

WHEN FRIENDS SHOUT ADVICE FROM SAFE GROUND

Job 3:1–31:40

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A lot of repetitive things are happening in these 29 chapters. Chapter 3 gives us Job's lament and is sort of a separate section by itself. Then, beginning with chapter 4, we find a series of speeches by Job's three friends, which he will respond to. We'll look at these in turn.

When we left Job in our last study, he was doing rather well—in his spirit, that is. His circumstances weren't too fine, but he was holding up well. Four successive messengers had come to him, bringing the news that everything he had was lost. He lost his property; he lost his livestock; he lost his servants. Last of all, he lost his family—his seven sons and three daughters. He even loses the support of his wife, who says to him, "Curse God and die." He handles that beautifully. He doesn't deny what's happened to him; he does appear depressed. He's not angry; he's not bargaining with God. He simply says, "The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). And we say of Job, "That's the way to handle suffering! You're a real man of God."

If there is one thing I've learned in ministering to people who are going through tragedy, it is to recognize that sometimes a person can handle a tragedy too well. I get worried when someone has had a real loss in their life—a loss of a spouse, a loss of a child, and they say, "I'm fine. God has been wonderful. I feel so good." The Lord does give us consolation and comfort, but underneath I believe that sooner or later there's going to be this bubbling up of sorrow and grief. That's why I always remind people in times of death or tragedy that God created us with emotions, and I encourage them to express them, not to sit on them.

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Job does real well for a while. He's the brave person sitting there shouldering it all. We're almost relieved as we open chapter 3 and find out he's a human being just like us. Now he's going to start going through denial and depression and anger. You find it in full force.

I. Job's Lament.

Job basically does three things in chapter 3.

A. First, in Job 3:1–10, he laments the day he is born. "May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, 'A boy is born!'" (Job 3:3, NIV). And he goes on with the lament. What is he saying? "I wish I had never lived."

Being depressed and cursing God are two different things. It's important to recognize that all through the Book of Job, Job is asserting that he has not cursed God. God backs Job up, saying, "He did not curse me or defame me in any way." We need to make the distinction that when we're depressed and we pull the blinds over the windows and say, "I wish I had never lived," we are not, by that act, cursing God. Also, we need to recognize that there is a difference between wishing you had never been born and a contemplation and plan of action to commit suicide. Job is not saying anything about taking his life; he's simply saying he wished he had never come into existence.

If we're honest with ourselves and if we've gone through anything at all, all of us would say, "I wish I had missed this altogether."

B. Next, in Job 3:11–19, he desires rest in Sheol or the place of the dead—not that he's contemplating doing anything to get there. He just feels that it's time to go to the grave. There's nothing more to live for, so he might as well go down to the grave like a stillborn child or like kings and counselors or rulers or wicked people or captives. He goes through them all in his litany of people who are in the grave. And he says, "Let me go down there."

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When we read the Book of Job we recognize immediately that Job did not have the light on the afterlife that we have. In those early days of the revelation of the Bible, God did not show His people everything. Sometimes in their thinking of the place of the dead, everybody was all lumped in the same place—the righteous and the wicked. Many times in the Old Testament we'll read a passage on the afterlife and we'll go away disappointed and say, "That didn't express the way it really is." Jesus taught us about what the life to come is really like. He gave us the story of the rich man and Lazarus, and He shows that there is a great gulf dividing those who die in the Lord and those who don't.

In effect, Job was in a fog. He knew there was life after death—that's very clear. As we go through the book we find there are times when he breaks out in hope: "After my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:26). But his light was not nearly as bright as ours. He wishes to be in the grave.

C. In the last part of Job's lament, Job 3:20–26, he questions God. "Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure... What I feared has come upon me;... I have no rest, but only turmoil" (Job 3:20,21,25,26, NIV). Job is giving a very normal response: Why? Why, God, did You allow this?

If there is anything the Book of Job does for our faith, it shows us that God allows His servants to ask why, and He doesn't strike us dead for it. He doesn't say, "You should have never asked Me that question!" That's why the Book of Job is so encouraging. God is not afraid of us sort of challenging Him when we're down, saying, "Lord, if it had been me in control of the universe I'd have done it differently. I don't understand this."

The positive confession people have had a field day with the phrase in verse 25: "What I feared has come upon me." They will say that what you say is what you get. The bad thing about that point of view is it doesn't have any vehicle or device by which to interpret the Scripture.

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Recognize that you cannot take any particular text where Job is talking and interpret but one line alone. You must take it in the package of everything he's saying. There are times when Job is down, and there are times when he is up. We need to recognize that despite what Job said here—"What I feared has come upon me"—God himself said, "There is no sin in Job. And I have not found in his lips or in his words any wrong." So the Lord himself is giving a clean bill of health to Job.

I think we all wonder how we would do if everything was stripped away from us. I would fear that, wouldn't you? It's not an indictment against Job but an authentic emotional response. Again, the problem the positive confession people have is denying people the opportunity to authentically express what is happening in their lives. It chokes up emotions and works them down into deeper layers of depression and bondage and hurt because people aren't allowed to work through what they're going through. You can't say, "I'm really concerned about something," because you have to say, "Everything is fine."

So we get through chapter 3 and we know Job is feeling the pinch. He hurts. He's mortal.

Now his friends enter in.

In chapters 4–31 are the speeches of his friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. The drama is set in such a way that each friend speaks. Eliphaz always speaks first, then Bildad and Zophar.

Actually Eliphaz speaks and Job responds; Bildad speaks and Job responds; Zophar speaks and Job responds. That process goes through three different sets of speeches till you come to the very end. Somehow, Zophar—the third person—drops out the third time.

II. I'm going to simply go through round one of the speeches, because rounds two and three are essentially repetitive.

If you get the drift of round one, then just magnify it by some decibel levels for rounds two and three. The speakers are all saying the same thing, and Job is basically saying the same thing.

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They're saying louder and louder, "Job! There's sin in your life." And Job is saying louder and louder, "No, there's not!"

A. Eliphaz enters the scene. There are five things I want to say about Eliphaz in chapters 4 and 5.

The first thing is he begins his speech very graciously, tactfully, and complimentarily. Perhaps he's an older one of the bunch. He begins sort of discretely. "If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? But who can keep from speaking?" (Job 4:2, NIV). He's been sitting there seven days. You have to admire his self-control. Now he's saying, "It's OK to speak, isn't it?" He compliments Job and tries to get on his good side. That's a good thing if you've got to correct somebody. Say something nice about them. "Your words have 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. Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope?" (Job 4:4–6, NIV).

That's the little lead-in dig that brings Eliphaz's point, which is the second thing we have to say about Eliphaz. His point in Job 4:7–11 is that everybody reaps what they sow. His whole line is, "We've been sitting here seven days, and no one would be going through what you're going through if they hadn't done something wrong in their life and failed God." Notice verse 8: "As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it" (NIV). In other words, he's saying, "The only thing that explains your condition is you have done something horribly wrong."

It's interesting that the apostle Paul takes this same phrase in Galatians 6:7 and says we will reap what we have sown. But the difference between Paul and Eliphaz is that Eliphaz is saying that what you sow is what you reap in this life. Paul takes that same phrase and that same understanding and says, no, it's in eternity. So in Paul's teaching in Galatians, what you sow is

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what you reap. One doesn't always reap in this life, but ultimately, in God's time, it will catch up. That's the fundamental difference between the two.

Then Eliphaz not only says you reap what you sow, but in verses 12–21 he also basically says, "I've had a supernatural revelation that tells me something is wrong with you." Look at how he broaches that. "A word was secretly brought to me, my ears caught a whisper of it. Amid disquieting dreams in the night, when deep sleep falls on men, fear and trembling seized me and made all my bones shake. A spirit glided past my face, and the hair on my body stood on end" (Job 4:12–15, NIV). What is Eliphaz doing here? He's saying, "Job, I know you're wrong because I've had a supernatural revelation in the night. It came to me and spoke."

What do you do when a person comes up to you and says, "The Lord showed me thus and thus about you. I've had a revelation, and you are wrong." It's hard to argue with people who've got the "inside pipeline."

That still isn't enough with Eliphaz. He goes on in 5:1–7 to say the fourth thing to Job: his experience proves his point. Eliphaz is saying, "I've lived long enough and I've seen that people who do wrong ultimately get it. That's my experience."

Then the fifth thing he says is in 5:8–27: repent and be restored. "Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty" (Job 5:17, NIV). One of the intriguing things about the Book of Job is that it has so many great lines that are spoken by the wrong people. That is, in fact, one of the difficulties in interpreting Job. We know that all Scripture is Scripture, but some Scripture is more Scripture than other Scripture. In other words, in hermeneutics—the science of the interpretation of Scripture—we recognize that the controlling influence of the interpretation of a text often has to do with who is speaking and whether God is standing behind what the speaker is saying. We interpret by understanding that

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God has allowed things to be in His Word that capture what people were thinking and saying.

Some of the things they were saying were not right.

One of the problems with Eliphaz and all the others is that what they say makes a lot of sense. In many cases, there is tremendous truth behind it. It's a wonderful Scripture if it fits your situation, but if you're like Job and have done nothing—if your crime does not fit the punishment you're getting—then it doesn't make any sense at all.

B. Job responds to Eliphaz in Job 6 and 7. He responds in three different ways. First, he defends himself. He starts out by saying he knows his words are rash, but his anguish is great. He's thinking back to his earlier speech that kicked off Eliphaz's tirade against him. "If you were hurting as bad as I was hurting, maybe you'd say some crazy things too," he says. "I don't have unlimited strength. Empathize a little bit with me. Don't press me down for everything I say."

But Job is very clear in Job 6:1–13 that he does not agree with Eliphaz—that there is no wrong in his life. There is no cursing of God in his life. There is nothing he has done that has merited this. I submit to you that it takes a mentally healthy person to withstand the attack of a well-meaning friend who says you need to confess—that you've done something wrong in your life. If we've got a low self-esteem or if we have a tremendous guilt complex, it's easy to accept that. But Job has a very healthy understanding of who he is and he defends himself.

Then in Job 6:14–30, he faults his friends. In a classic way he says to them, "A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty" (Job 6:14, NIV). What a great line. Job is saying, "If you were a good friend, you'd still be my friend even if I failed God." He goes on to say how much his friends have let him down.

When we feel theologized about another person's sufferings, we become cold and clinical.

That's Job's complaint with his friends. Instead of helping him, his friends have become cold and clinical and are analyzing him instead of helping him.

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A third thing that Job does in response to Eliphaz is that he not only defends himself and faults his friends, but in chapter 7 he also renews his complaint. He becomes very direct with God. In fact, Job is so direct I cringe a little in reading it. I wouldn't be that direct myself. He says, "Why have You made me Your target?" In other words, "God, I've become your dartboard." He closes with a dash of self-pity. "Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins? For I will soon lie down in the dust; you will search for me, but I will be no more" (Job 7:21, NIV). That's a great line. He's saying, "God, You're going to be sorry for what You did to me. You're going to come looking for me, and I'm not going to be around."

What's so great is what Job really believes. He believes that God really would come looking for him. That's what underlies his faith. "Lord, I really do trust you. Just don't be late."

C. Number two man comes up: Bildad. Eliphaz's name means "God crushes." Bildad's name means "God's darling." He's probably a bit younger than Eliphaz, because in biblical times advice always started with the eldest and worked down to the youngest until finally we find a youth speaking up on the subject of suffering when we come to the last speaker, Elihu.

Even though Bildad is probably younger, he tries to act older. He does three things. First off, in Job 8:1–10, he starts by defending God's justice. Job had closed by saying that the problem was with God and not with him. He hadn't done anything to bring this about. It was God who had singled him out as His dartboard. Bildad is shocked, as we would be. How could anybody lay this against God? So Bildad says, "How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind. Does God pervert justice?" (Job 8:2,3, NIV). Bildad doesn't mess around at all. He gets right to the point. He accuses Job of being a windbag and defends God. He draws the heartless and cruel conclusion that if Job didn't sin, maybe it was his kids who sinned. "When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin" (Job 8:4, NIV). Job, not only did you sin, but also your kids died because they sinned.

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After he defends God’s justice in verses 1–7, Bildad then appeals to tradition in verses 8–19.

This appeal starts off by saying, “Ask the former generations and find out what their fathers learned, for we were born only yesterday and know nothing, and our days on earth are but a shadow” (NIV). Why does he say this? He’s going to refer back to folk ideas—what people traditionally taught on the subject of suffering. The righteous never suffer; only the wicked do.

So go back to tradition; it will teach you something. He’s basically saying where there’s smoke, there must be fire. Therefore, where there is suffering, there must be sin.

Then in Job 8:20–22, Bildad offers hope, just like Eliphaz. These are wonderful friends. All they want to do is get Job to the altar and get him to repent. If you repent, God’s going to wipe the slate clean. It’s going to be wonderful all over again.

D. Job responds to that in chapters 9 and 10. His response is basically twofold. Chapter 9 represents the pits of Job’s depression. He really sinks down and says some things in chapter 9 that he isn’t saying as he continues to work through the situation. In chapter 9 you find him at the very bottom of everything. He’s basically saying to Bildad, “How can I argue my blamelessness before God? God is so great, He doesn’t have to answer to anyone.”

The point of Eliphaz and Bildad has been that God only punishes the wicked. Job is saying that the innocent are affected as well. God is sovereign. That means He can be arbitrary if He wants. Job hasn’t seen that the righteous always prosper and the wicked are always punished. That’s his complaint.

Job ends chapter 9 by arguing his blamelessness before God. “He is not man like me that I might answer him...If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both” (Job 9:32,33, NIV). What’s Job asking for? He’s asking for Jesus, for someone who could place himself between him and the wrath of God and help him understand God better. Later, we’ll see what the New Testament has to say about Job.

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After arguing his blamelessness before God, Job then comes back to his refrain: “God, why is this happening to me?” He clearly shows in chapter 10 that he’s not satisfied by the answers given to him by Eliphaz and Bildad. Yet he believes in God, although he does not know why he is suffering. Verses 18 and 19 say, “Why then did you bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before any eye saw me. If only I had never come into being, or had been carried straight from the womb to the grave!” (NIV). Anybody ever felt that way? He’s despairing, but he hasn’t given up his defense of his innocence.

E. So Zophar, the third guy, springs up in chapter 11. It’s tough to be third. I wouldn’t like to be third in an order of speakers. By the time you get through the first two, what’s left to say? Fortunately, Zophar’s advice is the shortest of the bunch. Zophar comes in with a machine gun and plenty of ammo. He goes after Job. There’s no time for a courteous address for him. Zophar simply attacks. He defends God and he attacks Job. In verses 5 and 6 he says, “Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that he would open his lips against you and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom, for true wisdom has two sides. Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin” (NIV).

There’s a lot of acid and sarcasm dripping here. “God has spoken to me. I wish you were sharp enough that He would speak to you. Wisdom has two sides.” Notice he doesn’t tell Job what the two sides are. It’s his secret. Again he’s saying, “This wouldn’t be happening to you if you hadn’t in some way opposed God.” Like the others, he appeals to Job to repent. These words aren’t a comfort to Job at all because they’re canned theology.

F. Job responds in chapters 12–14—his last response in the first round. He has three responses in these three chapters. The first is a rather indignant one: “I’m not inferior to you.” Job is basically saying, “I know just as much about God as you do.” He adds a little bit of satire, “Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you!” (Job 12:2, NIV). When you die, all knowledge is

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going to pass away. His basic response to Zophar is, “Your problem is that you have it easy.

Also, you haven’t looked around lately to see how well the wicked are doing.”

In Job 12:7–25, Job comes back in a very classic way and basically says to Zophar, “I can be just as orthodox on God’s sovereignty as you can be.” He gives a ringing defense of the sovereignty of God to prove to Zophar that he knows God is sovereign. Then he winds up in chapters 13 and 14 by saying, “I’m innocent.” Job 13:15 is especially powerful: “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (NIV). This is followed by Job 14:14: “If a man dies, will he live again?” (NIV).

III. Round two is chapters 15–21.

The same three speakers come up to bat saying basically the same thing. Job responds each time. By the end of round two you can tell Job is upset. The three guys who are arguing with him haven’t gotten his point that the wicked are prospering. To help them get that point, he now goes into detail. “Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? They see their children established around them, their offspring before their eyes” (Job 21:7,8 NIV).

IV. Round three.

Eliphaz and Bildad again give their ringing accusations, trying in one last measure to get Job to repent. Zophar doesn’t speak at all. Again the section closes with Job’s ringing defense of his innocence. The chapter ought to be a model for the ethics of our own lives. I can’t think of any passage in the Old Testament that equals its force in talking about what it means to live the righteous life.

V. What can we learn from Job and his friends?

I want to make two kinds of applications.

A. First, I want to talk about the kinds of lines or phraseology that I hear Job’s friends making. I pick up nine things—well-meaning counsels. These lines are spoken by people today to others who are going through hard times.

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There must be sin in your life.

You don't have enough faith. (You can't imagine how that weighs upon a person.)

You are getting paid back for stepping out of line. (There's not always a cause/effect relationship between our goodness and reward—or between our wickedness and punishment.)

Pray more.

Give more.

You don't have it as bad as someone else.

God will make it up to you.

The Lord has shown me something about you.

You have an evil spirit.

All of these nine things crush people!

B. What could Job's friends have done for him instead? If we can see why this encounter is in Scripture and what it tells us about being a real friend, we can be better friends to people ourselves, better prayer counselors, better lovers of people. Of the seven things I find they should have done, they actually did two. Two things they're to be commended for.

First, they came to him. They didn't stay away. They didn't say, "We don't need to go. He's got enough trouble. He doesn't want us coming around." They did more than phone. They did more than send a note. They arrived. They came.

The second thing they did was they wordlessly empathized with him, sat down with him, and shared in his grief for a while. Those are the two finest things a friend can do.

But there were some other things they could have done but didn't.

They could have ministered to his bodily need. Here's a guy, sitting and scratching his sores with a piece of pottery—a miserable man, sick and covered in dust and itchy sackcloth. Job is in need of a good bath and somebody to bandage him, pour wine on the sores and oil on the wounds.

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They could have tried physical ministry to him and move him from sitting on top of the ash heap outside of town to a better place with a more comfortable environment. They could have known the value of touching and holding someone who is going through suffering. That's what he needed at this point. When a person is hurting and in pain and you can't do a lot in terms of arguing with him or theologizing with him, just minister to the pain.

The next thing they could have done is share whatever they had to ease whatever part of Job's loss they could. They couldn't have eased the loss over his children, but they could have helped with his livestock and servants.

They also could have built Job up verbally. Instead of trying to prove him wrong, they could have said things like "Job, you've been a wonderful friend." The mark of a godly person is that they see the good in other people. That's often the difference between godly counsel and worldly counsel.

Next, they could have prayed for him. Instead of preaching at him they could have said, "Job, let's pray for you. Let's encourage you through prayer." They were men who knew how to pray, but it's so much more tempting to preach at people than to pray for them.

Finally, they could have simply given Job time to heal and grow strong again. Some things are going to take some time.