day with real encouragement. Such people need a

gentle arm around them, not an accusing finger pointed in their face! They don't need a lecture, they need love. Listen to what they are saying, look at them with eye contact, and say very little! Two, **be sympathetic** ... we should feel the pain of others, not inflict more. We are, says Paul, 'to bear one another's burdens' - that means, we get under a person's burden with them and help them carry the weight of their hurt - it's not a matter of us sitting at two arms length across the room in a leather chair, or behind a wooden desk, clinically and coldly explaining what went wrong. We don't need to explain everything, we can't - our role is to be there and point them to one who promises a bright and better future.

Three, **be supportive** ... Eliphaz went into battle as an adversary, because he forgot the original goal - he was meant to comfort Job. He spent his time trying to pin Job down, rather than seeking to lift him up. He focused on the negatives, rather than making much of the positives. He jumped to wrong conclusions! For all his good intentions in Round One, Eliphaz was more of a hindrance than a help - it's no wonder Job felt wearied and browned off when he had finished his spiel. Then, our final point in today's study, we see ...

### **His bad counsel (5:1-27)**

We can do a quickie summary of the words of Eliphaz like this: 'You know, Job, I've been around longer than you have and I understand God more than you do ... and, sadly, you've rubbed him up the wrong way, you've messed up, you've gotten

on his wrong side.' I mean, did you ever hear such nonsense - such bad counsel?

Even more so when he says in verse 8, 'Job, if I were in your sandals, I'd confess my hidden sins before God, and repent, and get back into God's good books!'

He promises Job a string of blessings in verses 11-18 when he says: God will set on high those who are lowly (5:11a), God will lift you up after you've mourned over your sin (5:11b), God will turn the lights back on and remove your dark despair (5:14), you'll get your hope back (5:16), then you can be happy again (5:17). Even though God has disciplined you and inflicted pain on you, he will give you relief (5:18a); God has wounded you, but his hands will also heal you (5:18b).

Then he waxes eloquent when he says that if Job repents of all his sins, that he'll be saved from seven things that God never allows to touch the righteous. And they are ...

One, famine (5:20a); two, defeat in war (5:20b); three, physical abuse or violence (5:21); four, harm from wild animals (5:22); five, financial loss (5:24); six, barrenness (5:25); and, seven, an early death (5:26).

He's more or less guaranteeing Job something like this: 'Job, if you get your heart right with God, and walk closely with him, you will have everything you've ever dreamed of and you will never need to fear anything! And what's more, 'you will come to the grave in full vigour' (5:26). You're not even going to get sick before you die!'

Well, what's that - a load of piffle, a bucketful of unsanctified waffle. Yeah, Eliphaz meant well, but his words had a devastating impact upon dear Job - read what he says in response in chapters 6-7. And it goes from bad to worse the further you get into the book. Quite simply, his words do not help his friend ... they deepen the hurt.

**Here's a couple of take-home lessons that we glean from this section ... we need to recognise that folks like Job are so shaken up and shell-shocked in the early days that they can barely hear a word you're saying! Talking down to him when he's in that state of mind, all you'll get is a glassy stare. That 'I'm here but I'm not here' look.** Perhaps the main thing when counselling a Job is to not blame him as that'll only make him feel worse and blur his thinking ... and best not to say that God is trying to teach him a lesson in it all. It's also worth noting that when people are in excruciating pain that they often say crazy and daft things. Things which they wouldn't normally say. Resist the urge to sort them out and set them straight! When God restores them to full health, he will gently draw them back to a relationship that is precious and beautiful. Your job and mine is not to fix our friend's thinking or theology, it is to walk with him. You can reassure him that you will always be there for him ... and so too will his heavenly Father. **'With friends like that, we need Jesus, our real Friend!'**