

Five

ELIPHAZ—I

JOB'S THREE FRIENDS

We turn back now to Job 2:11. We are beginning now to look at the three friends, or 'comforters' so-called, that came to be with Job in his suffering.

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognise him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

We have been looking, up to now, at Job's lament and his deep suffering. Now we will start looking at the three friends in turn, hearing what each one has to say, once they did start to speak, and how Job responds to that. We begin with Eliphaz.

THE TOUCHSTONE

Before we do that, we need to look at chapter 42 verse 7, right at the end of the Book of Job. You may have found, reading through the Book of Job, that in this great drama or debate it is not always easy to see who is right and who is wrong. As when we listen to any debate, after one speaker we say, 'That sounds good'; then, when we hear another speaker saying exactly the opposite, we say also 'That sounds good!' 'The one who first states a case seems right, until the other comes and cross-examines' (Proverbs 19:17). So how can we work it out? Things they say may be OK, but then they may be saying them for the wrong reasons. What they say may be partly true, and it may be partly false. So, as we read it through, we may become confused. Into that, also, we bring ideas and attitudes and experiences of our own, that may further complicate what we are reading—we may be reading into it things that are not really there at all, that come from our own experience and our own attitudes. As I have said before, we can't hear their tone of voice, and so we may misread it. We may say that Job or someone else is getting angry about something, because we would be angry if that is what we were saying, when in fact they are only stating facts, and saying what is. So how are we going to find our way through all of that?

We need to hear about it from God's point of view, and hear what He has to say about it. That is often what we don't do. At one Christian conference I went to, on sexuality, they were saying everything possible about sexuality from all the research that had been done, and there were all shades of opinion about this and that, but no one ever said, 'To find our way through this labyrinth, what does God actually say about this?' That can give us something that is much clearer. So what does God say about all of what is discussed in these chapters of Job? In chapter 42, God has a few words to say to Job, which we will come to later, and in verse 7 He speaks to Eliphaz and his friends:

After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you,

for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.' So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

Just reading that can come as a bit of a shock when you have just read the whole book. I know a friend of mine who read the Book of Job right through, and thought, 'Job is really speaking out of turn here, and the others are getting stuck into him, and fair enough too!' Then suddenly he read what *God* said about what they said and about what Job said: 'You have not spoken right, as my servant Job has.' He said, 'That turned the whole book on its head for me! Suddenly I had to look at the whole thing again, and see what was actually going on.'

So if we come to that now, and use that as the touchstone for our assessment of these many different speeches, and Job's response to them, then perhaps we may be able to see things there that we would not have known or been able to see otherwise. Because we now have God's judgement and God's discernment on that. According to God, Job is speaking of God what is right, and his three friends are speaking what is foolish and wrong. So we will use that as a guide to the rightness and wrongness of what is being said earlier in the book.

GODLY FRIENDS

But let us be careful how we do that, and make sure we do not end up doing to the comforters what they did to Job: accusing them, or putting them down, or writing them off. Note how they respond to what God says here in chapter 42. They went and did what the Lord had told them. They offered the sacrifice for their folly, and the Lord accepted Job's prayer on their behalf. These were godly men. These three were faithful believers in the one God at a time when there was widespread apostasy and unbelief and idolatry and licentiousness. They were friends of Job, and they had come from a long way, from foreign parts, to come and condole with him. They shared his faith in the one true God. We do not know how many that could have been said of at that time. I would venture to say that these three were older and wiser than most of us here. So, like Job himself, they deserve our respect. We will not sit ourselves in judgement upon them. But we will hear what they say with the discernment that is given to us by God's own word of judgement.

ELIPHAZ SPEAKS A FIRST TIME

So let's get back to Eliphaz now, in chapter 4. Eliphaz was probably the oldest and most respected of the three friends. He is the one who speaks first. He is also the gentlest and, to start with, the most tactful. Job has just, in chapter 3, cursed the day of his birth, lamented his situation and his suffering, and expressed his longing for death. Eliphaz is the first to reply:

- 4:1 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered:
2 'If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?
But who can keep from speaking?
3 See, you have instructed many;
you have strengthened the weak hands.
4 Your words have supported those who were stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble knees.

We saw in chapter 29 that this is true: that Job was one who had great wisdom, and many looked to him for that, and that he upheld many who were suffering, and he gave them great comfort and consolation and practical help in those circumstances. But Eliphaz hears Job speaking in this alarming way, and responds:

4:5 But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;
it touches you, and you are dismayed.

We saw that there was no hint of suicide with Job—if his life is to come to an end as he wishes, then it must be by the action of God. But Eliphaz interprets this as impatient dismay on Job's part. Job is used to being one who gives advice and help, but now the boot is on the other foot, Eliphaz is saying: 'You can't take it! And that is why you are complaining.' Yet, as we saw, we found no trace of self-pity in Job's response to his afflictions—or, if we did, it would have come from us—it is not in Job's own words: he is simply stating facts, saying how it was for him, saying it would be better now if I was dead.

So Eliphaz is starting to accuse Job, in a gentle way, of being impatient and dismayed, of not being able to take this when it comes to him. But he says:

4:6 Is not your fear of God your confidence,
and the integrity of your ways your hope?

Note here that he still considers that Job is upright. He knows that Job is a man of faith in God, and has fear of God, and he knows that he has integrity. Eliphaz will come out on a different side later on, but for now he believes in Job's innocence, and encourages him to hope in that.

THE INNOCENT AND THE WICKED

Then Eliphaz gives a little dissertation on the ways of God:

4:7 Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
8 As I have seen, those who plough iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.
9 By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.
10 The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion,
and the teeth of the young lions are broken.
11 The strong lion perishes for lack of prey,
and the whelps of the lioness are scattered.

What he is saying there is that the wicked do 'come a cropper', and that God brings them down. No matter how strong they may be, like great lions, they will end up being deprived. The upright and the innocent are looked after by God. That is fair enough: he says, God will preserve you if you are innocent; He will bring trouble on the unrighteous. That is true of what God says about Himself in many other places. In His covenants with Israel, in particular, He spells that out in great detail: you keep my covenant, this is what will follow; you break it, that is what will come. God is very clear on that. It is right through the Bible. I think we are all aware of that. Job could rightly be encouraged by that, being a man of faith and integrity.

down. So we never get to hear in the Book of Revelation what those seven thunders said. Probably because it was something that was given to sustain John himself in the receiving and in the imparting of this incredible vision that was so important for the life of the church. So sometimes these things are given to us not to blab about, or to impose on someone else in their situation.

There is another instance: Julian of Norwich, a godly woman in the fourteenth-fifteenth century in England, who practically died from a severe illness, and was given sixteen visions or revelations of Christ, which opened out to her wonderful things about how God relates to us, and how everything is done in love. It was twenty years before she wrote anything about those visions—we now have them in a book called *The Revelations of Divine Love*. When she finally wrote them down, it was the fruit of twenty years of mature reflection on those experiences that God had given her when she was a young woman.

I just say that, because I know that I have erred at times with regard to some experiences, supernatural or otherwise, that have been given to me, in trying to put them onto other people.

There is something else that troubles us with regard to this experience of Eliphaz, in that it did not have a good or peaceful effect upon him. He was lying there in the night, and it was creepy: the hair of his flesh stood up on end, and there was this spirit that he could not quite discern. We have misgivings especially when we hear what this voice says, and try to see how it matches with what we read elsewhere in Scripture.

4:17 'Can mortals be righteous before God?
Can human beings be pure before their Maker?
18 Even in his servants he puts no trust,
and his angels he charges with error;
19 how much more those who live in houses of clay,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed like a moth.
20 Between morning and evening they are destroyed;
they perish forever without any regarding it.
21 Their tent-cord is plucked up within them,
and they die devoid of wisdom.'

A very mournful picture, isn't it? A very plaintive spirit, out of the emptiness, mouthing these words.

ELIPHAZ'S BASE POSITION

It seems that Eliphaz, having affirmed the orthodox view of God's dealings with humankind, is still much shaken by the magnitude of Job's suffering. He has to come to terms with it in some way. He does this by magnifying God, and making human beings to be of little account. This is his whole attitude. Particularly in verse 17:

Can mortals be righteous before God?
Can human beings be pure before their Maker?

The implied answer there is: No—there is no hope of that. So you have to somehow make the best of a bad job before God. I wonder how many people have that as their underlying approach to life?

It is very different from what Job says. Job utterly rejects that, as we shall see. He says, Yes! I believe a person *can* be righteous before God. I believe that we *can* be pure before our Maker, and I desire to stand before God, and be righteous and pure, and I call upon God for that to happen! We will come to look at the great faith of Job, particularly in that tremendous passage in chapter 19, verses 25–27: ‘I know that my Redeemer lives’—my *Redeemer*! Job never regarded himself as not needing to be redeemed, as not being a sinner, so he is looking to *God* to be able to stand righteous and pure before his Maker:

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then from my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

Even if death finishes me, I shall see God, on *my* side, favourable towards me, as I stand holy and blameless before Him, on account of His redeeming action towards me. That is Job’s great hope, and Job’s great faith.

This is being completely demolished here by Eliphaz, who has opted for the lesser option, of trying to make the best of a bad job before God.

HEDGING THE HOLY

What Eliphaz is doing here is something we all tend to do. Even Eve, in the Garden of Eden, when the serpent came: she knew what God had said. She knew the orthodox position that God has given them everything good, but that if they disobey Him, and eat of the fruit, then they will be subject to His judgement. But she makes a similar mistake to Eliphaz, I think, when she responds to the serpent: ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, *neither shall you touch it*, lest you die”’ (Genesis 3:2–3). God had not said anything about not touching the fruit, He had just said, Do not eat it. She was perhaps so over-awed by that, that she herself put a hedge around what God had said, and had said, Well, it is not that I just won’t eat it—*I won’t even touch it!* And maybe I’ll be safe that way. See what her security is in then? Something that *she* has made, a hedge or taboo that she has put there, that is now her security, rather than simple and direct obedience in relationship with God.

We do this all the time. Jesus had to battle with this over the matter of the Sabbath. God had given the Sabbath as a wonderful gift—a day of rest. It was serious if that Sabbath was broken: the Pharisees of Jesus’ day had read in the Books of Exodus and Numbers how people were stoned to death for breaking the Sabbath (Exodus 31:12–17, Numbers 15:32–36). So they said, Just to make sure we don’t break the Sabbath, we’ll make all these rules and regulations about what we can do on the Sabbath and what we can’t, and then we’ll be safe from breaking the Sabbath! Instead of putting their trust in God who gave them the Sabbath, they were putting their trust in their rules and regulations: how far they can travel and how far they can’t travel, what they can do and what they can’t do on the Sabbath. They have got it all sorted out, and that puts them at one remove from relating to God—this is now their security, and not God Himself.

Eliphaz must have something to accuse Job of, and the sin he comes against in verse 2 is vexation and jealousy. He says, 'You are unduly vexed, and you are jealous, now that you have had everything taken away from you, of those who still have something'. I guess Eliphaz and his friends were still rather comfortably off and unafflicted, and perhaps they felt that a little bit, seeing Job left with nothing and in terrible agony, and they wanted to say, 'Well, you are jealous of us! And your vexation is out of place.' And he says, 'That is really what makes you a fool'—he is calling Job a fool here. And then he is warning what could happen to him: 'I have seen the fool taking root, but I cursed his dwelling! I would not tolerate that, and I cursed him, and he came to his doom.' He is almost saying, 'Job, you had better watch out! This is what I have done before.' That is his level of tolerance, perhaps, because of the way he is. The fool's offspring are crushed, and there is no one to deliver them (how sensitive and caring is that towards a man who has just lost all his children!): once you have done the wrong thing, and have received the curse, that's it! Written off.

AN ALIEN AND HOSTILE UNIVERSE

Here is Eliphaz's world-view, in verses 6–7:

For misery does not come from the earth,
nor does trouble sprout from the ground

—in other words, if trouble comes, there must be some good reason for it, so come on, Job, what really is the reason for your suffering? But he says—

human beings are born to trouble
just as sparks fly upward.

This is a very pessimistic, stoical, fatalistic view that he ends up with.

Many people have that. They think that the reality is the alien and hostile universe, and in that we have to find some comfort from a God who loves us and cares for us and perhaps even rescues us from that, but the reality is for them that 'human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward.' I was reading a Christian writer, who was actually attacking all sorts of Christian doctrines, but he just let slip at one point that this is what he thought life is really like—'an alien and hostile universe'.

That is not how the Bible presents it. The Bible sees everything as coming from God's hand, just as Job did. Job doesn't think it is an alien and hostile universe—it doesn't occur to him, he doesn't think in those terms. He says, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD' (1:21). See how Job sees everything in the context of the action of God. He has also said, 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips. A very different view, of a universe in the hands of a close and personal God.

But Eliphaz and his ilk have abstracted their world-view from that, and said, No, we've got a universe where things are pretty tough, and we're on our own. 'Life wasn't meant to be easy.'

COMFORT IN GOD

Eliphaz then seeks in that for some comfort from his faith in God, which is a good place to go. So he says:

5:8 As for me, I would seek God,
and to God I would commit my cause.
9 He does great things and unsearchable,
marvellous things without number.
10 He gives rain on the earth
and sends waters on the fields;
11 he sets on high those who are lowly,
and those who mourn are lifted to safety.
12 He frustrates the devices of the crafty,
so that their hands achieve no success.
13 He takes the wise in their own craftiness;
and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end.
14 They meet with darkness in the daytime,
and grope at noonday as in the night.
15 But he saves the needy from the sword of their mouth,
from the hand of the mighty.
16 So the poor have hope,
and injustice shuts its mouth.

Eliphaz turns to God for escape from this troublesome universe, for relief from it, and he turns to God in an orthodox way, with orthodox belief. He says some lovely things there, and it reads just like some of the Psalms. Compare verse 10 with the Psalm 65:9–10: ‘You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water . . . You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.’ So Eliphaz is on the right track here. Verse 11 is exactly what Psalm 113 says: ‘He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.’ This is echoed also in the songs of Hannah and of Mary (1 Samuel 2:8, Luke 1:52). So that is great stuff. Verse 13: Paul the apostle was talking about human wisdom, and how God frustrates that by establishing His wisdom, and to quote from the Old Testament to substantiate this, he goes to these words of Eliphaz (see 1 Corinthians 3:19). So Eliphaz is saying a very quotable thing here—worthy of being quoted by the apostle Paul himself to substantiate his understanding of God’s wisdom. That is why I say we must not condemn these comforters out of hand, and we must not sit in judgement upon them. But we must see where they are coming from, how far they go, and where they stop, where they cut out.

Verse 17, again, is one that is quoted in the New Testament:

5:17 How happy is the one whom God reproves;
therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.

That reads very much like Proverbs 3:11–12, which is quoted in Hebrews 12:5–6, where the writer wants to go very much into the matter of suffering that comes to God’s people, by the hand of God, as a chastening or disciplinary suffering: ‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.’ So again it is certainly not that Eliphaz here is out of order when he says this. And then, when he says:

5:18 For he wounds, but he binds up;
he strikes, but his hands heal.

I wonder how many Christians have a measure of faith in God that rises to what Eliphaz is saying here. This is exactly what God says in Isaiah 45:7: 'I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things', and that incredible verse in Deuteronomy 32:39: 'I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.' That is a wonderful thing, and that is something that Eliphaz has come to see.

BUT NOT TOO CLOSE!

But his response to that—to God's initiative and sovereignty over all His creation—is one which backs off. It is possible to lay hold of that, as I have done myself, but then to say, 'Well, if that's what God does, what hope have we got? It's all in His hands, and there is nothing we can do.' It is possible to say, 'There you are, you see? God does all that—so sit down and be quiet'. That is virtually what Eliphaz is saying to Job.

But that is not what Job does. Job knows that too. Job sees that—he does not need to be told that by Eliphaz. But he responds in the way Abraham did, when God said to Abraham, 'I'll show you, Abraham, what I am about to do: I am going to wipe out Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness'. Abraham does not say, 'Oh well, God, if You're going to do that, I'll just go and hide somewhere.' He says, 'But God—You're the Judge of all the earth! Will You not do right? If there are any righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah, how can You destroy them?' And so God enters into dialogue with Abraham, and Abraham, starting from forty and reducing the number each time, gets God to say that if there are only ten righteous people in the city, He will not destroy it. (God knows that there is only one righteous person in the city, and that is Abraham's nephew Lot, and He gets him, and members of his family, out before He destroys Sodom and Gomorrah—see Genesis 18:16–33.) The point we are making here is that, unlike Eliphaz, Job is prepared to enter into that dialogue with God, pleading God's righteousness on behalf of humanity. Whereas Eliphaz is saying, If God's like that, we'd be better off keeping our distance.

Prayer:

We thank You, dear Father, for the wisdom of those whom You have brought to Yourself. You Yourself are the fountain of all wisdom and knowledge, of all goodness and truth, of all righteousness and peace. We thank you that You are to us a God nearby and not far off. Let us never take Your truth to ourselves at any distance from You. Let us never stop at a point where we cease to receive from You. Let us never seek or opt for alternative sources of wisdom and knowledge that keep us from You and Your great salvation of us in Jesus Christ, As we see and acknowledge all things to be in Your hands in this vast and often overwhelming creation, so may we be bold at Your bidding to press towards Your throne of grace, to seek and find You there in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we gladly pray. Amen.