

# Job's Friends

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Listen in on any discussion about personal suffering and it won't be long before the conversation turns to the failure of friends. It is almost universal. Suffering people will talk about their hour of need and describe small blessings and comforts from friends, but alongside that a large scale sense that friends fail us.

Every book I have read about someone's suffering has included that experience. Every pastoral conversation I have sooner or later turns to it. I know that has been the topic of numbers of conversations in homegroups these last few weeks as we have looked at this book of Job.

Job is the book above all others in the bible which describes the agony of suffering. We have looked over these last few weeks at various aspects of it. We looked at the role of Satan and even God in Job's suffering. We examined why Job could claim that he was an innocent sufferer. Last week we saw the incredible freedom that God gave Job to complain and protest and cry out to and about God. He allowed Job freedom to struggle and wrestle with his doubts and questions in the face of suffering.

But today we are going to examine Job's friends. Job too had friends who failed him. Just as suffering is inevitable it is also inevitable that at times we will be the friends of sufferers, so we need to see what went wrong. We are going to try to understand what they should have been like and why they failed, but also how their very failure led to something beautiful being forged in Job's soul.

The first thing we must notice is that they are too quick to speak.

➤ *They are too quick to speak*

That statement looks patently untrue if you just read the end of chapter 2

 **Job 2:11-13**

They are model comforters. Intentionally going to sympathise with him and comfort him. Weeping and mourning with him and for him. And then sitting with him, not just for an hour or two but for seven days and seven nights. And in all that time not speaking.

It is not particularly words we need in our darkest moments. It is the presence of another. It is someone turning up with some food for us. It's a card to put on the mantelpiece. A gentle hand touching us. It is someone coming and washing all the dishes because we just couldn't find the energy. And not just once but over time.

After a week Job finally speaks in chapter three, pouring out his misery as we saw last week. And this prompts Eliphaz the Temanite to speak.

 **Job 4:1**

This alone is an ominous opening. He "replied". Job hadn't asked a question demanding a reply. But Eliphaz must respond.

After only this first speech of the friends Job will conclude that they are completely useless.

 **Job 6:15-17**

But Job they have travelled from far off and just sat with you patiently for a whole week! “Undependable”? But it is not enough.

Any pastor who reads this, myself in particular will be filled with guilt at this point. Gone are the days when a pastor could just sit with his church members for hours or days – perhaps it never was like that. And like Eliphaz we are so quick to open our mouths. So eager to offer theological wisdom. Many of you here know my inadequacies as a pastor. I do apologise for being too much like Eliphaz.

Perhaps the answer in part is that the body of Christ collectively can minister in the way Job needs. No individual could do more than Eliphaz and his friends but God’s people together can be there, for days, weeks, months, years to support us – without words but just their presence. That is happening amongst us and I praise God for it. But is it ever enough?

The next failure again is displayed by Eliphaz but it will be repeated by his friends.

➤ *They think they understand when they don’t.*

Eliphaz is very cautious in beginning to speak

 **Job 4:2**

He tries to bring the truth to Job in a gentle, roundabout way

 **Job 4:12-13**

But what he says is relatively simple.

First of all God is just.

 **Job 4:7-8**

God protects the innocent and God brings trouble on the wicked, as surely as he brings a harvest after sowing. The bible is full of such assertions.

Do not be deceived: [says the apostle Paul] God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. (Gal 6:7)

Secondly no one is righteous.

 **Job 4:17**

Again as the apostle Paul puts it

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23)

So Job should humble himself, and cast himself upon God.

 **Job 4:8, 11, 16**

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. 1 Pet 5:6

God is clearly disciplining Job

 **Job 5:17**

Hebrews 12:7  
Endure hardship as discipline;

These are good gospel truths. God is just, no one is righteous before God, we must humble ourselves before God and cast ourselves on his mercy and for those who are forgiven through the death of Jesus, suffering now serves not as punishment but as discipline. All those things are true but Eliphaz is wrong.

Wrong because he hasn't seen what we saw in the throne room of heaven in chapters 1-2 that God was not trying to drive out some sin through this suffering but actually to demonstrate the nobility of Job's character. But wrong because Job's need at that point was not quick answers but deep sympathy.

Eliphaz thinks he understands – he doesn't.

But then as all the friends in turn start speaking to Job the most unsavoury aspect of their characters slowly starts to appear.

➤ ***They are not concerned with Job or God's glory but themselves***

At first their speeches look like zeal for God.

 **Bildad – Job 8:2-3**

But soon they have abandoned careful consideration of Job's complaints and are resorting to caricature.

 **Zophar – Job 11:2-4**

Job didn't say that. He said he didn't understand, and his innocence was based on his willingness to confess his sins, not his absolute purity.

By the time Eliphaz gets his turn to speak again he has moved on to open condemnation.

 **Eliphaz - Job 15:2-5**

Not surprisingly Job in turn criticises them.

 **Job 16:2-5**

And this exposes more of their hearts.

 **Bildad - Job 18:2-3**

And again –

 **Zophar - Job 20:2-3**

Do you hear that? “why are WE considered stupid?” “I hear a rebuke that dishonours ME!”

Me...me...me. In particular as men they are enraged that their intelligence and their honour should be impugned. Don't go near a hurting person if you want to avoid criticism. Like an injured dog they bite, even people who want to help. But then if we really want to help we can take a bit of friendly fire can't we? Unless it is really all about me. Me having the answers. Me being appreciated as a kind person. Me being loved for my good deeds.

The third time he speaks Eliphaz is leading the charge good and proper.

 **Eliphaz Job 22:4-11**

Here is the desperate strategy of defeated fundamentalist. Rather than carefully examine Job's complaints, acknowledge areas of ignorance and consider things carefully he just throws mud. It is all lies. But Eliphaz would rather invent reality than re-examine his beliefs.

We see it amongst the atheist fundamentalists who insist that “religion poisons everything.” The fundamentalists campaigning for gay rights who claim that every evangelical who speaks out for chastity is in fact a vicious homophobe. And of course amongst the Christian fundamentalists who go far beyond careful nuanced interaction with complex situations and particularly with struggling people and simply resort to mud slinging. No wonder the media portray Christians as wild-eyed fanatics – there are just enough of them to give it credibility.

Remember it was the theologically orthodox Pharisees who put their hands over their ears and rushed at Jesus to kill him.

And after that they sulk.

 **Bildad – Job 25**

Note how short it is. How resigned. But not happily. This is petulant grump.

And Job is mercilessly sarcastic to his silenced opponents.

 **Job 26:2-4**

They have been exposed as puffed up, self-obsessed fools. As Abraham Lincoln said

Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than open your mouth and remove all doubt.

Job then pours out his complaint for five chapters as the other three slip away but in chapter 32 amazingly a fourth character pops up. Elihu – a youth!

 **Elihu - Job 32:6-10**

This makes painful reading for me because when I was young I was too much like Elihu for comfort. Elihu chooses to correct both Job and the friends. But he doesn't actually say anything new. And at the end of it even Job can't be bothered to answer him.

It is interesting. In 1 Tim 2 the apostle Paul warns Timothy about "the evil desires of youth" and most young men would probably think he means lust. But this is what he says

1 Tim 2:22-23

Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, ...  
Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.

The evil desires of youth here are pride, self-assertion, over-confidence in our own cleverness, quarrelsomeness, rather than righteousness, faith, love and peace.

What a cumulative indictment. The book of Job is calling us to be friends to sufferers who are slow to speak, who do not think they have all the answers, and in particular who are genuinely committed to the welfare of those who suffer, and to their finding in time the comfort of knowing God in all his rich though mysterious love, and faithfulness and goodness and glory.

One such man was John Newton who wrote the hymn amazing grace. He befriended William Cowper, the great Christian poet and hymn writer of the eighteenth century, who suffered terribly with severe depression. For years Newton visited him and sat with him through terrible times. He even bought a field that lay between their respective back doors in Olney in Bedfordshire, so that the painfully shy Cowper could walk to his home without meeting anyone. There were times when Newton was barely away from Cowper for more than seven hours. We still sing numerous hymns by Cowper and Newton forged partly through that friendship. How much blessing has come to us because one man was prepared to be a faithful friend?

And I could tell you about faithful visitation of the sick, caring for the downcast, advocacy for the vulnerable in this church. Patient, other centred, God glorifying love. Sometimes I think you don't know what gems you are.

But, you know, I think this book is also wondering whether there could ever be friends who would fully meet Job's need. I come back to the fact that Job's is the universal cry of sufferers. Human beings just are "miserable comforters".

But actually there is another friend in this story who has not yet spoken. Amidst all the bluster from the friends, and even from Job he has remained quiet. It is God himself.

➤ *God is the true friend*

While everyone else was shouting at each other and him God remained quiet. Perhaps ironically one of God's virtues is that he doesn't speak too quickly. Why didn't just answer Job at the beginning is not clear – though for sufferers it is very true to life. Eventually he will answer. We will look at that in a few weeks' time. The answer won't be quite what Job or the friends are looking for but it will satisfy at a deep level. And

neither will it be entirely comforting emollient words – God will says Job “brace yourself like a man” (Job 38:3).

But for now he is silent. Why?

Perhaps he wants to let the foolish friends display their emptiness and self-obsession. Perhaps it just takes time for Job to start to articulate his questions for God clearly in his mind. We saw previously that it is Job’s last great speech which brings all he wants to say together with the greatest clarity. Perhaps initially Job is just too raw and tossed around and vulnerable to hear anything. I am not trying peddle simplistic answers like the friends here. In the end we must say we don’t know why God is slow to speak. But he is.

John Keats described suffering as a “veil of soul-making”. And there is some support for that in scripture. Even Jesus had to be made perfect through suffering.

[Jesus] offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears... Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered – Heb 5:7-8

That is not supposed to be a knock down argument justifying suffering, but it is a little tiny window into one of God’s purposes in allowing it.

He is silent but he is with us. Jesus, God the Son insisted “surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.” He is true friend.

The friends think they understand but don’t. God and Jesus do understand at every level. God’s final answer to Job is to the effect that his understanding is infinitely above Job’s and Job must simply trust. But God’s answer in Jesus is also that he is absolutely to the ultimate degree identified with our suffering – God became man in Jesus and was despised, rejected, abandoned, beaten, tortured, humiliated, killed. And now by the Holy Spirit he sits alongside us.

Young Elihu says at one point

I too will have my say; I too will tell what I know. For I am full of words (Job 32:17-18)

But as Matthew warns us

[Jesus] will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. Mat 12:19-20

Jesus sits alongside and when he finally does speak into our soul he says “I am the Word. And I will tell you what I know. I know.... The cross.”