



BILDAD'S SPEECH-SMOKE IMPLIES FIRE

Text: Job 8

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In a prior congregation that I served in, I heard of a conversation between two middle aged women. One was praising God for how richly he had blessed her. She was a faithful churchgoer who was doing well financially. But her fellow churchgoer felt irate at the remarks of her friend. Or was it that she was upset with God? You see the second woman was also a faithful churchgoer. But she was dirt poor, really struggling financially. Why was God not blessing her, she wanted to know? Was there something wrong with her? Was God punishing her for not being good enough? We get ourselves into all sorts of difficulties when we settle for a simplistic understanding of theology and are then quite black and white about it. Is it really the case that the well-to-do have been blessed by God and the down-and-outs have not been blessed? Is it the case that there is a cause and effect? If you are righteous God blesses you and if you are bad he curses you? Let's put this question on a world scale. Think of the millions around the world who have little in the way of food, shelter, even parents and proper carers. How do we view this big gap between the have's and the have nots? In the western cultures, we are incredibly wealthy. Does it mean God has blessed us? And is that because we are 'good'? In the two thirds world, they are incredibly poor. Is that because God has seen fit not to bless them, because they are not good? Or do we need to consider that many of us in the west need to reassess our lifestyles, because how we live is also a sign of greed, of wastage and abuse of economic power? It's not a simple black and white case, is it? There is great complexity.

Now how does all this fit into Bildad's speech here in chapter 8 of Job? Bildad is the second of Job's three friends who had been listening to Job as he sat on the ash heap. We see that Bildad is not as gentle and refined as the first friend, Eliphaz. Bildad is more of a blunt traditionalist. He is an arch conservative who feels the forefathers had it all worked out. And he is very black and white. If Eliphaz highlighted God's holiness, Bildad pushes God as a God of justice. And God never perverts the cause of justice. If a person is righteous he is blessed. If a person is wicked he is punished. That's it. There is no other response possible. It's black and white. It's very simple and clear! So, with that mindset it's not hard to see that Bildad has little time for what he regards as Job's carrying on. Job insists that he is innocent of any wrong. So, he wants to know why God has dealt with him so harshly. All his property was taken or destroyed. His ten children were killed. And Job himself is very sick. Job has cursed the day of his birth. He has kept on crying out for God to take his life. He wants out. He wants to die. Job had made it clear that he was not impressed with what Eliphaz had to say. And that he regarded his friends as being next to useless. Job had seriously vented his anger at them and even at God.

Now Bildad speaks up and the first thing he says in effect is: 'Shut up Job, you bag of wind!' Note verse 2: "*How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind.*" There is no attempt to listen to Job. No attempt to hear what it is Job is actually struggling with. Bildad has his own view and he is going to tell Job. His main thesis is found in verse 3 "*Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?*" Bildad cannot conceive of God not following the simple rules of justice. You do wrong you get punished. You do right you get blessing. Is there suffering in your life? Then you must have done wrong. Where there is smoke there must be fire. No ifs or buts. As far as Bildad is concerned it cannot be otherwise. God is unwavering in his justice. There is an inflexible righteousness and just power with God. Bildad is described by the commentators as the 'traditionalist par excellence'. He goes by the book. His source of information is not experience like Eliphaz. For Bildad it is his scholarship. Bildad does not really have a personal relationship with God. He has a scholarly learning about God. His is a hoarding of the knowledge of the past. Bildad has no concept that a new experience may require a rethinking of the way things were dealt with in the past. He cannot imagine that the formulas of previous generations may no longer be adequate. For example, Job's experience is that he is a righteous man. Even God said so in chapter one. But still Job suffered enormously. For Bildad this is simply not possible. His

understanding is too simplistic, too black and white. This shade of grey doesn't exist, it can't exist. There is a sense in which Job's experience threatens Bildad's whole world view. If Job is actually innocent, and God is behind his suffering, or has allowed it, then Bildad's entire system of thinking collapses. He must put Job in his place or Bildad is lost.

So, we see how strong Bildad is towards Job when he says in verse 4 "*When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin*". Bildad is giving an example of what he believes is God's justice. But what a callous thing to do! Where is the grace towards Job who is grieving so deeply over the loss of all his children? Bildad is saying they must have deserved to die, because God is always just. He punishes the wicked. Bildad can't stand what he perceives as Job's arrogance. Bildad can't cope with Job saying he is innocent, and questioning why is God so cruel to him. Bildad makes it clear Job's children died because they were wicked. And if Job is at all good, then there is still a chance God will rouse himself on Job's behalf. Not as a matter of grace. Not as a matter of forgiveness as Job asked for in chapter 7. But as a matter of good works. Job needs to be doing good, showing he is pure and righteous. God will again bless what Job does right. That fits Bildad's formula: God blesses the righteous but punishes the wicked. (:6) "*...if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf ...*" Bildad says to Job in verse 7, in effect, 'Stop your complaining and death wish! Get yourself righteous and God will bless you even more. Change your attitude man! Cut out this nonsense of complaining against God and being angry with him'.

Bildad says he gets his wisdom from tradition. He appeals to the tradition of the elders. Note verse 8ff: "*Ask the former generations and find out what their fathers learned, for we were born only yesterday and know nothing, our days on earth are but a shadow.*" In a sense Bildad says: 'You are young. What do you know about life? You haven't been around that long. You have some experience, some tragedy and you think you can demand answers of God. Listen to the wisdom of your forebears. Remember how it has always been. You are not old enough to have gained wisdom. Do you want to find peace? Then stop challenging honoured doctrine and listen to the wisdom of the past'. Bildad illustrates that wisdom with some examples from nature that picks up on some ancient proverbs. (11-17). Papyrus was an important plant to cultivate and harvest. With water, it grows tall and looks majestic. But without water it shrivels and dries up faster

than grass. It's then next to useless, no longer to be harvested. That's the fate of those who forget God. 'You go against God's ways and you perish, Job. You think you have some thing to hang on to Job, with your insistence of innocence. Others have trusted in themselves, in their wealth or their abilities. But that's like trying to hang on to a spider web when you are falling over. Fine for a spider but useless for a man! A plant can look pretty solid when its roots are spread all over the garden. But it is soon ripped out and then its place doesn't even remember it any more'. This last example is a shot at Job who said in chapter 7 that if he died God would miss him and long for him. It was Job's back handed plea for God to hear him. Bildad says: 'Yeh right. Think again Job. When you're gone no one will remember you. Not even God. It's dead and buried my friend; finished, gone and good riddance'.

So Bildad finishes his comparatively brief speech by coming back to his main thesis. God is always just. Verse 20 "*Surely God does not reject a blameless man or strengthen the hands of evil doers.*" 'So, Job that's the tradition, we have always accepted for generations. We know it's true. Take a lesson from history. People who sin perish. Those who transgress are punished. God doesn't reject the righteous, nor does he maintain evil doers; never. So, acknowledge where you have sinned. And it must have been big because you have suffered a lot. Where there is smoke there must be fire. Do the righteous thing and God will again bless you'. (:21-22) "*He will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy. Your enemies will be clothed with shame, and the tents of the wicked will be no more.*" There is a certain irony here. Bildad is right in one way. In the end Job is richly blessed. But not by the manner Bildad is advocating. What God does with Job will completely demolish Bildad's approach!

What shall we say of Bildad? He is a prisoner of tradition. Bildad refuses to allow any experience to temper his understanding. For him all experience must be seen in the light of accepted tradition. There can be no exceptions. For exceptions can rattle his whole orthodoxy. The doctrine of God's justice is the very cornerstone of his theology. Bildad's error lies in building his entire theology on the simple premise of (double) retribution: do wrong you are punished, do right and you are blessed. The whole point of the book of Job, especially as we have seen in chapters 1 & 2 is that God's ways are not tied to this simplistic approach. God himself held Job up as a wonderful example of a righteous servant. Yet he still allowed Satan to destroy Job's life. Bildad's cold, analytical, insensitive application of the justice of God has not allowed for the possibility

we see in this book of Job, that the innocent may suffer. Bildad's idea of blessing is far too simplistic, as it is with many today. God's blessing is often seen far too materialistically. If we have lots of possessions, with a big bank balance then we must be 'blessed'. And if we are poor and down and out we have not been blessed. Bildad cannot even begin to conceive that there may be blessing in suffering. He cannot see that there can be a strong spiritual growth, maturity, deep blessings, in loss and suffering. As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:3-5 *"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."* Bildad cannot conceive that Job could be suffering for the sake of others. How we handle suffering and the example we set can help others who find themselves in deep trouble. The Apostle Peter wrote (1 Peter 2:21) *"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his footsteps"*. How we as Christians deal with suffering provides a revealing of Jesus and grace. Even the doctrine of the cross of Christ would be anathema to Bildad. For a righteous man to suffer in the place of others would, for Bildad, make God unrighteous. Bildad's approach would end up denying God's way of salvation. Bildad's assertion in verse 20 *"God will not reject a blameless man..."* makes him the precursor of the Pharisees who mocked Jesus with the same logic: *"He trusts in God, let God deliver him, if he wants him."* (Matthew 27:43). Jesus was completely innocent when he suffered on the cross. It was a gross injustice. But through it God brought forgiveness and hope. Each of us has our suffering. But when we know about God's rejection of Jesus for our sake, our suffering can never again be as dark as Job's.

One of the most disturbing things about Bildad is his refusal to listen, to really heed what Job was saying. Job would completely agree with Bildad that God is just. He would accept that God looks for the righteous and blesses them. That had been his experience in the beginning. But that was not his experience later. He was innocent yet still he suffered. Job wanted to know why? That was his struggle. Why do the innocent suffer? But Bildad just didn't listen. He simply assumed his theology and wanted to espouse it. His counsel completely missed the point because he made no attempt to understand. I am reminded of an experiment once conducted on a large group of ministers. They were timed to see how long they would listen to parishioners before giving advice. Guess how long the average time was: five minutes. That seriously saddens me. How

can anyone understand what another person is going through in their suffering in five minutes. We need to understand that the gift of listening is itself healing. We do not need to come up with an answer. Even God does not provide Job an answer in the end. Because it is beyond human understanding. It is far better to admit that then push our own ideas and agenda onto someone who is suffering. As James writes “...be quick to listen and slow to speak...” A bit of humility then becomes an act of grace.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- Is your theology too simplistic at times? Are we too dogmatic, too black & white? Are we really listening to those who suffer?
- What does it mean to be blessed by God? Is it only with material wealth? How can suffering bring spiritual growth?
- Do we need to always provide an answer to those who suffer? Is it actually possible to do?