



With Friends Like These...Eliaphaz's Useless Kindness

Grappling with God: The Gospel According to Job #4

Job 4-5

David Sunday

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I'm confident God is going to reveal Christ and His glory as we turn to Job 4-5—a portion of the Word that is somewhat perplexing, disturbing and difficult. Have you ever had the experience of a well-meaning Christian friend crushing you by telling you truth in a profoundly unhelpful way? I can still remember a letter I received over 20 years ago from a Christian leader whom I respected. This letter was intended to tell me the truth and there was truth in it. However, it really disturbed my mind for several months and left me feeling condemned. Even worse, there have been times when I've been on the delivery end of that kind of counsel.

If we are honest with ourselves, we can understand a critique of Christianity offered by Thomas Henry Huxley who said, "I object to Christians. They know too much about God." They are too confident in what they think they know.

In the book of Job, we have come to a long middle section devoted to a dramatic discourse between Job and three of his friends—Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. There are three cycles of speeches in this section. Most of the time they are talking past one another which makes this book all the more realistic and believable.

Mike Mason writes"

All the characters in this book seem impatient to get a word in edgewise, and all are quick to criticize one another for talking too much... How true to life it is to see passionate debaters continually brushing off the arguments of their opponents like so much lint from their sleeves, even while stabbing their own fingers into the table and yelling, 'Now just listen to this!' Such lively,

dramatic detail reminds us that the book of Job consists almost entirely of talk. Talk, talk, talk.

We are going to see talk going back and forth in this prolonged dialogue where we will find some vital lessons about how not to care for, counsel and minister to one another when we are going through troubled times.

The first of these friends is Eliphaz. He comes from a place named Teman, noted for its wise man. We find Eliphaz to be a good, venerable man who is probably the oldest of the three friends. He starts out with a very caring, gentle approach. He is trying to be kind with Job. However, as you can see from the title of this sermon, it is a useless type of kindness. Eliphaz wants to comfort Job, yet before long becomes exasperated with him. Of the three friends, Eliphaz is probably the most comforting. Yet the truth of the matter is that Job experiences his comfort as a form of cruelty. How can it be that words which are intended to bring comfort and which contain truth can actually be unhelpful, useless and cruel?

This brings us to the main lesson I want us to learn from this section of Scripture. It is possible to speak truth in a way that is profoundly untrue—to affirm truth in a way that advances falsehood. Oswald Chambers said it like this: “It is possible to convey a lie by speaking the truth.” We’re going to see this again and again in these speeches from Job’s friends.

I think it’s a critical lesson for us to learn because we are Bible-loving, Bible-treasuring, Bible-teaching people. You can know the Bible thoroughly, quote it extensively and explain it deeply but in the final analysis can completely miss the mark. You can be unhelpful even in the way you use Bible truth and end up using the Bible in a way that ultimately conveys falsehood.

- I want to say a word about the doctrine of inspiration. We believe all Scripture is God-breathed, useful and profitable. Not a single word of Scripture ever leads us astray for it is all faithful and true. However, the Bible does give us examples of false teaching and shows us how the truth can be misconstrued in the mouths of men. As we read this inspired account, God wants us to understand how good, godly people can use His truth in ways that are misleading and untrue: Sometimes it is by mixing truth with lies.
- Or it might be by leaving out important counterpoints, focusing only on one side of the truth and leaving out important truths which would add further light.
- Sometimes it is by misapplying truth, leaving the hearer confused and falsely condemned.

Job’s friends make all three of these mistakes. Let’s look at Eliphaz’s speech as an example. As we work our way through Job 4 and 5, I want you to imagine you are a counselor in training. You are sitting in on counseling sessions between Eliphaz and Job, listening to this wise older man counsel Job in his distress and suffering.

The first thing you notice is that Eliphaz does a lot of talking. He doesn't wait for an answer from Job or listen to Job's heart. He asks rhetorical questions but keeps moving. He is trying to do the right thing by speaking truth into Job's miserable situation. Let's read the Word and follow Eliphaz's line of argument in Job 4:1-6:

Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said:

"If one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient?

Yet who can keep from speaking?

Behold, you have instructed many,

and you have strengthened the weak hands.

our words have upheld him who was stumbling,

and you have made firm the feeble knees.

But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;

it touches you, and you are dismayed.

Is not your fear of God your confidence,

and the integrity of your ways your hope?"

Let's use verse six as the 'banner' verse of this section. *"Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope?"* Eliphaz basically approaches Job and says, "Job, please be patient. I've got some hard words I need to speak to you which won't be easy to hear. Please don't get offended or irritated with me" (verses 1-2). "Remember how God has used you in the past, Job. Remember how you have counseled and instructed others who were going through similar trials. Aren't you able to take a bit of your own medicine? You're not going to fail or refuse to take the counsel you've given, are you?" (verses 3-4).

Verse five is a mild reproach. "Job, you've seen others suffer and have helped them through it. But now it comes to you and you can't bear up a little or be patient in the midst of this adversity." *"...it touches you and you are dismayed."*

Verse six is a window into the worldview of Job's friends. This worldview says God rewards good and godly people. "Be patient. God will reward you, Job." *"Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope?"* I think the emphasis is on the word 'your'—*"your fear of God..."* We should underscore piety and holiness in our minds. What is missing from Job 4:6? What do we know that Eliphaz doesn't? It is precisely because of Job's blamelessness and righteousness that he is suffering this way. Job is not suffering because of something he has done wrong, rather because of his steadfast service to God.

If you were going through a hard time and someone posed that question to you, how would you answer? "Is not your godliness a source of confidence and your integrity a source of hope to you? Don't you trust that because of how righteous you have been, this is going to turn out well for you in the end?" I would hope your answer to Job 4:6 would be this: "My hope is not

in my fear of the Lord or in my integrity. That is not what gives me confidence as I go through this hard time.”

Let’s move on to Job 4:7-11:

*“Remember: who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
As I have seen, those who plow iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.
By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.
The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion,
the teeth of the young lions are broken.
The strong lion perishes for lack of prey,
and the cubs of the lioness are scattered.”*

Let’s use verse seven as the banner over this section. *“Who that was innocent ever perished?”* The New Living Translation says, *“Stop and think! Do the innocent die? When have the upright been destroyed?”* Think long and hard about that question. Put it in the scope of Biblical history—everything you know about God’s redemptive dealings with His people throughout history. If you also consider Christ and the cross, you’ll come up with an answer different from the one Eliphaz is expecting.

For Eliphaz, this question is rhetorical and the expected answer is, “Nobody who was innocent ever perished. Never were the upright cut off. Job, there may be something wrong in your life currently but overall you seem like a righteous man. God’s going to come through for you.” There is no concept in Eliphaz’s worldview for an innocent person suffering. That’s an important deficiency in his worldview.

“As I have seen...” (verse eight). Eliphaz is the great observer of life. He sees laws of nature and patterns of existence which God has worked into humanity. It always turns out the way he would expect. He is saying, “My experience shows me that you reap what you sow.”

Now, is that true or false? *“...whatever one sows, that will he also reap”* (Galatians 6:7). That is as true as the day is long. Yet how is this truth being used with suffering Job? Eliphaz is basically saying, “You are not one of those wicked people and have every reason to be confident.” The health, wealth and prosperity gospel comes from this ‘cause and effect’ type of thinking put forward by Eliphaz. The idea is that if you are righteous, God will bless you. If you are not experiencing blessing, it must be because there is something wrong with your life.

Sometimes this kind of thinking leads those of us who are more prosperous to look down our noses at those who are poor or those whose lot in life is not as blessed as ours. We think,

“They are getting what they deserve—getting out of life what they have put into it.” We use this kind of thinking to justify a coldness or lack of compassion in our hearts.

Job 4:12-21 gets kind of spooky. Eliphaz gets a word from the Lord in the middle of the night. I don't know if you've ever had anyone come to you when you've been having a hard time and say, “I've got a word from the Lord for you.” Whenever that happens to me, I get a little bit nervous. I wonder about what they are going to say and if they will use words in a manipulative way.

*“Now a word was brought to me stealthily;
my ear received the whisper of it.
Amid thoughts from visions of the night,
when deep sleep falls on men,
dread came upon me, and trembling,
which made all my bones shake.
A spirit glided past my face;
the hair of my flesh stood up.
It stood still,
but I could not discern its appearance.
A form was before my eyes;
there was silence, then I heard a voice:*

It is interesting to read the way Eliphaz describes this vision from the Lord. You almost wonder whether it is a good or evil spirit appearing to him in the middle of the night. We know Satan is working behind the scenes in Job's drama. What will this voice say and what will this great revelation be? Is this the way God normally reveals Himself to His people?

Whatever is going on, the revelation in Job 4:17 is kind of disappointing, commonplace and obvious. It doesn't take a vision in the night to see this truth.

*“Can mortal man be in the right before God?
Can a man be pure before his Maker?”*

That truth can be used in a couple of ways. It is a fact that none of us is ultimately pure before God's eyes for we are all tainted by sin. *“None is righteous, no, not one”* (Romans 3:10). But is that the reason why Job is suffering? Is he suffering because there was some flaw in his character which God wanted to correct? On the other hand, what is the answer to Job 4:17 in light of the gospel? Can a mortal man be in the right before God? Thanks be to God, yes he can. *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (Romans 5:1). *“The righteous shall live by his faith”* (Habakkuk 2:4). It is a wonderful gospel truth that mortal men can be right with God and pure in His eyes.

However, Eliphaz uses this truth to draw some conclusions about Job:

*Even in his servants he [God] puts no trust,
and his angels he charges with error;
how much more those who dwell in houses of clay,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed like the moth.
Between morning and evening they are beaten to pieces;
they perish forever without anyone regarding it.
Is not their tent-cord plucked up within them,
do they not die, and that without wisdom?’*

Eliphaz is suggesting something to Job: “Let’s face it, nobody’s perfect. Even though I think you are a good, godly man and can put confidence in your integrity, the fact that you are suffering is proof positive that something has gone awry in your life. Right now God is chastening and correcting you. It’s your job to search your heart and figure out what you have done to cause these sufferings.”

Of course, Eliphaz is not applying this counsel to himself or expecting to end up in the same predicament as Job.

*“Call now; is there anyone who will answer you?
To which of the holy ones will you turn?” (Job 5:1)*

How would it feel to be suffering like this and to have a godly friend say, “Call out. Is anyone in heaven going to answer you?” Eliphaz is saying, “Job, if you are looking for some way to be delivered from your suffering, forget about it. There is no one in heaven or on earth who will be able to help you. Suffering just comes with the territory of being human. People bring trouble upon themselves.”

*“Surely vexation kills the fool,
and jealousy slays the simple.
I have seen the fool taking root,
but suddenly I cursed his dwelling.
His children are far from safety;
[Job has just gone through losing ten children. What would it be
like for him to hear his friends saying words like this?
they are crushed in the gate,
[How did those children die? A great wind came and caused the
house to fall on them]
and there is no one to deliver them.
The hungry eat his harvest,
and he takes it even out of thorns,
and the thirsty pant after his wealth.*

[Why does all this happen?]
*For affliction does not come from the dust,
nor does trouble sprout from the ground,
but man is born to trouble
as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:2-7).*

Eliphaz is saying, “Trouble comes as a result of being human because humanity creates trouble for itself. It is our lot in life—the way it is.” I’m not hearing a lot of compassion or sympathy.

Eliphaz offers some advice: “*As for me, I would seek God, and to God would I commit my cause”* (Job 5:8). The New Living Translation says, “*If I were you, I would go to God and present my case to him.*” In other words, “Job, you are basically a godly man and it will all work out for you in the end. Don’t lose heart or become impatient. If you just confess whatever you have done, I’m sure God will hear you.”

Eliphaz continues with a wonderful statement about Who God is:

*“Who does great things and unsearchable,
marvelous things without number:
he gives rain on the earth
and sends waters on the fields;
he sets on high those who are lowly,
and those who mourn are lifted to safety.
He frustrates the devices of the crafty,
so that their hands achieve no success.
He catches the wise in their own craftiness,
and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end” (Job 5:9-13).*

These are true words. Paul quotes these very words in 1 Corinthians 3:19.

*“They meet with darkness in the daytime
and grope at noonday as in the night.
But he saves the needy from the sword of their mouth
and from the hand of the mighty.
So the poor have hope,
and injustice shuts her mouth” (Job 5:14-16).*

He is talking about how God exalts the lowly, brings down the lofty and provides for the needy and poor. All of these things are true, yet Eliphaz is not applying these truths correctly to Job’s situation.

We get the conclusion of his argument in Job 5:17-27:

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

*For he wounds, but he binds up;
he shatters, but his hands heal.
He will deliver you from six troubles;
in seven no evil shall touch you.
In famine he will redeem you from death,
and in war from the power of the sword.
You shall be hidden from the lash of the tongue,
and shall not fear destruction when it comes.
at destruction and famine you shall laugh,
and shall not fear the beasts of the earth.
For you shall be in league with the stones of the field,
and the beasts of the field shall be at peace with you.
You shall know that your tent is at peace,
and you shall inspect your fold and miss nothing.
You shall know also that your offspring shall be many,
and your descendants as the grass of the earth.
You shall come to your grave in ripe old age,
like a sheaf gathered up in its season.
Behold, this we have searched out; it is true.
Hear, and know it for your good.”*

He is saying, “Job, listen. God is disciplining you right now but don’t fret. The hand that wounds you will also soothe your wound. He’s going to come and heal you.”

As I looked at these verses, I remembered the mechanical singing fish my dad has on his deck. Every time you turn the fish on, it sings, “Don’t worry, be happy. Everything’s going to be alright.” I think that is the kind of counsel Eliphaz is giving Job. “Don’t worry, Job. Yeah, you’re kids just died; you’re bankrupt and have lost everything. It’s going to all be alright, Job. Don’t worry. God’s got His hand of discipline on you now, but He will lift it someday and prosper you.”

The truth is we will see many of these things come true by the end of the book of Job. Yet this is not comfort, wisdom or using God’s truth to bless. In fact, Job is going to reject all of this counsel in the next chapters. What Eliphaz is saying is partly true but he is speaking truth in a way that conveys a falsehood. He is being grossly insensitive to Job’s suffering—not taking seriously the depth of what Job has been through.

We’ve come to the end of the counseling session. How would you feel if you were in Job’s shoes? How would you respond to this counsel? You know what it’s like to hear someone present an argument that sounds logical and right but know there is something wrong with what they are saying. Something is missing and it doesn’t sit right with you. Yet you couldn’t argue against them or tell them what is wrong. You just know it isn’t right.

What is missing from Eliphaz's counsel to Job? There are two things which I believe we desperately need to cultivate in our care and ministry to one another.

1. Humility
2. Grace

Without humility and grace, we could know the Bible inside out, teach it in all its truth and end up being unhelpful, useless and even harmful in the way we use God's truth. We need these essential qualities if we are to be wise and caring counselors to one another.

Humility

Eliphaz is too confident in what he knows—in his own diagnosis of the situation. He isn't doing any listening or asking any questions. He never prays. He's not aware of what has gone on behind the scenes but he thinks he knows it all.

There is a 'Peanuts' cartoon where Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "There's one thing you're going to have to learn. You reap what you sow. You get out of life what you put into it—no more and no less." Snoopy, the dog, is sitting in the corner and doesn't like what Lucy is saying. He says, "I'd kind of like to see a little margin for error."

There is no margin for error in Eliphaz's mind. He's got this thing figured out and knows what's happening. He knows how to set Job right. The problem is he doesn't know what is going on and is totally missing the point. Job's friends don't allow for any margin of error in their judgments.

Oliver Cromwell, the great British reformer, was having an argument with some ministers who were very stubborn in their convictions. Finally Cromwell exclaimed to them in exasperation, "I beseech you by the mercies of Christ, consider that you may be mistaken."

I think that's a wonderful statement to have impressed upon our minds and hearts. When we are dealing with the things of God and God's truth, thinking we know about the Bible and about what God is doing in other people's lives, let us by the mercies of Christ consider that we might be mistaken. Maybe we don't have the full angle on the truth. Maybe there are some important points we are missing.

Our ability to reason can only go so far. Humility requires us to recognize there are limits to our reason. Blaise Pascal said, "Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it." This situation with Job is beyond Eliphaz's ability to reason.

One effect of our time in Job should be to make us more humble about what we don't understand. There are lots of things going on in our lives and other's lives which we do not

understand. A good reading of this book should lead us to be humble about making judgments on other people. God's ways are higher than our theology. Our relationship with God is deeper and greater than our theology and our understanding of Him. There are ways of God that take us beyond what we can understand with our theology.

Oswald Chambers said, "Beware of priggishness as you would of poison." I've heard that word "priggishness" a lot but had to look it up as it is one of those British words I've never fully understood. It is an attitude of superiority toward other people which says, "I've got it all together and I know what's wrong with your life." Beware of that attitude as you would of poison.

Whenever you approach a friend's suffering from a position of superiority or say things like, "If I were you, I'd do this or that..." you end up disqualifying yourself from empathy. You lose your ability to sympathize or really offer care.

Grace

Where do you see the grace of God in Eliphaz's words? Job's experience of suffering was extreme. He was greatest of the men of the east (Job 1:3) and his suffering was probably the greatest that any human being except for One has ever experienced. We need to learn to see the sufferings of Job as foreshadowing the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can only begin to comprehend Job's sufferings when we start to see them in the shadow of the cross of Jesus.

Eliphaz has no place in his theology for innocent, redemptive suffering which is part of God's redemptive plan to show His glory in the world. This really means Eliphaz has no place for the cross of Christ in his theology. If Eliphaz were alive in the first century, how would he have responded to Jesus? If he was one of the religious leaders, what would he have done with a suffering Messiah—One Who was crucified on the cross? What would he have thought of the Apostle Paul who said, "I want to know fellowship in Christ's sufferings" (2 Corinthians 1:5)?

There are hints of the gospel in this passage in Job. "*Remember: who that was innocent ever perished?*" (Job 4:7). Well, our Lord Jesus Christ was innocent and He perished. God raised Him from the dead. Yet we haven't answered that question in Job yet. "*Call now; is there anyone who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn?*" (5:1). Is there any Mediator in heaven Who will hear your cry, sympathize with you in your plight and be able to help you in your weakness? Eliphaz is saying, "No, there isn't because heaven is too high." He has a God Who is sovereign and transcendent but Who is not near to those who are suffering. Jesus is such a Mediator. Job is looking for that Mediator—the Messiah.

Counsel that leaves out the cross of Jesus Christ and the grace of God only produces discouragement, despair and hopelessness in those who are suffering. Eliphaz's preaching and

counsel only focuses on ‘doing’ and putting principles into practice. *“Behold, this we have searched out; it is true. Hear, and know it for your good”* (Job 5:27). Case closed. I’ve laid out the truth. “Put it into practice, Job, and everything will be alright.”

This kind of teaching leaves people hopeless, despairing and disillusioned; especially when they are suffering. Any kind of comfort which lacks the gospel is false comfort. Even Biblical counsel which is not saturated in the gospel and God’s grace will ultimately lead people away from the truth. It can hide the grace and glory of Jesus Christ—Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6).

This is why the number one core value of our church—which we want to pound like a drumbeat—is the functional centrality of the gospel. We don’t ever want to teach or preach without making the connection to the grace that God shows to sinful, broken people through Jesus. We don’t ever want to preach or teach without humility.

It is a dangerous thing to know a lot about the Bible and become puffed up with what you know. It is dangerous to spew a lot of Biblical counsel without connecting it to a God Who draws near to sinful, broken, hurting people with grace, compassion and mercy. Without the gospel, how can you make sense of Job’s sufferings or endure your own sufferings. God’s ways are often hidden from us. We don’t know what He’s doing in our lives but we do see Jesus.

“But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature...” (Hebrews 1:2-3). We see in Jesus a God Who suffered with and for us. That makes a huge difference for us.

Mike Mason believes the religion of Job’s friends provides good insulation for themselves but no consolation for their suffering friend. May God deliver us from that kind of religion.

Let’s pray.

Father, I pray that You would keep us from the kind of religion that insulates us, making us feel good about ourselves—like we know all the answers and can figure everything out and explain it. It leaves us brittle, unfeeling, distant and lacking in compassion toward our fellow man. Lord, I pray for the kind of religion that makes us a source of consolation to others. I pray, Lord, You would grant us the humility to recognize there are many things in Your ways that are beyond us.

Oh, the depth of the riches, the wisdom of God
How unsearchable are His ways.
How profound are His judgments, so high above our thoughts,
And His pathways no man can trace.

(from Romans Doxology by John Elliot)

We don't know Your mind, Lord, and cannot be Your counselors. But You are a God Who has given us much grace and glory in Jesus Christ. I pray, Father, that we would be a people who are dripping with the sweet consolations of Your grace because we have been drenched in Your gospel day-by-day. Make us such a people, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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