

Sunday January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Job 4:1-6; 6:14-23  
“Let’s meet Eliphaz”

This story goes that a woman was caught shoplifting a can of peaches from a local supermarket. She wasn’t desperate for peaches; she just wanted them and did not want to pay for them. The judge hearing the case found her guilty, and asked her how many peaches were in the can. The woman in tears said there were six peaches. The judge therefore ruled that the woman should spend six days in jail; one for each peach she stole.

The woman broke down in inconsolable sobbing as the judge was about to bring his gavel down to end the proceedings, when the husband of the woman jumped from his seat in the courtroom and shouted, “Just a minute your honour, she also stole a can of peas.” Most of us would agree at some level with the idea that the punishment given to someone should fit the crime. Justice is supposed to be blind some say, but it rarely is.

One of the strongest critiques of the justice system, is that it does not seem fair, and that sentences for some nasty crimes are rather light. And then there is the very real sense of cultural bias in the courts. In the last few years, we have garnered new phrases into our vocabulary that speak to the unfairness and inequity of the justice system. We hear of things like “racial profiling” and “Black Lives Matter” and others.

Somewhere, deep down inside us, there is a real sense that the world should, and maybe is, well ordered when it comes to justice. You reap what you sow. “Don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time”. Today we meet the first of Job’s friends who came to “comfort” him. The three men, share with Job a desire to explain what has happened to him. Job has just finished his heart wrenching soliloquy on his suffering. Now his friends, who had been silent open up.

Eliphaz speaks first, and what he offers to Job is nothing but more pain. He means well, perhaps, but his explanation of Job’s tragedies says more about Eliphaz than about Job. Like Job, all three friends are men of influence, wealth, and wisdom. They are likely all men, others would come to for advice. It is clear by what Eliphaz says that he was not really listening to Job. But he begins with cautious language and is not pushy. This will change in future speeches.

He begins by flattering Job about how he was a counsellor himself to many people, but now he needs to listen to some counsel himself. The very heart of what Eliphaz will say in his speeches is simply this, “I plead with you to be submissive to God’s discipline.” You can tell that Eliphaz was holding back. He is fighting the urge to butt in on Job’s speech. He worries that Job’s suffering, like the wind struck the house, will keep him from hearing the wisdom Eliphaz shares.

The advice Eliphaz will give is exactly the same advice Job would give to anyone else. Eliphaz is telling Job to be consistent. The two men share the same world view, and therefore it should apply to Job as much as anyone else. So, what exactly is this world view? Job may be a pious, God-fearing man, but there is a moral order. Good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people. Verse seven is critical to Eliphaz’ argument.

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“Listen to this key truth-give me one example of an innocent person who died an untimely death, of a morally upright person who has been cut off from the prime of life.” You can’t Eliphaz insists. Its never happened, and it never will. Its an illogical phrase because it assumes what it seeks to prove. But never let evidence get in the way of a good theory. Eliphaz has just pronounced the religious theory of a lot of very serious folks.

Its what people thought when Paul was bitten by a viper on Malta. “No doubt he is a murder”, they said. Justice has not allowed him to live”. Eliphaz uses a farming analogy to essentially state the “we reap what we sow”. The world is not a random place; actions have consequences. What Eliphaz misses, however, is that the harvest comes at the end of the age, not now. Eliphaz urges Job to stick with what he has always believed.

Then the tone of the speech changes. Eliphaz talks about a night time visitor to his sleep. Of some nebulous being whispering to him. Eliphaz assumes it was from God, but there are doubts, and it maybe the Satan himself who whispered to Eliphaz. What did this visitor say, “Can mortal man be right before God? Can a man be pure before his maker?” Sort of a let down in our anticipation. We had hoped Eliphaz would learn of Job’s secret sin.

Satan’s challenge before God was that no person on earth is genuinely in the right before God and Eliphaz has become The Satan’s spokesman. Even angels are not fully clean before God, so how can we expect vessels of clay to be so. So, Job; get real. We are mortal, God is immortal and never the twain shall meet. There is here another foreshadow that we need someone to intervene with God. A Saviour, an advocate.

Bad things happen to people who think they can reach God. They are crushed. Troubles do not just come from nowhere. They are the result of human sinfulness. So, Eliphaz is saying. You did something wrong Job. Perhaps something very wrong. Be humble enough to admit it and submissive to the discipline God is placing upon you. So, what is wrong with Eliphaz’s words. They make a great deal of sense to a great number of people.

What’s wrong with asking Job to be consistent, realistic, humble, and submissive to God? The biggest problem is that Job’s experience is an extreme one. His is much greater than all of us and he fell, much lower than all of us. We may like to think we are like Job, but in reality we are not like him at all. Only one man was greater and fell harder than Job and that was Jesus. We only suffer, in part like Job, and suffering in an unjust world is part of our sharing in Christ’s suffering. Without the cross of Christ, Job’s story makes no sense.

Eliphaz’ counsel was kind in its intention, but it as very painful to Job. Eliphaz’ message is one of piety and religion, rather than a gospel of grace. If Job believes it, he will remain in despair. Job desires to respond to Eliphaz and does so for two whole chapters. What we observe is a man, although ruined by life’s events is still a worshipper of God. At the heart of Job’s response is the critical point I made at the very beginning.

God’s glory is more important than our comfort, and it does matter, that men and woman be tested to see if they are real worshippers. Take away all the things on earth that we deem precious and do we still worship and love God.

This was the whole point of the test begun in the throne room. It would seem in all cases, for all people, that the only sure-fire way to see if someone is a true worshipper of God, is to test them and that testing includes loss and suffering. Sincerely following God in Christ, means sometimes making the hard choice, and sacrificing something or a relationship with someone which will be detrimental to our devotion to God.

Job begins by telling his friends that suffering as he does, without rhyme nor reason, is unbearable and their religion does him no comfort or good. Eliphaz called Job a fool for his earlier outburst, but the opposite is in fact the truth. Job's outburst is the natural and understandable response to suffering. Job's misery is also translated as vexation here. It refers to a tiring anger that wears someone out.

Job is telling his friends that they do not understand him or his situation. Job then surprises us by stating that the root of his misery, isn't really the loss of his wealth or his children or these cursed boils he suffers from. His misery comes from God shooting poisoned arrows at him and he knows not why. Another way of expressing these arrows, is as terrors as found in Psalm 88:16. Job delivers a simple enough illustration to make his point.

An animal, he reminds them, only fusses or makes a ruckus when it is hungry. The diet Eliphaz has offered him is inedible, and so Job brays in protest. That which is offered to Job is worthless and disgusting. In Psalm 69 we read similar sentiments, "I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink." This of course points to Jesus and the sour wine offered him as he suffered.

Job still wants to die, but he realizes that the only reason he is still alive is that God has refused to let him die. Job weeps that God would crush him and end his misery. Job wants to die so that he may die without cursing God, and would die keeping his spiritual integrity in tact. Job wants to honour God by his life, and by his death. To keep from cursing God demands a fortitude Job doesn't believe he has.

Before all this, Job was a very successful man, now he wonders if he can hold onto the most important thing, and that is his devotion to God. All Job wants from his friends is kindness. The Hebrew word is *chesed*. It means to have a strong obligation to remain loyal, and to show sympathy, and love to a friend in distress. Job states angrily that his friends have shown none of this. Job paints a very vivid and familiar picture for his friends.

Picture a camel caravan traveling in the summer time. The caravan is running low on water and someone remembers a desert wadi that holds cool refreshing water, collected from the winter snow melt. But it is summer, so when the caravan reaches the wadi, it is bone dry. When they arrive, they are ashamed for placing their hope in something that is not there. They were so confident but now they are disappointed.

Job states that that is what his friends are like. When he saw them coming, he had new hope, that they would refresh him, but instead his hopes are dashed. He reminds them that he is not being selfish. He does not ask for money or possessions.

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He just wants them to ease his torment with some useful clarity and sympathy. Verse 6:27 is quite telling. “You do not love me. I am just a pawn in your religious discussions.” Wow! There is so much we could unpack here about how we treat others. Sometimes our religious words and platitudes only intensify a person’s pain. If a person’s pain has no redemptive value, how can it bring glory to God? (Rom. 5:19)

Job switches targets of his words from his friends to God himself. Job knows it was God who placed a hedge around him. Job knows this calamity that has befallen him was also by God’s hand (through the agency of the Satan, but Job doesn’t know that). Chapter 7 is really all about one question to God. “Why do I matter?” What flows out of him is like Ecclesiastes on a rainy day.

Job goes on to draw a picture of his life, and it’s not pretty. He talks of himself as a conscript in an army or a slave like Solomon used to build the temple. A lowly labourer living pay to pay. Such people long for the shadows of evening, because then they can rest and get their pay. It’s similar to the way Job longs for death. This life of indentured servitude goes on and on. Then there are the sleepless nights.

Psalm 127:2 speaks of God’s gift of sleep, but for Job the nights seem endless. He is disgusting even to himself; dirty, ulcers infected by vermin or maggots. Job sees his life as a living death. The days are like a weaver’s shuttle passing back and forth at tremendous speed. Job’s prime of life is slipping by with nothing to show for it. Another year, another year of misery. Put that in a Hallmark card.

Job knows God’s eye is on him. He instinctively knows that he ought to matter to God. But everything he is suffering seems to contradict this fact. Job believed he lived a covenantal relationship with God which is eternal. Remember Jesus arguing with the Sadducees about the resurrection? (Matt. 22:32) Jesus reminds them that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob still have a relationship with God even after death.

Then finally Job states the obvious, I think. He begs God to just leave him alone. Eliphaz wants Job to be silent but Job will not. “I will not restrain my mouth.” (7:11) It is interesting that Job seems to be preaching, and in doing so, is gradually making his way to the truth. Job pictures God, in some very unflattering ways. God is a hostile watcher whom Job cannot escape. It’s akin to “Big Brother” with cameras everywhere watching every move.

The pressure under such scrutiny is unbearable. Job wonders why, if he is as insignificant as his current situation seems to indicate, why pay any attention to him at all. “What is man, that you make so much of him, and that you set your heart on him...” Why, O God, are you visiting to test me? Usually, God’s interest in us is thought to produce hope and encouragement, not for Job. For Job, God’s eye is a terrible thing.

Then finally the biting question. Verse 21 reads, “And anyway, why don’t you forgive me?” If, as Eliphaz argues, Job’s tragic circumstances are due to sin, why doesn’t God forgive him and end this torment? All of this points to one inspiring truth. Jesus will come and fulfill the sufferings of Job and ours as well. He will suffer not for his own sins, but for ours.

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There is so much to wrestle with here in this exchange between Eliphaz, Job, and God. When we are under intense spiritual, psychological, or physical pain, and no matter how sincere the words are of a dear friend. Ultimately, religious phrases and platitudes are no comfort at all. Intellectually, we may agree with such sentiments and the truth behind them, but when under God's eye, we find them no healing balm for our wounds. Only in the cross of Christ, do we find meaning in our suffering.

Eliphaz also is troublesome in that he has a nice ordered religious system. It brings his soul peace to see the world operate in such black and white terms. Despite the evidence before him of his friend Job's suffering, which seems meaningless, Eliphaz will not let go of his well-ordered world view.

We too can fail our dear friends and family with trying to dismiss their suffering with trite bible verses and catch phrases. The one who is suffering may indeed concur with your attempts at comfort, but deep down inside, the words ring hollow. Instead, we need to encourage our beloved to lament as Job does, and also as the Psalms do. We must endure with them and listen with our hearts and be Christ for them.

This is what they long for. Not answers, but solidarity with us, and with God in Christ. And this is our calling in a broken and suffering world.