

What Not to Say to a Suffering Servant

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[0 : 00] We're going to be reading now in our Bibles and in the book of Job, which is in the Old Testament, just before the Psalms, the long book of Psalms. And Phil Copeland, for the last couple of weeks, has been looking at Job. We've got another evening together on that this evening.

No doubt we'll come back to it at a later stage as well. But we're going to read this evening in Job chapter 8, and then a few verses just at the very end of the book. And having been in the first couple of chapters where we've read what happened to Job and all the calamities that came upon him, and then the arrival of his friends, so-called Job's comforters.

Here we are in chapter 8, tipping in immediately on one of the words that his friend Bildad speaks to him in order to bring comfort.

And as we read this, you will notice that many of these verses speak of wonderful truths about God. And yet, taken as a whole, this chapter, as with so many of the others in the book of Job, is an extraordinary example of how you can say things that are wholly right, and yet be wholly and completely wrong in the message that you're actually giving.

And we'll see that that is the Lord's assignment and assessment of this at the end. So let's read Job chapter 8. Then Bildad the Shuhite answered and said, How long will you say these things?

[1 : 27] And the words of your mouth be a great wind. Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert the right? If your children have sinned against him, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression.

If you'll seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you're pure and upright, surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation. Though your beginning was small, your latter days will be very great.

For inquire, please, of bygone ages, and consider what the fathers have searched out. For we are but yesterday and know nothing. Our days on earth are just a shadow.

Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding? Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh? Can reeds flourish where there is no water?

While yet in flower and not cut down, they wither before any other plant. Such are the paths of all who forget God. The hope of the godless shall perish.

[2 : 34] His confidence is severed and his trust is in a spider's web. He leans against his house, but it doesn't stand. He lays hold of it, but it does not endure. He's a lush plant before the sun.

And his shoots spread over his garden. His shoots entwine the stone heap. He looks upon a house of stones. He's destroyed from his place.

If he's destroyed from his place, then it will deny him, saying, I've never seen you. Behold, this is the joy of his way. And out of the soil others will spring. Behold, God will not reject a blameless man, nor take the hand of evildoers.

He will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouting. Those who hate you will be clothed with shame. And the tent of the wicked will be no more. Lots of pious words there.

But let's turn over to the very last chapter of Job, Job 32. And just read these few words here, which give ultimately the Lord's own assessment of the words of Job's friends.

[3 : 41] After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, my anger burns 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 a burnt offering for yourselves.

And my servant Job shall pray for you. And 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.

So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Namathite went and did what the Lord had told them. And the Lord accepted Job's prayer.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, you're doing well. Well, please do have your Bibles open to Job.

[4 : 51] Job 8. And I promise you we'll eventually get to that passage. Well, this week I read a deeply moving story about a faithful Christian pastor who was ministering near the end of the Second World War in Stuttgart.

At that time, Stuttgart had been heavily bombed by allied forces. Destruction and death was everywhere. And one afternoon this pastor went out for a walk around the city.

He was deeply discouraged. His head was full of gloomy thoughts. And suddenly he found himself standing there looking down at a massive concrete pit of a cellar that had been shattered by a bomb a few days earlier in which more than 50 young people had been killed.

And as the pastor was looking down, he was approached by a woman. And she recognized him and she said, Pastor, my husband was down there. The cleanup squad was unable to find a trace of him.

All that was left was his cap. We were there last time you preached in the church. And before this pit today, I want to thank you for preparing him for eternity.

[6 : 10] Now friends, every church pastor has been called to carry out the privileged task of preparing the people of God to face suffering and to face death.

And every church pastor also has the privileged task of comforting and strengthening believers whilst they're going through the mill, whilst they're going through suffering and pain.

And if you're a member of Christ's church watching this tonight, then I'm sure you'll know this, but you have actually been called to the same ministry.

As brothers and sisters in Christ in the Tron Church family, we've all been called to minister to one another so that we will all be better prepared to face suffering and death.

And when suffering does strike one of the members of the church family, we have the responsibility of gathering around them and comforting them and supporting them, strengthening them to help them endure.

[7 : 08] And that is a great privilege. It's a great ministry to be called to, but it is also a privilege that can be easily abused. What do we say to a suffering believer that will help them?

And what should we not say to a suffering servant of the Lord? Well, this section of the book of Job is going to help us greatly. Last Sunday in Job 3, we heard Job pouring out the anguish and the deep pain of his heart in probably what is the darkest chapter of the whole book.

Job is feeling so alone, so full of despair, that he cries out, shocking things. Shocking things. He curses his whole existence. He wishes that someone would blot him out from the record of history. He cries out that he longs to be in Sheol, that is, in the place beyond the grave. He says, if I go there, well, I'll be better off because I'll find the rest from all of the terrible things that are happening to me now in this life.

And at the end of his lament, Job, the blameless and upright believer whose possessions are all lost, his children killed, his health is destroyed, cries out this agonized question, why?

[8 : 27] Why? Why is God doing this to me? Why is he letting me live through all this? And as Job poured out that dark lament, he is surrounded by three men.

Three men who arrived in his company back in chapter 2, verse 11. Eliphaz, the Temanites, Bildad, the Shuites, and Zophar, the Namite. And they each travel from their own country to come and comfort Job and sympathize with him.

But so far, they're not doing a very good job at all. We're told that for seven days and seven nights, they don't say a word to Job. Instead, they mourn and act like he is dead already.

And that only heightens Job's loneliness and despair. Well, now that the lament is over at the end of chapter 3, in chapter 4, we, the readers, are desperately hoping that these friends will do a better job.

In chapter 4, we want them to speak tender words that will strengthen Job. We want them to humbly come alongside Job and help him as he puzzles and prays over this why question.

[9 : 35] We want them to show Job great compassion and care and love. We want them to be wise counselors who fear the Lord and who are human, who are real and show sympathy.

But it doesn't take long for our hopes to be dashed. In a very, very old edition of the Bible, there is a wee introduction to the book of Job and it says this.

Let me read it to you. In this history is set before our eyes the example of singular patience. For this holy man, Job, was not only extremely afflicted in outward things and in his body, but also in his mind and conscience by the sharp temptations of his wife and chief friends, which by their vehement words and subtle disputations brought him almost to despair.

These friends came to him under the pretense of consolation and yet they tormented him more than all his affliction. notwithstanding, he did constantly resist them and at length had good success. And friends, that is what really happens in this big, massive chunk of the book from chapter 4 to chapter 27 where we read through really three cycles of intense and heated dialogue between Job and his friends.

[11:01] This goes back and forth between them. And through it all, Job is not comforted at all. He's tormented and Job finds that he has to defend himself, defend himself all the time.

And as you read through the cycles, it is clear that there's someone who's actually lurking behind these friends, the Satan, Job's accuser, the one who's desperately trying to make Job curse God and show himself to be an unbeliever, an enemy who doesn't want the Lord to receive glory through Job's confession.

You see, the Satan's attack on Job, it doesn't end in chapter 2, but he's still at work and he's now subtly at work in chapters 4 to 27 and his weapon of choice against Job are the words of his friends, their false teaching.

Now obviously, we don't have time to look at every detail from chapter 4 to 27 this evening, but I hope that after tonight, you might feel inspired and encouraged to go through and read that section for yourself patiently in the quiet, taking your time, working hard to get into the detail more and more.

What I thought would be helpful for us to do this evening is to spend time becoming familiar with Job's three friends because when we look at them and their woeful pastoral theology, we will learn what we should avoid doing if and when we have to support and counsel a brother or sister in the church who is suffering.

[12:35] And God willing, maybe later on in the year, we shall come back to this section of the book 4 to 27 and we will look at the way in which Job responds to his friends and more importantly, we'll look at the way in which Job wrestles with God throughout this section for he does it again and again and again basically every time he opens his mouth.

Well, we're going to pause there and the musicians are going to play for us a version of Psalm 62 which has verses of lament in there and we are going to follow along at home in the quiet.

Do look at the words on the screens, ponder them in your hearts for God alone my soul must wait in silence. ponder them ponder them Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[15:25] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[17:49] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. the world would be unfair and that cannot be so.

So Job, you're just going to have to face it. You are guilty of great sin. For Job, you are perishing.

Or in chapter 5, verse 17 to 26, Eliphaz says, I'm paraphrasing here, Look Job, I'll tell you why you're suffering.

You're suffering because God is disciplining you. That's it. That must be it. You've sinned and because God loves you, he's teaching you a valuable lesson. So learn that lesson, Job, and be thankful for what's happening to you.

[19:01] And in chapter 8, the chapter that we read earlier, I think, I've chosen this chapter by the way, because in this chapter I think you see the friend's system of theology in its most simplest form.

But Bildad, he says things which actually make it clear that he believes the same thing as Eliphaz. And just imagine saying this to a man who's just buried his seven children.

Look at verse 3. He says, Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right? Job, if your children have sinned against him, he's delivered them into the hand of their transgression.

See what he says? Bildad says, Job, God is sovereign. He always does what is right and just.

Therefore, when your children died, it must have been because they were wicked sinners. That's a great word of comfort, isn't it?

And Bildad goes on to offer Job what he considers to be hope. In verses 5 to 7, he says, Job, your kids are dead because of their sin.

[20 : 11] But you know, it's not too late for you. You're still alive, so there must still be a chance for you. There must still be a bit of hope for you. Yes, you must have done something to deserve all this.

There must be some terrible sin that you're hiding. Job, repent of that now. And if you do that, then you will be restored by the Lord. You will be restored. And in chapter 11, Zophar, which in my opinion, Zophar is my least favorite friend.

He seems to be the harshest and the angriest friend. In chapter 11, he says, Oh, Job, you should count yourself blessed. Yes, you've lost your possessions, your servants, your children, your health. But really, you should count yourself lucky that God hasn't punished you in the way that you deserve to be punished, you wicked man. Don't be stupid, Job, is what Zophar says.

Repent. Now, friends, if you read the three speech cycles later on, you will see that these friends sing the same thing over and over and over.

[21 : 20] And they become more and more fierce, more and more intense as they speak. And as we read of poor Job hearing all of us, it breaks our hearts because we, the reader, know the truth.

We know the truth because back in chapters 1 and 2, Job has been repeatedly called a blameless and upright man, a man who fears the Lord and turns away from evil.

Two times, that verdict actually comes from the mouth of the Lord himself. In other words, we know that Job is not wicked. He's not lived the life of hypocrisy. He's a genuine believer who's lived a consistent life of repentance and faith.

He's not sinless. He doesn't claim to be sinless anywhere in this book, but he is blameless. He is not being punished or disciplined at all.

We know that he's been blasted by Satan, not because his relationship with the Lord is dodgy. But the opposite is the case. He's being blasted by Satan because he has a real relationship with the Lord as God.

[22 : 25] And that is what Job says in his replies again and again to his friends. I've done nothing to deserve this. I'm blameless. I'm a man of integrity. Again and again, his friends never even stop to consider that Job might be right.

And so they make a big mistake. Job does not need to repent of any specific sin that has led to this suffering. To say that to him and to say that to a believer in the same position to him is to add cruel burden onto their grief.

And yet the comforters say that for nine chapters again and again. So let us completely throw out those nine chapters and ignore all the friends completely.

But is that something that we can do? Is that something that we can do? Can we simply dismiss everything that is in the friends theological system?

Well, rather frustratingly for someone like me who likes things to be clear black and white the answer is no. Because as is usually the case with false teaching you find that there are bits of truth mixed in with bits that are false in this false teaching.

[23 : 42] and this is why it is so dangerous. Let's just think about the four things that they believe in their system again. God is sovereign. Is that true?

Yes. God is just. Is that true? Yes. God will punish the wicked and bless the righteous. Is that true?

Yes. God will discipline his spiritual children. Proverbs 3 and Hebrews 12 say yes.

Yes. When people suffer does that always mean that they're being punished or disciplined? No.

There's the error.

Was that the case with Job? No. You see friends these friends of Job are a mix of orthodoxy but actually at the same time they're deeply flawed and dangerous and wrong.

they wrongly apply truths to Job's scenario and this is a major lesson for us to learn I think. Sometimes when we counsel others it doesn't necessarily have to be when they're suffering but especially when they're suffering we could come along and say something to them that might be true that might sound be sound and orthodox and yet it can be actually so wrong and unhelpful because we've wrongly applied those truths to the situation.

[25 : 00] or we might have completely have misread the situation that someone is going through when they suffer and we say the wrong thing. When we counsel folks when we read the word of God with them we must be careful not to crush people by misapplying God's word.

We must take our time be patient don't be quick to speak. That is actually why we are doing why we have Bible teaching like this right now this is why we're doing what we're doing now is it not?

One of the reasons anyway is that we are letting God's word shape and mould our understanding of why we suffer and why God allows suffering to sweep over our lives so that we are better prepared to face it ourselves and also to help others when they're going through it.

And it might well be that over the next few months if lockdown carries on one of the things you want to do is make it a project to get to know what the Bible teaches about suffering better and better and better.

And pray that God will help us to grow in wisdom and care so that we don't mishandle his precious word of truth. Well here's our second question this evening.

[26 : 14] How do these friends speak to Job? In other words what is their tone? What is their tone? Well I think the friends speak to Job in a deeply arrogant way.

they are very sure that they are right and as a result they utterly dismiss anything that Job says in his defence and they do it in a very harsh way and a demeaning way.

For example look at chapter 8 verse 2. Bildad says this in response to Job's speech from chapter 6 to 7 and Bildad says this oh Job how long will you say these things and the words of your mouth be a great wind?

In other words he says oh Job just shut up. What is coming out of you is just a load of hot air. You're a windbag Job you're a windbag. Now the reason one of the reasons the friends have such confidence is because their beliefs have been passed down to them from their forefathers from the great traditions that they've come from.

That's what these men that's where they look to for the trustworthy answers to all of their questions. Tradition and that's especially true of Bildad. Just look at verse 8 to 10. He says for inquire please of bygone ages look back to the traditions and consider what the fathers searched out.

[27 : 36] For we are but of yesterday and know nothing for our days on earth are a shadow. Will they not teach you and tell you and utter words out of their understanding? Now tradition can be a very very good thing of course but not if you treat it as an infallible source of truth that holds the key to all of life's perplexing moments.

That's what Bildad seems to do. He's the type of man that you sometimes bump into in church who boasts about the great spiritual upbringing he's received. He's always ready to give you words of advice from the past.

Can be helpful. You'll sometimes be very unhelpful. He and the other friends are so sure of their correctness in theology and in their doctrine they're not willing to take any correction at all.

I take it they're the type of men today that you find who love to read systematic theology textbooks. Again that's fine that's a good thing to do but not if it gives you a sense of being completely without error.

They never entertain the possibility that they are wrong and don't have all the answers. And friends if we want to be good comforters then we surely must ditch that attitude.

[28 : 59] We must come alongside suffering people with humble hearts lowly hearts gentle hearts that's what the Lord Jesus was like wasn't it? Gentle and lowly and with an attitude that says I don't have all the answers.

I don't know precisely what you're suffering but I'm here to help you puzzle through the pain that you're going through. I'm here to help you as you wrestle with the Lord. I'm here to give you space. I'm here to talk to you if you want.

But above all I'm here to show you that I love you. And boy oh boy Job's friends never do that I think to him. I don't think they ever show Job that they truly love him.

If you read back in chapter 4 to 5 you will see that initially Eliphaz shows a little bit of sympathy for Job but it quickly disappears.

And the way that he and the others speak to Job it reveals that these friends they don't understand the extent of his pain. They're not willing to try and see things from his perspective.

[30 : 03] In fact they attach more to their theories. So they are more attached to their theories than to Job their friend. In other words it does not look as though these friends actually have any compassion.

And what they want to do when they come to see Job I think is they just want to show off their theological knowledge. They're quick to speak, slow to listen. Their speech is lacking in any care and sensitivity.

As one commentator put it. They give Job loads of sound texts but no sympathetic tears. And again this is something that can happen so easily in the church today.

Two Sundays ago you might not have been here but I shared a true story that I once heard from a very trustworthy friend about that recently retired couple who were driving down the motorway to go to a family party.

Let me just remind you of that. They were genuine believers. They had loved Christ for years. They were pillars of the local church family. They loved Jesus. And as they made their way down the motorway the husband all of a sudden became unwell.

[31 : 18] Pretty soon he was unconscious. And the wife who kept herself really fit she managed to lean over to the steering wheel and put her leg over and managed to pull the car into the hard shoulder. And the car skidded to a halt in the hard shoulder.

Just in time for her to look at her husband take his last breath. He'd had a heart attack. Well I wasn't there but I was told that a few days later this grieving lady bravely made it along to be with God's people in the church on Sunday.

And after the service she was sitting off to the side just by herself with a friend weeping and grieving with great dignity. wasn't hiding it. She was letting it out before the Lord and amongst his people at which point someone from the congregation approached the weeping widow and carelessly said to her and again this is what I'm told happened.

She said something like this. Come come come now. There's no need to cry. Remember Romans 5. We should rejoice in our suffering. And Romans 8. He works all things together for the good of those who love him.

Come on now. Come on. Stop crying. Now friends Romans 5 and Romans 8 are absolutely true. And those passages do help suffering Christians to endure suffering and hardship.

[32 : 44] And there is a time to sit down with people who are suffering and go over those verses in the correct way. But to go up to that weeping widow at that very moment in time and to speak to her just days after her husband died whilst his death was still raw and painful that is a terrible thing to do.

Please do not ever say anything like that to a suffering believer who's in the same situation. The last thing that poor widow needed was to have those Bible verses shoved upon her and to be rebuked for lamenting before the Lord.

That is woeful pastoral care. That's the stuff of Job's friends. And yes maybe the person who spoke to her that day was trying to be a genuine comforter but their words lack compassion sympathy and love.

It would have been better if that comforter had forgotten Romans 5 and Romans 8 and instead went to Romans 12 verse 15 where Paul says weep with those who weep.

That would have been so much better and appropriate and helpful. So friends let's learn from Job's comforters and their tone.

[34 : 04] Here's the final question to ask of these friends tonight and it's this. What do they not believe? What do they not believe? What is missing from their system of theology?

And I believe that this is really at the heart of why these friends get Job so wrong. And it's not what they believe that is the main problem. That is a problem. But it's what they don't believe that makes them so wrong.

And again I said this the other week. Please let me just recommend to you the work on Job by Christopher Ash who's written two excellent books on Job. They're up there with Bob Files two excellent books on Job and I thoroughly recommend them.

And I must say that I'm indebted to Christopher Ash as we've been going through these series. Very much so. I'd recommend his writings. But Christopher Ash says that there are three vital truths that the friends don't believe.

Let me just give you them quickly. We'll rattle through them before we close. The first vital truth they don't believe is that there is a Satan.

[35 : 07] There is no Satan in their belief system. We know from chapters one and two that Satan is real and an influential being.

We know that the whole tragedy of Job has its origin in the heavenly conversation between the Lord and the Satan. But the comforters don't seem to have any place in their thinking for Satan or the fact that they are being swept up in a supernatural battle that is bigger than any of us could ever imagine.

There are hints throughout the book that Job believes that though. Remember chapter three that we looked at last week? He speaks about rising up Leviathan. That was a term used for a creature who was like Satan, a spiritual enemy of the creator God.

Job talks about him here and we'll see later on in the book as well. But Job's friends, they think that they live in a world where evil is purely a human phenomenon.

They believe evil is purely a human phenomenon and how wrong they are. The second vital truth that they don't believe in is the fact that God's judging of the wicked and God's blessing of the righteous are not always immediate.

[36 : 28] Christopher Ash puts it like this, there is no waiting in the friends belief system. For them, judgment must be carried out now by God, immediately, here and now, in the present.

There's no waiting. The wicked are punished now and the riches are blessed now and that's how it was. Their system is so neat and tidy, that's how it works. The friends believe that you reap what you sow but they forget that after sowing seed, you've got to wait a long time before you reap.

And throughout the Bible we're told that God will not always carry out his acts of judgment immediately upon the wicked. In fact, the Bible seems to again and again say that ultimately his act of judgment on the wicked will not happen in the here and now.

His ultimate judgment will come at the end of history. And the Lord will carry out his judgment ultimately on the last day. But now in the present, the wicked often do prosper.

We're going to have a look, hopefully God willing, later on where Job says that. He wrestles with that. He looks around at the world and he says, look at the world, my friends. Look, how can you believe this system that you believe?

[37 : 43] Because there's so many wicked people out there who do not love the Lord, who do not fear him, who prosper. Can you not see this, my friends? Is your system so flawed, so oversimplified?

There's no waiting. And that brings me to the third vital truth that is missing from their beliefs and it is this. There is no cross in their system.

Listen to Christopher Ash on this point. He says, in the context of the whole Bible, perhaps the deepest error and omission of the friends is this. They have no place for innocent suffering.

That is sometimes referred to as redemptive suffering, cross-shaped suffering. They think that if the righteous were ever to suffer or perish, it would be a blot on the moral landscape.

As Eliphaz says, who that was innocent ever perished? Well, the Bible places against that question a large eternal cross, where the innocent one perished in the place of the guilty so that we might not finally perish.

[38 : 53] In a profound sense, the sufferings that Job foreshadows will be the price paid by grace to unlock the gate of heaven.

But with their tiny, impersonal theological code, Job's friends miss the heart of the universe. And so, friends, if we want to be helpful comforters to each other, we need to look at these three vital truths, and we need to ask ourselves whether they are missing from our belief systems.

For if they are missing, these truths in our belief systems, then we will start to see the universe as Job's friends saw the universe. And therefore, we will also start to treat those who are suffering in the same way that they did.

And we want to shun that as quick as possible. So as I close, let me conclude by encouraging you to go away now and take the time to read through Job 4 to 27 on your own.

