

Bad Counsel and Wretched Comfort

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[0 : 00] . Tonight we come to the third in our studies of the book of Job.

And if you were here a week or two ago, you may remember how we started off. We began with chapters 1 and 2 where we met Job for the first time and we traced the story of his painful sufferings.

And we noticed there how Job was both a believer, a godly man and a wise man. Not only godly but wise. And yet he suffered the loss of his property, his workforce, all ten of his ten children and then his health broke down spectacularly.

And all as a result of the permission given by God to Satan to afflict him. Then in our second study, a fortnight ago, we read chapter 3 and in chapter 3 Job gives vent to his feelings.

He gives vent to his mental agony for the first time. He wishes, he says, that he had never been born. But he has been born. So he wishes now that he might die and as quickly as possible.

[1 : 26] Now chapter 3, if you like, opens for us a window onto the inside of Job's mind. And Job's mind proves to be a place of unbearable pain.

Now when we get to chapter 4, we enter a new phase of the book. Because at chapter 4, verse 1, the dialogue begins.

The extended dialogue between Job and his three friends, who are named, back in chapter 2, verse 11, as Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shu'ite and Zophar the Naamathite.

Now have a look with me at chapter 2, verse 11. The unwary reader, looking at chapter 2, verse 11, and seeing in that verse that Job's three friends have come specifically to comfort him, may well think that chapter 4 is now going to bring Job some relief.

Ah, we might think, the US cavalry is appearing over the horizon, help is at hand, and Job is going to start feeling a little bit better, because as we always say, a trouble shared is a trouble halved.

[2 : 38] No such joy, however. In fact, if anything, things begin to get worse for Job as he discusses his predicament with his three friends. His dialogue with them begins here in chapter 4, and it doesn't end for about another 24 chapters.

And it proves to be 24 chapters of a blazing row. In fact, parts of it would be quite comical if the problem weren't so serious.

Just look, for example, at chapter 8, verse 2. Chapter 8, verse 2, where Bildad says, How long will you say these things, and the words of your mouth be a great wind?

So he's accusing Job of being a windbag. Is that a way to comfort your suffering friend? Or look at chapter 11, verse 3, where Zophar, the second friend, begins to speak, and he says to Job, Should your babble silence men?

And when you mock, shall no one shame you? In other words, you're just a mocker, Job. You can't be serious. Then look at Job's reply in chapter 12, verse 2, where he speaks with cutting sarcasm.

[3 : 53] No doubt, he says, you are the people, and wisdom will die with you. In other words, you have a monopoly on the wisdom of the world, obviously. I don't think.

Well, look on to chapter 13, verse 4, where Job says, As for you, you whitewash with lies. Worthless physicians are you all.

Oh, that you would keep silent. Then in chapter 15, verse 2, Eliphaz is speaking again, and he accuses Job of having windy knowledge, and a belly full of the east wind.

And later, Job replies in chapter 16, verse 2, You miserable comforters are you all. Will your long-winded speeches never end? So it's no exaggeration to call this a blazing row.

It's a little bit like Prime Minister's question time in the House of Commons, except that here, it's a row between friends, one of whom, Job, is in dreadful pain. So this section of the book of Job, chapters 4 through to 27, this section which records the discussion between Job and his three comforters, is not at all what we might have imagined.

[5 : 08] It isn't a simple dialogue with the poor sufferer on the one side suffering, and the kind comforters on the other side comforting. Not at all. It proves to be a fierce argument over the way in which God deals with people.

That's what it's all about, an argument over how God deals with people. The three comforters say certain things about God, which Job simply cannot accept. And Job says certain things about God and about himself, which his three friends are equally unwilling to accept.

Now the question is, who is right in this argument? Who is seeing things clearly? And who is muddying the waters? That's the \$64,000 question.

Now turn with me, if you will, to chapter 42, that's at the very end, and verse 7. The last chapter of the book of Job. Chapter 42 and verse 7.

Page 446. After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, speaking to him really as the leader or the chief man amongst the three comforters.

[6 : 26] He 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 I make no apology for looking up the answer at the back of the book at this stage, because it will help us if we know what God's verdict is on the argument before we try to tangle with the argument itself.

Now I say that because when you read what Job says, and then you read what his three friends keep saying to him, it isn't always obvious who's in the right and who's in the wrong. In fact, there are considerable sections of what the comforters say that seem to be thoroughly right, that make you reach for your red biro, and want to mark a tick in the margin beside those sections.

Now in a few minutes, I'll show you some examples of what I mean, but just for now, let's understand that God's final assessment of this blazing row is that Job is fundamentally in the right, but his three friends, although right in part, end up with skewed and mistaken conclusions about the way God deals with human beings, and therefore the three friends are in the wrong.

So what I want to do for the rest of our time this evening is to see just what it is that the comforters are saying about God and to try to understand why and how they're wrong about him.

[7 : 55] I've got three main headings, and I'll tell you what they are now so that you'll have an idea of where we're going to. The three headings all concern the comforters and their view of God.

First, their system of understanding God is skewed by half-truths. Second, their attitude towards Job lacks honesty and love.

And third, their vision of reality is marred by blind spots. So in that order. First, their system of understanding God is skewed by half-truths.

Now let me describe their system under four points, four simple points. Point one, God is absolutely in control. Now is that right or wrong?

It's right, isn't it? In fact, it's one of the things we noticed back in chapter one, that God's sovereignty is never compromised. That's the first plank in their edifice, if you like.

[8 : 59] Now point two, God is absolutely just and fair. Now is that right? It is. The whole Bible testifies to God's perfect justice.

But it's the third and fourth points which should begin to raise the question marks in our minds. Point three is this, God always, always punishes wickedness and rewards righteousness and he does so pretty soon and certainly in this life.

And then point four, and therefore, if I suffer, I must have sinned and I'm being punished justly for my sin. Now the three friends are quite right in saying that God is sovereign and that he's just.

But they are wrong in concluding that God always punishes wickedness and rewards righteousness in this life. And also they're wrong in concluding that a person's suffering proves that he or she has sinned and is being justly punished.

The three comforters, if you like, are starting with good theology but they're drawing false conclusions from it. Now let's look at some examples of this.

[10 : 22] Back to chapter four again where we started. Verse seven. Eliphaz says, Remember, Who that was innocent ever perished?

Where were the upright cut off? Job, he's saying, God is absolutely fair and always fair. The moral system of the universe would break down if innocent people were to perish or if upright people were to be destroyed.

That simply cannot happen because we live in a morally watertight universe. Implication, your suffering, Job, proves that you are a serious sinner.

A bad one. Well, let's look on to chapter five and verse 17. Eliphaz is still speaking. Behold, he says, Blessed is the one whom God reproves.

Therefore, therefore, despise not the discipline of the Almighty. In other words, Job, this suffering is to be understood as God's loving discipline of you because of your sin.

[11 : 24] You have sinned. Obviously sinned to a serious degree. And God is responding by sending this severe blessing of painful discipline. Now for us, who have the whole Bible open in front of us, so to speak, chapter five, verse 17 raises a difficult question because if you've read your Bible a fair bit, you'll know that almost exactly the same thought is expressed in Proverbs chapter three, verses 11 and 12, which in turn is quoted with approval in Hebrews chapter 12.

So the Bible does teach that God disciplines his children with loving and corrective and training discipline when they go astray. The problem with Eliphaz is that in his mental filing cabinet he has no file for innocent suffering.

He cannot conceive of a category called innocent suffering. So if he sees his friend Job suffering, it must mean that the friend is guilty. To Eliphaz, it's obvious.

It's watertight. But God says that that view is wrong. Bildad expresses a similar viewpoint if you look onto chapter eight, verse four.

Bildad says, if your children have sinned against him, that is against the Lord, he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression.

[12 : 57] In other words, their sudden and catastrophic death, Job, your children's death, was obviously the immediate consequence of their sin. And so for chapter after chapter, this argument goes backwards and forwards.

Job protesting that he's innocent, his friends responding that he cannot be innocent because if he were, he wouldn't be suffering. And as the thing develops, everyone's blood pressure begins to rise by several notches.

And eventually, Eliphaz, in his rising frustration with Job, that Job won't accept his point of view, says, turn with me to chapter 22, verse five, Eliphaz says to Job, is not your evil abundant?

There is no end to your iniquities. And in the next few verses, he really goes to town with Job. He accuses Job there in chapter 22 of being a hard-hearted, rich man who has effectively robbed his neighbours and made life a misery for poor people.

But we know that Eliphaz is wrong in all this because God himself has told us back in chapter 1, verse 8, that Job is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.

[14 : 11] In fact, throughout this dialogue between Job and his three friends, we need to remember that God exonerates and justifies Job both in chapter 1 and in chapter 42 at the top and the tail of the whole book.

And he also tells us in chapter 42 that the argument of the comforters is untrue. Now, friends, let's try and earth this in our own experience.

One reason why it's so valuable to have the arguments of Job's comforters in front of us and to know God's verdict on their arguments is that those arguments may prove to be alive and well in our own hearts and minds.

And if they are, we need to kick them out. They can appear in two equal and opposite versions. Version number 1 says, a Christian looks at his or her life and says, I'm so blessed.

I must have done something quite good to deserve all this blessing. Look at me. Happy marriage, nice home, good health, lovely children, money in the bank. Clearly, God is rewarding me for living such a good life here on earth.

[15 : 20] Or there is version number 2, which I guess is rather more common, where a person says, I'm suffering terribly. I must have done something awful to deserve this.

Now, you've heard that, haven't you, from suffering friends. I think of a conversation I had some years ago with a Christian woman in our congregation down in Burton-on-Trent. This particular woman, aged about 58, had within 12 months lost both her husband and her son, who was only in his 30s, to different forms of cancer.

And her own health was seriously breaking down. She was feeling thoroughly defeated by life, a Christian-believing woman. And she said, what have I done to deserve this? It seemed obvious logic to her that her suffering must have been occasioned by her sin.

Now, that's exactly what Job's comforters were saying. And God said, they were wrong. However, the picture is not a simple one, because there are times when human sin does lead directly to suffering for the sinner.

We find this in the Bible. So, for example, when King David sins against the Lord by committing that horrible package of murder and adultery together, God tells him that there will be painful consequences.

[16 : 42] And there are. He's forgiven by the Lord. He's forgiven. He confesses his sin and is forgiven. But the consequences go on for generations. And the happiness of his family life is seriously damaged for decades.

It can be exactly the same for us. If I were to commit adultery, it would lead to dreadful suffering for me and for a number of other people, probably for years.

Let's all be warned by that. That's the truth, isn't it? Or another possibility. If somebody were to hurt me badly and I were then to refuse to forgive him and I were to nurse resentment and hatred against that man and become hard and bitter, then the damage to my character would be my fault because I should have forgiven him.

The Bible teaches me to forgive. I've sinned in not forgiving and I reap the consequences of my sin as I become damaged and bitter and hardened and possibly physically unwell as well.

So what we have to say is this, that our sin can lead directly to our suffering. But that was not the case with Job. The cornerstone of the book of Job is that he suffered and yet was innocent.

[18 : 00] And we know that because God tells us that fact. And God tells us that the comforters were wrong because they insisted that Job's suffering resulted from his sin and because they would not entertain the possibility that an innocent man might suffer.

So there's the first thing. Their system of understanding God is skewed by half-truths. Then second, their attitude towards Job lacks honesty and love.

Now we'll look at this lack of honesty and love in just a moment but let's first notice their whole attitude towards Job and let's ask if it's the appropriate attitude for people who are trying to comfort a man in great pain.

Look for example at chapter 5 verse 27 which is the last verse in Eliphaz's opening speech 5.27. Eliphaz says, Behold, this we have searched out it is true.

Hear and know it for your good. Well, who's up on the moral high ground here? It's so cocky isn't it and self-confident. It doesn't seem to allow any room for debate or manoeuvre.

[19 : 15] There's only one way of looking at this problem, Job. You're wrong and we're right so stick that in your pipe and smoke it. But poor Job can only reply there in the next verse.

Oh that my vexation were weighed and all my calamity laid in the balances. Or for another example of their attitude look on to chapter 15 verses 9 and 10 where Eliphaz is speaking again.

Chapter 15 verse 9 Eliphaz says, What do you know that we do not know? What do you understand that is not clear to us? Both the grey-haired and the aged are among us older than your father.

Now we've often heard that kind of conversation haven't we? An older person looks rather pityingly at a much younger person and says something like this, I was working 90 hours a week when you were still in short pants my lad.

People of my generation we know. You don't. It's the old trick of using seniority to apply pressure. If argument fails put down your opponent by reminding him of how much younger he is than you.

[20 : 35] So here is Job confronted by his three friends. He is innocent. He is suffering terribly. But because the friends cannot cope with the possibility of innocent suffering they swell up like bullfrogs and they have this overbearing confidence.

But they lack honesty. They've worked out this watertight theory that suffering must result from sin and they're sticking to it come what may.

They're not prepared for evidence to get in the way of a good theory. If they'd looked honestly at Job's situation they might have perceived that he was truly innocent as well as painfully suffering.

But they weren't prepared for that kind of honesty and consequently they ended up believing something which was not true about God. But also they lack love.

Job is crying out to them in great agony but it's as though they simply can't hear what he's saying. There's a classic example in chapters 7 and 8.

[21 : 38] In chapter 7 Job is pouring his heart out. You see he speaks in verse 3 of months of emptiness and nights of misery are apportioned to me.

In verse 11 he speaks of the anguish of his spirit and the bitterness of his soul. In verse 15 he says I would choose strangling and death rather than my bones.

In other words rather than staying alive in this body. I'd rather be put to death in a horrible manner. And in verse 21 he ends the chapter with thoughts of his imminent death. For now I shall lie in the earth you will seek me but I shall not be.

And all Bildad can say after this dreadful pouring out of heartbreak is How long will you say these things and the words of your mouth be a great wind?

Now there isn't much love there is there? These three men are simply not prepared to engage with Job in his suffering. It has been said that we can only really understand what we love.

[22 : 47] And that's certainly true of human relationships. These friends don't understand Job because they don't love him. Now thirdly their vision of reality is marred by blind spots.

These three friends I don't think it's exaggerating to say that they're really false teachers because their system of doctrine is in the end condemned by God.

And false teaching is often identified as much by what it leaves out as by what it includes. So let's notice three omissions in the comforter's system.

First they have no room for Satan. It's interesting that they never once mention Satan in all their long speeches. Now we know that he's responsible for Job's sufferings because we've been able to read the first two chapters of the book and Job's three friends of course have not.

But one of the purposes of the book of Job is to show us that human suffering can be the result of Satan's malignant activity. God is Satan's final conqueror and Satan can do nothing outside God's permission but Job's suffering is caused by Satan.

[24 : 07] But Job's three friends have simply no place in their thinking for Satan or for the spiritual forces of evil. To Job's comforters evil is a purely human phenomenon.

Now in the New Testament both the Lord Jesus and Paul the Apostle teach us a great deal about Satan's hostile activities. So if we have no place in our thinking for Satan we shall be blind to an important component in human suffering.

Secondly, they have no room for a judgment in the distant future. For them everything has to happen here and now. So you sin, you get punished now.

Or you're obedient and you get blessed now. Of course it does happen that way sometimes. If I were to go home tonight after the service and drink half a bottle of whiskey then get into my car and drive off at high speed and seriously injure myself of course my sin and folly would be receiving immediate payback.

But the Bible is constantly training us to see that the final judgment comes beyond the end of this world. So for example Jesus in Matthew chapter 13 tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds.

[25 : 32] The wheat and the weeds grow up together in the field he says and will not be separated until the harvest which is the final judgment. Then the wicked will be punished and the righteous saved.

But not until then. You could describe the comforter's theology as a slot machine theology. You know these slot machines in the university foyers or wherever the airport lounges you put in your money and you get your can of coke or whatever.

Think of their theology as a slot machine theology. You pop in godliness and out pops a can of blessing. Pop in some disobedience, out comes a can of poison.

Tit for tat to be experienced here and now in this life. Of course there are some churches which have embraced a form of this in what is known as the prosperity gospel.

The idea being that if you are obedient to God you will be blessed with great material prosperity here and now. Put in your coin of obedience and out pops prosperity. You will prosper in your work, you will prosper in your bank account, especially your bank account, you will prosper in your family life and in every material way.

[26 : 44] But in the real world and in the real church sometimes godly people prosper like that but quite often godly people suffer.

slot machine theology is simply not true as an inflexible rule. The great encouragement of the Bible and particularly to Christians who have long term sufferings is that the full blessings of the gospel will be given to us after the day of judgment.

But Job's friends had no such long term perspective. Then third and last and I'm saying something I've said before but I want to express it in terms of the whole story of the Bible now.

Job's friends have no place for innocent suffering. Just turn with me back to a verse that we looked at a bit earlier, chapter 4 and verse 7.

I want us to end with this one tonight, chapter 4 verse 7 where Eliphaz says, remember who that was innocent, ever perished?

[27 : 58] I think of that in terms of the whole Bible. The answer is Jesus. Job's innocent sufferings foreshadow the innocent sufferings that eventually opened up the gateway of heaven for us.

If we're like Job's friends friends and we shut our minds to the possibility of innocent suffering, we may end up missing the greatest truth in the universe that Jesus through his innocent suffering has brought about our forgiveness and our reconciliation to God if we will but gladly accept it.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. dear God, our Father, we want to thank you again for the strong theology that the book of Job teaches us and for the way in which it is able to help us to cope with sufferings in others and indeed with long-term sufferings in our own lives as Christians.

So we thank you for Job and his example and all that he went through and even more, dear Father, we thank you as we think of Jesus, the greatest of the innocent sufferers whose suffering has brought new life and forgiveness and reconciliation and indeed membership of the new creation for all who turn to him in trust.

So we pray tonight, dear Father, for those here in this congregation tonight who are struggling with real suffering. We know there must be some, perhaps many. Our prayer is that they will find real comfort, not the comfort of Job's comforters, but the comfort of the gospel.

[30 : 10] And we pray that you'll give to all of us a greater and deeper joy as we think of what you have done and of what has been opened up to us and promised to us for the long-term future through our being united with Christ.

And these things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.