



ELIPHAZ'S SPEECH: REPENT & ALL WILL BE FINE(?)

Text: Job 4 & 5

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I remember in my first church a conversation with an 80 year old woman. We spoke of her children. She was in tears as she remembered years earlier when her little boy had died. She had asked her minister at the time why God had taken him. The minister had replied: 'Well, it could be because you haven't been going to church twice ever Sunday'. The cruelty of that remark had stuck with her for over 50 years. I said that I had no idea why God took her little boy. We sat and cried together. The minister's remark, even if well intended, was a cruel blow implying it was her fault. It was a remark based on a cause-effect theology. If you are suffering you must have done something wrong. There was the assumption that 'Because I know theology I presume to know the mind of God'. Good theology can be applied very badly in a situation of suffering.

I say these things to gear you in to what is happening here in Job 4 & 5. Here we see that Job's friend Eliphaz responds to Job's curse and lament in chapter 3. And the way Eliphaz responds is like that of the minister with my old friend. So far, we have seen that Job was a very good man that God held up as a model servant. That's why Satan challenged God and said: 'Job only loves you because of all you give him. Take it all away and he will curse you to your face'. So, God had allowed Satan to take all Job's possessions, all his children, even his health. We saw that Job did not curse God. He remained faithful accepting God's right to give and to take. Three friends came to console him as Job sat on the ash heap. After seven days of silence, Job finally opened up. He caught us by surprise with his rage. He cursed the day he was born. He made it clear he wanted to die. Now we see him still on that ash heap. And Eliphaz, the oldest

and wisest of his three mates, feels bound to say something. What he says can be summarized like this, 'You are a good man Job. So, don't lose heart. Now we know bad stuff happens to sinners, so just confess your wrong. You are being disciplined. But bear it patiently and all will turn out alright'. In other words, 'Repent and all will be fine'. Sounds reasonable. But despite some good theology Eliphaz gets it very wrong.

(4:1-5) "Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied: If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? But who can keep from speaking? Think how you have instructed many, how you strengthened feeble hands. Your words supported those who stumbled; you have strengthened faltering knees. But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you and you are dismayed." Eliphaz, we see, feels the need to set Job straight. As far as he is concerned Job's outburst was not right. And so, he can't keep from speaking, though he is sensitive to the fact that it may upset Job. 'Now Job, don't lose your patience. But let me test some thing with you. In the past, you have been great in helping others when they were down. But now you yourself are suffering. Instead of heeding your own advice to those others, you are impatient and upset.' That tells us what Eliphaz thinks of Job's outburst. He has failed the test. But his failure can be corrected if he passes the test Eliphaz is about to put to him. *(4:6&7) "Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope? Consider now: Who being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?"* Basically, he is saying that a true believer can rely on their fear of God and innocence to avoid destruction and to live in hope. But the moment we hear Eliphaz say that we know something is wrong. We know from chapters 1 & 2 that these things mentioned here are said of Job by none less than God himself. And yet still Job has suffered dreadfully. Job is a man loyal to God and upright. But he is terribly disturbed and impatient. Of course, Eliphaz doesn't know what was decided in heaven between God and Satan. He doesn't know that Job suffers precisely because he is a man of integrity who deeply fears God. That's why he was chosen to be tested. It was to show his faithfulness in suffering and bring praise to God. Eliphaz may be thinking he is helping his friend, but what he says is so cruel. The innocent and upright don't suffer he claims. But Job is innocent and suffering. Too often when Christians want to say things to comfort a person suffering they end up saying well intended words that hurt deeply because they just don't know the facts. They don't know the mind of God. And they say unhelpful things because they misconstrue good theology.

Look at what Eliphaz says next. In verse 8 he says: *"As I have observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it."* In other words: *"What you sow you reap"*. This is the position on which Eliphaz builds his whole argument. Behind this theological principle is a view of the world as an ordered moral universe. God is in charge. He is a just and good God. Good will be rewarded. Evil will be punished. So far Eliphaz is right. Jesus himself said *"With the measure you use, it will be measured to you"* (Mark 6:24) And Paul said the same *"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows."* (Gal 6:7) We are indeed saved by grace through Christ. But at the end of time we will have to account for what we have done. So, on the one hand Eliphaz is right; godliness and integrity brings its rewards. But in another sense Eliphaz is completely wrong. He thinks that this principle, 'what you sow you reap', also works the other way around. Everything you reap must come from what you have sown. If you reap suffering you must have done wrong. Now this is just not true of Job. The opening chapters made that abundantly clear. The problem is that Eliphaz is replacing theology with causal logic. Now logical argument is very useful. So is observing how one thing causes another. But what are very valuable assets in our daily lives on this earth are useless in understanding the ways of God. God so often does the unexpected. Take the cross of Christ. A completely innocent man, Jesus, suffers terribly. It's a huge travesty of justice. But through it God brought the way of forgiveness and hope. In our theology, we can say what the Bible says. That we can trust. But when we use logic to extend what the Bible says we can end up on slippery ground. That is Eliphaz' mistake. He wants to show up the justice of God. As he goes on in verse 9-11 to show how the evil doers are *"...destroyed at the breath of God..."* But with his wrong use of logic he concludes that if Job is reaping suffering he has sown terrible sin. So, he had better come clean and confess it. Instead of bringing support and comfort he brings more pain.

Eliphaz has a touch of arrogance about him, which comes about because he thinks he knows his stuff well. In verse 8 he says he talks from experience: *"As I have observed..."* In verses 12-17 we see that he even claims to have been given a revelation. So now it's a 'God told me' experience. (:12) *"A word was secretly brought to me, my ears caught a whisper of it"*. He tells of how he had this eerie experience that made him shake all over. He felt something, a spirit, glide past and all his hairs stood up. And you think he is going to tell us some deeply profound truth not known before. But he says in verse 17 *"Can a man be more righteous than God? Can a man be more than his Maker?"*

Well Eliphaz, surely that goes without saying doesn't it. But Eliphaz wants to sound profound. He wants to make sure Job understands that he is a sinner, and ought to own up. Eliphaz says in effect in verse 18-21 that God is so far above all his creatures in his holiness that in comparison even "*his angels*" are "*with error*". So how much lower and less holy are human beings. They are as easily crushed like moths. They are like those who live "*... in a house of clay whose foundations are dust...*". Or those whose tents so easily fall over when the tent ropes are pulled up. The central tenet of Eliphaz' theology is that no human is right, in relationship to God. And no one can argue with Eliphaz on this because he had a vision. Therefore, it's irrefutable. So, Job, come clean. You are a sinner. So, repent of your wrong.

What we see with Eliphaz is that he responds to Job by speaking part of the truth. What he says is true as far as it goes. But it's not the whole truth. This is his constant mistake. He assumes he knows it all, but doesn't. Eliphaz goes on in 5:1 telling Job its useless going on with his appeal to God: "*Call if you will, but who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn?*" In other words, do you think an angel will act as a mediator? It makes no difference, Job because you are a human being. Like all human beings you share in the universal sinfulness of all humanity. The standard wisdom teaching is (:7) "*...man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upwards*". Eliphaz says he's been around and seen the "*...fool taking root...*" (:5ff) 'We are all screw ups Job. That's what experience shows. So, come on. Stop indulging yourself in your grief and this protesting your innocence'. Eliphaz says Job must turn to God for help; (5:8) "*I would appeal to God, I would lay my cause before him.*" Not an appeal in the sense of protest, but by Job reminding himself of God's awesome power and goodness. God is all powerful and good and he can solve all problems. In 5:9-16 Eliphaz has a hymn of praise extolling the goodness of God: "*He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted...the lowly he sets on high and those who mourn are lifted to safety...the poor have hope...*". It is a beautiful hymn. We see that Eliphaz is so near, yet so far from the truth.

We see it again in the last segment of his speech (5:17-26). What he says comes down to this. 'Job, don't be angry. Appeal to God and he will forgive you. Humble yourself and confess your sin. Learn to see suffering as discipline from God. And if you do you will be really blessed'. Note :17-18 "*Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds but he also binds up, he injures,*

but his hand also heals." Eliphaz has picked up on the biblical teaching that God disciplines those he loves. Suffering is a means of growing in spiritual maturity. And that is true, as the writer to the Hebrews so clearly teaches. But again, Eliphaz is so near yet so far. He is wrong in how he applies this to Job. If only Job would admit his sin, he says, then there will be happiness again. Job will be rich again and his family will prosper again and he will have a vigorous life before he dies (5:24-27). What we notice here is how insensitive Eliphaz is. It is hardly appropriate to tell someone who has had all his property destroyed or taken, all his kids are dead, that his *"tent will be secure..."* and he will have many children. Nor is it particularly helpful to say to someone who wants to die that his remaining years will be full of vigour. There is truth in what Eliphaz says. But he doesn't know what is true of Job. There are times the righteous children of God experience the dark side of God. Jesus did on the cross. At those times, we don't need an Eliphaz. No matter how good their theology or good intentions. To assume to know the mind of God is arrogant and wrong. Note the last verse of chapter 5(27). *"We have examined this, and it is true. So, hear it and apply it to yourself."* In other words, 'We know the truth. You sow what you reap. You have reaped suffering, so you must have sown evil. We know it's true. All human beings are sinners. So repent and all will be fine'. Why do people feel the need to do this? Well, Eliphaz has a problem that many have. If Job is both righteous and rejected by God, then Eliphaz' neat logical theology gets unstuck. If God only rejects the sinners, then there is causal logic. I can understand it. That is, I have a sense of control over it. But if the righteous suffer, it doesn't fit my system. Then I am lost, and I can't cope with that. In a sense Eliphaz needs to put Job in place, or he has lost his place. Destroy Job or he himself feels destroyed. Seeing another suffering terribly makes us also feel very insecure. It makes us very uncomfortable because we have this need to have everything under control. But that, subtly, implies faith in ourselves not in God. Rather, with the sufferer we must be willing to simply trust God. We must acknowledge there is so much we do not understand. Despite our good theology, God and his ways are a mystery to us. So together with the grieving, keep praying, keep appealing to God's grace, and trust him. Look at the cross and see the gift of Christ given for the full payment of all our sin. Leave room in our theologizing for struggle, for unanswered questions, for the dark side of God in our lives. Don't feel obliged to provide pious responses to one suffering. Have the grace and courage to sit with them and cry with them. In prayer take up their appeals to God. Be the presence of Christ to them as a fellow sufferer.

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.

- Have you experienced someone like Eliphaz during a time of suffering/depression? How did it make you feel? How has this sermon helped you?

- Describe the problems with:
 - Good theology in the wrong place
 - Wrong use of logic in theology
 - Presuming to know God's mind

- How would you minister to a person suffering without a known cause/reason?