

## **What (not) to say to someone in grief**

### **Job 4-6**

#### **Sermon Part One**

Every minister remembers their first funeral.

Funerals are significant opportunities for ministry,  
but they can be stressful, particularly when you're starting out  
because you don't get a lot of time to prepare.  
And one of the things I found myself worrying about the first time  
was trying to work out what exactly I would say to the bereaved,  
not only during the service but also during our incidental discussions.

I remember driving in the car on the way to the church,  
and I think this must have been the Holy Spirit prompting me to think ahead,  
but I remember thinking "What am I going to say when I greet them?"  
The typical Australian greeting of *How's it going?* didn't seem appropriate.  
*How do think we're going? Where at a funeral!*  
So I pulled into the car park,  
and there they were gathered as a family having just arrived themselves.  
And so I decided to go with "*How are you all holding up this morning?*"  
It seemed to work.

But it's tricky, trying to find the right words to say when people are in grief.

Having lost his wealth, his children, and also his health,  
our friend Job is experiencing some deep grief.  
But straight after the traumatic events of chapters 1 and 2,  
three of his friends come and sit with him.  
So Job is fortunate in that his friends have come to support him.  
Or is he that fortunate?  
Sometimes comforters can pick the wrong strategy, can't they?  
Sometimes the wrong words are chosen, and people end up feeling worse.

As we listen in on the first of Job's friends to speak,  
I think there is a lesson or two in speaking to the bereaved.  
What are the good things to say, and what are the things to avoid saying?  
Let's listen in and find out.

Our first friend speaks up in Chapter 4.1

And even before he opens his mouth we have reason to be hopeful.  
We are told that Eliphaz is a Temanite,  
meaning he is from Teman in the land of Edom.  
It seems that Teman was a town renowned for learning and wisdom.

In Jeremiah 49.7 the Lord Almighty asks

*Is there no longer wisdom in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent?*

*Has their wisdom decayed?*

So saying that Eliphaz is from Teman

is a bit like saying that he's from Oxford or Cambridge,

Our expectation is that Eliphaz will have some knowledge to share.

So how does this wise-man approach his friend?

Well, he starts with what you might call *some tough love*:

Ch 4 vs 3-5 Think how you have instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands. <sup>4</sup>Your words have supported those who stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees. <sup>5</sup>But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed.

Remember, Job was described in Ch 1 as the

greatest man of all the peoples of the east,

so he would have been a leader of sorts

no doubt he'd have been a source of counsel for others.

And so now Eliphaz comes along and challenges Job:

*Be consistent Job! Stop being a hypocrite.*

*It's time to apply to yourself the advice to keep your chin up.*

*Advice, Job, that you yourself have handed out many times before.*

We love those TV shows where we see tough love in action.

*World's Strictest Parents* is one that comes to mind; sometimes it works!

But perhaps we love it because it involves dishing out a little bit of justice: the rough kid gets a taste of his own medicine.

I wonder whether Eliphaz is wanting to rough Job up a little bit,

because in what he says next we see that he's a bit suspicious of Job,

he thinks that Job's hiding a secret, that he's not as righteous as people think.

In verses 6-11 Eliphaz explains what he seems to think is an indisputable moral law:

Take verses 7 and 8 as an example:

"Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. <sup>9</sup>At the breath of God they perish; at the blast of his anger they are no more.

Here's the law of the universe according to Eliphaz:

God only stirs up trouble for those who deserve it.

If someone is suffering,

then there's got to be some kind of sin lurking in the background

*Yes Job, we all know that you are a very pious man,*

*but trauma only comes to those who are sinning...*

*so Job, perhaps this is proof that your life was not as it seemed.*

What is it that makes Eliphaz so confident of his analysis?

Well, we have a very strange section beginning from verse 12.

Eliphaz speaks of a kind of vision that he has received,

a vision causing him to tremble (v14)

and making his hairs standing on end (v15).

He's had some kind of encounter with a spirit who spoke in a hushed voice.

It's a message from the spiritual realm,

the realm which we saw in chapters 1 and 2

as we witnessed God's conversations with Satan.

And what is the message?

Well it's a message that seems somewhat truthful,

It's a message about how God will judge the wicked,

how the unrighteous and impure will be crushed more readily than a moth (v19),

how they are broken to pieces, how they perish forever (v20).

And the inference, again, is that this is exactly what is happening to Job;

God is punishing him for his sin.

So this is Eliphaz's diagnosis:

despite his outward appearance of piety,

Job must have done something to bring this upon himself.

God is in the business of punishing those who do wrong,

and obviously Job is being punished, so Job must be guilty of something.

What can he suggest Job do in response? What medicine can he prescribe for Job?

Well from ch5 v8 Eliphaz speaks some wonderful truths:

If I were you, he counsels Job I would appeal to God;

I would lay my cause before him. <sup>9</sup>He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.

Ch 5 v 17 sounds familiar

Blessed are those whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.

<sup>18</sup>For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal

This is exactly what we read in Hebrews 12: God disciplines his children.

So the advice is to turn to God (presumably in repentance) and seek his restoration, knowing that God *will hear* such a cry and that God *will* respond.

So even though Eliphaz has been harsh,

he does want Job to be restored,

and he does offer Job some hope as he finishes his speech.

But over all, what mark would you give Eliphaz as a counselor? My mark: 4/10!

He does say some truthful things:

God does punish the wicked, and human beings can be very wicked people.

But as Eliphaz has said, God *is* willing to forgive and restore.

But Eliphaz also demonstrates a view of the world that is incredibly simplistic.  
He has a simple formula: terrible events = God's punishment for evil.  
He cannot see that suffering *might not* be the product of sin.  
Since we've been given access to the heavenly throne room in Ch 1 and 2,  
we know that Job *is not* being afflicted because of his sin,  
he's being afflicted because Satan has asked to see him tested.

What Eliphaz fails to see is that suffering can come for a whole range of reasons.  
He asks the question in 4.7 Who being innocent has ever perished?  
As readers of the NT we know the answer to that question, don't we?  
Jesus suffered as an innocent man,  
and the suffering of Jesus was part of God's plan all along.  
Suffering isn't always the result of personal sinfulness.

Eliphaz does his best to diagnose the situation, but he still comes up short. Why?  
Despite his confidence, he doesn't have complete knowledge of the situation.

So here's the lesson for our counseling of others:  
have some humility about what you do and don't know.  
Eliphaz is so confident! Ch 5.27  
We have examined this, and it is true. So hear it and apply it to yourself.  
But it's a confidence that's misplaced!

If you ever find yourself speaking to the grieving,  
and you begin a sentence with the words "This is happening because ..."  
Just pull up for a second and think about how much you really know.  
By all means, speak about God's love and presence and ability to heal,  
But I'd be very cautious in offering a quick diagnosis of the situation,  
especially if you are drawing a link between suffering and a person's sin.

The foolishness of this kind of counseling becomes apparent as Job responds,  
which we'll hear after our next song.

## **Sermon Part Two**

The beginning of Ch 6 is a bit of a tense moment.

You may have been in the situation when you've offered someone advice, and then you wait with baited breath for the response.

Well, Job turns his head to Eliphaz, and he lets him have it!

In verses 2-10 we hear again how Job sees his situation:

His anguish outweighs the sand of the sea (v3)

And verse 4 is wonderfully vivid: The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison; God's terrors are marshaled against me.

He's right to say that, by the way.

Satan was the one who suggested this, but God's hand is also active.

And Job defends his right to complain

verse 5 Does a wild donkey bray when it has grass, or an ox bellow when it has fodder?

The idea here is that animals don't make a noise without a reason.

They don't cry out unless they're hungry, unless they're in need.

So Job is saying "I have every right to complain, Eliphaz"

Then Job repeats what we heard from him last week: he wishes he was dead.

Verse 10 is very insightful.

According to Job, the benefit of dying would mean that he would still have this consolation—my joy in unrelenting pain he says—that I had not denied the words of the Holy One.

As we've seen in previous weeks,

Job's goal in all this is to not enter into sin:

to curse God, to label God as unfaithful or as some kind of liar.

Job would rather die than arrive at that point.

So this is Job's view of things:

in great grief he has every right to bellow like an animal,

but what he will not do is turn against God.

What we do see Job doing in verse 14 is that he turns against Eliphaz.

While true friends show each other kindness,

Job's own friends (v15) are as undependable as intermittent streams

He describes the scene of a chain of caravans trekking across the desert.

The air is dry, the heat is intense, water is running low,

but then someone remembers, *there is a river just off the path*

and so the party diverts and heads off expecting to find refreshing streams,

but all they find upon arriving is a riverbed as dry as a bone.

Your heart sinks, and this is Job's description of the help provided by Eliphaz,

*My friend is about to speak! What refreshment can he bring?*

*What was that? It's my fault? Ugh ... now I feel worse!*

It's not that Job is unwilling to listen.

Teach me, and I will be quiet; he offers in v24  
show me where I have been wrong. <sup>25</sup>How painful are honest words!

*I'm willing to hear it*, he says

But the problem is that Eliphaz hasn't got it right.

But what do your arguments prove? He asks.

V 28 be so kind as to look at me. Would I lie to your face? <sup>29</sup>Relent, do not be unjust;  
reconsider, for my integrity is at stake. <sup>30</sup>Is there any wickedness on my lips?

*I'm not sure you've read the situation correctly* he says.

*I'm innocent. Whatever the reason behind my suffering,  
it's got nothing to do with any sin.*

If Eliphaz has taught us how not to offer counsel to someone in grief,

Then Job teaches us something about how to view our own suffering.

Here's his lesson: he doesn't buy the lie that his suffering is due to his sin.

He knows that his sin is dealt with,

He knows that through sacrifice, his sin is atoned for.

But Satan's strategy is to try and get Job to doubt that

Remember Eliphaz's strange dream?

I wonder whether we're meant to see that dream as coming from Satan.

A dream where a truth is told—*God punishes the unrighteous*—

but where the even greater truth of God's forgiveness is left unannounced,  
and so on account of that dream Job is told that he is still under judgment.

One of Satan's tricks is to convince you that you are still guilty  
even though you've asked for your sins to be atoned for.

But Job won't buy it, and neither should we.

When I was in high school,

my friends and I would play a game as we caught the train home from school.

We'd hop on the carriage and as the doors closed and the train pulled away

one of us would call out in a deep voice "tickets please!"

And then we'd watch as everyone madly rushed to find their ticket.

Completely infantile, but gosh we thought it was funny.

These days it's not "tickets please" but "opal cards please"

—not that I'm still playing that game—

but we do have inspectors checking whether we're doing the right thing.

It's a problem if you don't have a card,

but if you have swiped on there's that little bit of pride isn't there,

when you can **confidently** hand your card over.

"Here it is, you can check it, you will see that I am a good citizen!"

Friends, because of what Jesus has done,

we can have tremendous confidence as God looks over our lives.

Here's how Hebrews Ch 4 puts it: Therefore, since we have a great high priest who

has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess ...  
Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy  
and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The wonderful truth of the gospel is that sin no longer stands against us,  
and so for the Christian who has placed their faith in Jesus  
there is no reason to think that God is punishing us or is angry with us,  
because that punishment has been taken by Jesus at the cross.

It is true that God can discipline us  
if as Christians we are heading down the wrong paths,  
but it's discipline as a loving Father disciplines a child;  
it doesn't exclude us from the family  
and is only meant to be temporary  
as we're prompted to get back on the right track.  
But this isn't the situation we have with Job,  
and its not necessarily the right explanation for every instance of suffering.

So when it comes to dealing with grief,  
both in our own experience and in the experience of others,  
here's the summary from these chapters:  
We want to develop a *confident humility*.  
Confident: because we know it's not on account of anyone's sin  
But humble: because we can't see the full picture.  
That way we'll save ourselves from damaging others  
and from being damaged *by others*  
when counseling goes pear shaped.