

“How Not To Comfort”
Job 2:11-13; chapters 4 - 37
Series: Job [#3]
Pastor Lyle L. Wahl
Date: October 14, 2007

Theme: **A Faulty Focus Leads To Faulty Counsel.**

Bad advice. We’ve all heard it, and probably have followed it. The headline read: “*Lottery Winner Blames Bad Advice For His Losses.*” In 1995 Andrew Cicero won a \$5½M. lottery. He retired, planned to travel and provide for his grandchildren’s education.

Today Cicero, now 72, has sold his house, moved into an apartment, and lives on a pension and social security. His lottery winnings were to be paid on an annual basis over 25 years. After five years he took advice to sell the remaining payments to a private firm for \$2M so he could invest the money and live off the interest.

It turned out that move cost him a tax penalty of \$240,000. He also claims he lost \$600,000 or more on bad investments, because of bad advice. And he is in court with an accounting firm whose advice, he claims, cost him at least \$170,000.

Bad advice can be costly.

As we return to the book of Job today, we are taking an overview of the largest section of the book. A long section in which Job is given bad advice, faulty counsel.

This man, of whom God said, “there is no one like him ... a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil” (1:8), in one day lost all his wealth and children. Then he lost his health and his wife’s support.

But Job had friends. They decided to come and help him. While their intent was to provide good counsel, to sympathize and comfort him, they ended up providing bad counsel, pouring salt in Job’s wounds. Sadly, they are an example of “*How Not To Comfort,*” and the central lesson we can learn from them is that “A faulty focus leads to faulty counsel.”

Off To A Good Start

Now, Job’s Friends got off to a good start. They took the initiative to come.

“Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him.” (2:11)

Job’s three friends were just that, *his friends*. They take a prominent place in the book and are soundly lambasted by all on all sides. Job himself later said to them, “Sorry comforters are you all. Is there no limit to windy words?” (16:2b-3a). But they *were* his friends.

Friends are not perfect. Friends do not always listen as they should, think or speak and

act as they should. But, like Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, they can still be your friends. Sometimes, as here, they may stretch the friendship to the breaking point, but still be your friends.

These friends heard about Job's calamities and showed up. We know they lived in different places because they set a time to show up, each one coming "from his own place." We don't know how long it was after Job's calamities that they arrived. The bad news had to travel to them. Then they communicated with each other, set a date, prepared, and set out to Job's place. It easily could have taken a good number of weeks or even months.

Their willingness to drop what they were doing, take the time and expense of travel and being away from their own businesses, indicates their true friendship. They did this to "sympathize with him, and comfort him."

And Job's friends initially *did* sympathize with him. They also showed respect and restraint.

"When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." (2:12-13)

They didn't catch a glimpse from a distance and quickly, unnoticed, turn around and go back home. They *had* heard the news, but now they saw Job, and they couldn't believe their eyes.

They tore their robes, threw dust over themselves; sat down in the ashes of the garbage dump and mourned with him. They didn't check into the local inn, and take shifts to sit with Job. The three of them stayed with him, 24-7.

And then ... notice, they stayed there with him *quietly* for seven days and seven nights. They remained silent because they felt the intensity of Job's pain.

Can you imagine yourself doing that today? Our culture may talk about the value of silence, but we don't really value it that much when we fill our days with wall to wall sound, and generally feel awkward if silence goes on for more than a few moments.

I read an article this week on Problem Based Learning from Queens University. One of its basic, practical tips for group leaders, was, "When communication stops or is at a stand still, wait thirty seconds, someone is bound to talk."

Job's friends were silent as a way of entering into his grief. They respected him—he was, remember, "the greatest of all the men of the east" (1:3), and, beyond that, he *was* their friend.

They showed restraint by not slapping him on the back and saying, "We're here now. It's all going to be okay!" They showed restraint by not immediately delving into a *question*

period on the details of what had happened to him. And, they stayed with him; quietly waiting until Job was ready to speak.

All Went Downhill From There.

In those first seven days and nights, Job could not have asked for more from his three good friends ... *but ... it ... all went downhill from there.*

Job had hit *rock bottom*. He broke the silence with his lament, or scream of pain in chapter 3. With the silence broken, with questions and issues now on the table, his friends began to speak.

1. The flow of chapters 4-37.

Let's look at the big picture, the flow of chapters 4 - 37. The basic structure of these chapters is centered on three rounds of speeches.

Round 1 starts in chapter 4 and goes through chapter 14. Eliphaz, perhaps the eldest, leads off, and then Job responds to his speech. Then Bildad steps up to the podium, and Job responds. In turn, Zophar speaks and Job replies.

Round 2 follows the same pattern in chapters 15-21.

Round 3 continues on in chapters 22-31, but for some reason Zophar dropped out—did he have no more to say? Was he tired? frustrated? We are not told why he dropped out. Job ends the round with a long speech in chapters 27-31.

In chapter 32 a fourth man makes an appearance, Elihu.

There were a lot of words exchanged in these chapters. The intensity rises quickly, and keeps rising in these debates between Job and his friends.

2. Some salient samples of the downward flow.

Because we are taking just one week to look at his friends, I've selected *some salient samples of the downward flow* so we can get a picture of this runaway freight train racing downhill.

It has often been said that when you try to help someone who is at rock bottom, you may well get it wrong. Whatever you say and do will often be misinterpreted. If that were the only obstacle Job's friends faced, they would have fared much better as comforters. Their biggest obstacle, as we shall see, was themselves, their own focus.

Eliphaz began the first round, almost asking for permission to speak.

"If one ventures a word with you, will you become impatient? But who can refrain from speaking?" (4:2)

While he acknowledges that Job had helped others, in verses 3-4, he quickly pivots,

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

dismayed.” (4:5)

His point, “Job, you’re not practicing what you have been preaching!”

The intensity picks up in verses 7-9.

“Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed? According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity and those who sow trouble harvest it. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of His anger they come to an end.” (4:7-9)

We will come back to this later, but for now, note he is saying that Job’s problems are the result of his sins.

And, Eliphaz tells Job all this trouble is God’s discipline. “Accept it, and God will rescue and bless you.”

How would you like these to be the first words from your good, long-time friends in your lowest moments?

The intensity of the confrontations picks up when Bildad begins his first speech,

“How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a mighty wind?” (8:2)

Job had poured out his heart, his pain and frustration to his friends, and the first thing Bildad says is, “Job, stop being such a windbag! Enough of all the hot air!”

But Bildad is only warming up. Look at the next statement,

“Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert what is right? If your sons sinned against Him, then He delivered them into the power of their transgression.” (8:3-4)

Do you get what he is saying? “Job, your children died because they sinned! They were sinners, Job! That’s why God took their lives!”

Let’s move on to Zophar’s opening statement.

“Shall a multitude of words go unanswered, and a talkative man be acquitted? Shall your boasts silence men? And shall you scoff and none rebuke?” (11:2-3)

He not only accuses Job of being a windbag, but also of boasting about his *supposed* innocence.

Then Zophar moves on,

“For you have said, ‘My teaching is pure, and I am innocent in your eyes.’ But would that God might speak, and open His lips against you, and show you the secrets of wisdom! For sound wisdom has two sides. Know then that God forgets a part of your iniquity.” (11:4-6)

“Job, you say you are innocent. If only God would show up and speak! He would prove you are not!” On top of that he says, “Job, you think what you are going through is bad? Well, let me tell you, God is only giving you part of what you actually deserve! You should be thankful it isn’t a lot worse!”

Now that they are warmed up, and have heard Job’s pointed responses (which we will review next time), they keep turning the temperature up.

Eliphaz gets the second round going,

“Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge and fill himself with the east wind? Should he argue with useless talk, or with words which are not profitable?” (15:2-3)

Then he goes on to say that Job really does not reverence God; that he speaks *craftily* (I wonder if Eliphaz says this because he knows he can’t refute Job’s arguments). He also claims that Job is guilty and condemned by his own words.

Bildad’s second shot comes in chapter 18,

“How long will you hunt for words? Show understanding and then we can talk. Why are we regarded as beasts, as stupid in your eyes? O you who tear yourself in your anger—for your sake is the earth to be abandoned, or the rock to be moved from its place?” (18:2-4)

He says Job isn’t making any sense, and isn’t giving them the respect they deserve. He asks, sarcastically, “Do you want God to rearrange the whole world just for you?”

Zophar chimes in in chapter 20, saying that Job has insulted him. Then he says, “Job, remember, the wicked only prosper for a short time and then are gone” (1-7). In other words, “Job, confess and repent before it’s too late!”

Eliphaz kicks off the third round with a direct, frontal assault.

“Is not your wickedness great, and your iniquities without end? For you have taken pledges of your brothers without cause, and stripped men naked. To the weary you have given no water to drink, and from the hungry you have withheld bread. But the earth belongs to the mighty man, and the honorable man dwells in it. You have sent widows away empty, and the strength of the orphans has been crushed.” (22:5-9)

These charges are clearly false because God said Job was righteous and blameless. Eliphaz goes on to say again, “Job, admit your sin! Return to God! And He will bless you” (22:21-27).

Bildad’s final speech in chapter 25 is short, probably because he can’t think of anything more to say. He recites platitudes about the greatness of God and the lowliness of people, who, he says, are like maggots and worms. He may be saying, “Job, who are you to ask God

questions?”

The three-round debate ends after Job’s response to Bildad’s last speech because, as 32:1 describes it,

“Then these three men ceased answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes.” (32:1)

Job would not break. He would not admit he was a wicked sinner, and that all these bad things were God’s judgment on him. And so, the three friends gave up debating with him.

They are done, but young Elihu enters the debate in chapter 32. He opens by saying that out of respect, because he is younger, he has been silent. But now, angered by what he has heard from all four debaters, he must speak.

Pride drips from every section of his four speeches. For example,

“My words are from the uprightness of my heart, and my lips speak knowledge sincerely.” (33:3)

“...listen to me; keep silent, and I will teach you wisdom.” (33:33)

While his speeches are philosophical, he does take some direct shots at Job.

“What man is like Job, who drinks up derision like water, who goes in company with the workers of iniquity, And walks with wicked men?” (34:7-8)

From there he goes on to say that God is paying Job back for the evil he has done.

“Therefore, listen to me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God to do wickedness, and from the Almighty to do wrong. For He pays a man according to his work, and makes him find it according to his way. Surely, God will not act wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice.” (34:10-12)

He pronounces an indictment against Job,

“Men of understanding will say to me, and a wise man who hears me, ‘Job speaks without knowledge, and his words are without wisdom. Job ought to be tried to the limit, Because he answers like wicked men. For he adds rebellion to his sin; he claps his hands among us, And multiplies his words against God.’” (34:34-37)

And,

“So Job opens his mouth emptily; he multiplies words without knowledge.” (35:16)

Yes, after getting off to a good start, *“it all went downhill from there.”*

Why? How Did This Happen?

This leads us to a question, *“Why?”* *“Why, how did this happen?”* At the start I said that

Job's friends teach us that "*A Faulty Focus Leads To Faulty Counsel.*" Let's see why this is so. There are three ways in which their focus was faulty.

1. Job's friends lost sight of their mission to sympathize and comfort.

First, Job's friends lost sight of their mission to sympathize and comfort. Remember their intent was good, they came "to sympathize with [Job] and comfort him" (2:11). Also remember that they began well. It is often said that Job's friends were at their best in the first seven days as they sat with him ... *and kept their mouths shut.*

But after Job poured out his heart to them in chapter 3 — when he said he wished he had never been born; or if he had to be born, that he had died at birth; or now, in his great misery, that he could die; when he expressed his thoughts that God was silent and had hedged or boxed him in with no way out; and that his worst nightmares had come true — after this, they moved from comforters to fixers, to prosecutors and judges, to defenders of God's sovereignty and righteousness, at least as they saw it.

If we are to be true comforters, to give sound counsel, to be channels for "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3), we *must* keep our focus; we *must* know that our purpose in those times is "to sympathize and comfort."

Yes, it is natural to try to answer the deep questions, even if we really don't have the answers. It is natural to try to teach, to try to set the record straight and correct. But when someone is on rock bottom, the first thing they need is for us to feel and enter into their pain.

After we enter into their situation, get to hear and know their heart better, we can see things more clearly. We will be true comforters, and givers of good counsel. Then, we will also be able to instruct and correct later, *if needed.*

Remember Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and Elihu, and always remember *your* mission to someone in distress.

2. Job's friends were prisoners of their own false assumptions, their own erroneous theology.

The second way in which their focus was faulty was that Job's friends were prisoners of their own false assumptions, their own erroneous theology. They did a lot of philosophising and recitation of their own theology in their speeches. Practically, when someone is hurting, they are not looking for a lecture on philosophy or theology. They are looking for, and desperately need a *comforter.*

Job's friends said some things that were true, and others that were not true. Their biggest problem was that they "were prisoners of their own false assumptions and their own erroneous theology." So, there are many half-truths here—truths skewed by their own assumptions and views.

Let's look at one example which shows their skewed view, which is also a rather "mechanistic" view of God, His sovereignty and our relationship to Him. We find it in chapter 4.

"Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed?"

[Now, we could stop here and start a list, a long list of those who were innocent and upright who perished, or were destroyed, starting with Abel in Genesis 4.]

According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity and those who sow trouble harvest it. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of His anger they come to an end." (4:7-9)

As I pointed out earlier, Eliphaz is saying that Job's present problems are the direct result of his past sins.

Now, the principle of "sowing and reaping" is true. It is taught in the both the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is a timeless truth. Let's look at a clear statement of it in the New Testament.

"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." (Galatians 6:7-10)

Eliphaz and his friends took this timeless truth as a mechanistic formula. Their thinking was something like this:

1. God is sovereign and righteous. [True.]
2. God punishes sin and blesses righteousness. [True]
3. Therefore, God always punishes sin and blesses righteousness in this life. All the bad things that happen to me are God's punishment for my sin, while all the good things are God's blessing for my righteousness. [This conclusion is False]

The Galatians 6 passage does not draw a connection to "real time" reaping, but points to "in due time." For believers, this points to when Christ judges our works, and rewards us for those done in faith.

Jesus exposed this same error in John chapter 9.

"As [Jesus] passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind? Jesus answered, 'It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.'" (9:1-3)

When giving comfort and counsel, ask God to keep you from being a prisoner of your own false assumptions, from any and all erroneous theology.

3. Job's friends were caught up in self-righteous pride.

And, thirdly, Job's friends focus was faulty because they were caught up in self-righteous pride. We see that in each of the four friends.

First, Eliphaz. He started to speak by saying, "according to what I have seen..." (4:8) and "[Take note of] this; we have investigated it, and so it is" (5:27). Again, "I will tell you [Job], listen to me; and what I have seen I will also declare" (15:17).

Bildad self-righteously condemned Job's children, "...[God] delivered them into the power of their transgressions" (8:4).

And Zophar, he was so convinced he knew Job's heart and problem that he wished God would show up, speak and rebuke Job. In addition to that he said self-righteously, "sinful Job was only getting part of the punishment due him" (11:4-6).

Then young Elihu said, "Just because the four of you are older does not mean you are wise or understand justice. Listen to me and I will tell you what I think—the way it really is!" (32:9-10). Again, "I've got a lot to say, and I can't hold it in any longer. I won't be partial or flatter anyone—in fact, I don't even know how to do that" (32:17-22). *Yeah, right Elihu.*

If we are going to be true comforters and counselors for each other, O how we need to watch that we do not get caught up in self-righteous pride. We need to remember what God told us through the apostle Paul,

"For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." (Romans 12:3)

Despite their great start, Job's friends show us "*How Not To Comfort*" rather than "*How To Comfort*." Their focus became blurred as they lost sight of their mission, became prisoners to their own erroneous ideas, and stood confidently in their self-righteous pride. Yes, "*A Faulty Focus Leads To Faulty Counsel*."

As you spend a few moments with God now, think about Job's friends, and yourself as a friend to others.

Following their example is not only hard on our friends, it is hard on us too. Ask God to help you to keep sight of your mission as you spend time with, encourage and comfort others. Ask God to free you from false assumptions and thinking, and also from getting your ego and pride involved.

While Job's friends give us an example mostly of "what not to be and do," Jesus gives

us the perfect example of “what to be and do.” Make your goal to be like him as you relate to others. As Thomas Chisholm wrote, our “constant longing and prayer” should be to be like Jesus, “full of compassion, loving, forgiving, tender and kind; helping the helpless, cheering the fainting, seeking the wandering sinner to find.”

© 2007, Lyle L. Wahl

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.