

What Not to Say to Suffering Friends

Job 4-7 (To give big picture: Job 4-26)

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Well someone had to say something. We couldn't believe what we heard. It was obvious he was hurting. But his conclusions were way off. Bildad and Zophar looked at me. That look of 'ou're the oldest Eliphaz. Say something." I was the senior member after all and in our culture, the oldest always speaks first. I looked at Job. Poor guy. He'd been through some hard stuff. But we couldn't remain silent with all he'd said. So I cleared my throat and began.

Job, "Will you be patient and let me say a word or will be you be impatient? For who could keep from speaking out? [3](#) "In the past you have encouraged many people; you have strengthened those who were weak. [4](#) Your words have supported those who were falling; you encouraged those with shaky knees. [5](#) But now when trouble strikes, you get impatient." So far so good. He's just looking at me. He's not smiling yet but I'm sure we can get him there. The ice has been broken. I began to get a little more comfortable in speaking. I'll give him some good old wisdom to help soften the blow.

[7](#) "Stop and think! Do the innocent die? When have the upright been destroyed? [8](#) My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will get the same back." That was the wisdom part. But then I remembered this dream I once had. I thought it would be relevant for Job. So I told him about it.

"Job, I had a dream. It came to me in a disturbing vision at night, when I was in a deep sleep. Fear gripped me, and my bones trembled. A spirit swept past my face, and my hair stood on end. The spirit stopped, but I couldn't see its shape. There was a form before my eyes. In the silence I heard a voice say, 'Can a mortal be innocent before God? Can anyone be pure before the Creator?' "If God does not trust his own angels and has charged his messengers with foolishness, how much less will he trust people made of clay!"

I shared that because I didn't want Job to think that I was just speaking from what I knew. I had received this through a dream. It reinforced what I thought. Then I shared where I thought Job needed to go.

"You can cry out for help in prayer Job. But I don't think anyone will answer. You can't pray to angels." I was leading up to my conclusion that Job needed to confess his sins to God. We know that when something bad happens in a person's life, it's because they or someone in their family has sinned against God. Job had not yet acknowledged this. So we needed to move him towards that. In fact, Job was talking almost foolishly. So I thought it would be good at this

point to put in a little proverb about fools. I didn't think Job was a complete fool. But I thought he was making some foolish conclusions.

[2](#) Surely resentment destroys the fool, and jealousy kills the simple. [3](#) I have seen that fools may be successful for the moment, but then comes sudden disaster. [4](#) Their children are abandoned far from help. [5](#) The hungry devour their harvest. The Fool! The thirsty pant after their wealth. [6](#) But evil does not just shows up, and trouble does not just sprout from the earth. [7](#) People are born for trouble as readily as sparks fly up from a fire.

I couldn't tell what he was thinking. In our culture, you don't interrupt what the other person says until it's obvious they're finished. But he wasn't smiling yet. I cared about him. He just needed to go to God and confess his sin. So it was time to point him to God.

[8](#) "If I were you Job, I would go to God and present my case to him. [9](#) He does great things too marvelous to understand. He performs countless miracles. [10](#) He gives rain for the earth and water for the fields. [11](#) He gives prosperity to the poor and protects those who suffer. [12](#) He frustrates the plans of schemers so the work of their hands will not succeed. [13](#) He traps the wise in their own cleverness so their cunning schemes are thwarted. [15](#) He rescues the poor from the cutting words of the strong, and rescues them from the clutches of the powerful. [16](#) And so at last the poor have hope, and the snapping jaws of the wicked are shut.

God is the one in whom we find refuge! Job just needed to go to Him. But it was time for some tough love. He had to go to Him to confess. Someone had to lay it on the line with Job.

"But consider Job the joy of those corrected by God! Do not despise the discipline of the Almighty when you sin. [18](#) For though he wounds, he also bandages. He strikes, but his hands also heal. [19](#) From six disasters he will rescue you; even in the seventh, he will keep you from evil. [20](#) He will save you from death in time of famine, from the power of the sword in time of war. [21](#) You will be safe from slander and have no fear when destruction comes. [22](#) You will laugh at destruction and famine; wild animals will not terrify you. [23](#) You will be at peace with the stones of the field, and its wild animals will be at peace with you. [24](#) You will know that your home is safe. When you survey your possessions, nothing will be missing. [25](#) You will have many children; your descendants will be as plentiful as grass! [26](#) You will go to the grave at a ripe old age, like a sheaf of grain harvested at the proper time! [27](#) "We have studied life and found all this to

be true. Listen to my counsel, and apply it to yourself.” _That was a rousing conclusion. Go to God. Confess your sin and he would be restored and experience all the pleasures of God.

I sat down indicating I was done talking. I still didn’t know what to expect. But surely Job would get it. Yet he still wasn’t smiling. And there was no relief on his face. Then he spoke.

[2](#) “If my misery could be weighed and my troubles be put on the scales, [3](#) they would outweigh all the sands of the sea. That is why I spoke impulsively. [4](#) For the Almighty has struck me down with his arrows. Their poison infects my spirit. God’s terrors are lined up against me. [5](#) Don’t I have a right to complain? Don’t wild donkeys bray when they find no grass, and oxen bellow when they have no food? [6](#) Don’t people complain about unsalted food? Does anyone want the tasteless white of an egg? [7](#) My appetite disappears when I look at it; I gag at the thought of eating it! [8](#) “Oh, that I might have my request, that God would grant my desire. [9](#) I wish he would crush me. I wish he would reach out his hand and kill me. [10](#) At least I can take comfort in this: Despite the pain, I have not denied the words of the Holy One. [11](#) But I don’t have the strength to endure. I have nothing to live for. [12](#) Do I have the strength of a stone? Is my body made of bronze? [13](#) No, I am utterly helpless, without any chance of success.

“Oh boy,” I thought. He still doesn’t get it. He thinks he’s justified in his complaint. Yes, God’s arrows had pierced him. But it was because of his sin. Why couldn’t he see this? Then he turned to all of us.

[14](#) “One should be kind to a fainting friend, but you accuse me without any fear of the Almighty. [15](#) My brothers, you have proved as unreliable as a seasonal brook that overflows its banks in the spring [16](#) when it is swollen with ice and melting snow. [17](#) But when the hot weather arrives, the water disappears. The brook vanishes in the heat. [21](#) You, too, have given no help. You have seen my calamity, and you are afraid. [22](#) But why? Have I ever asked you for a gift? Have I begged for anything of yours for myself? [23](#) Have I asked you to rescue me from my enemies, or to save me from ruthless people?

What does Job think he’s doing? I came here to comfort him. What does he mean “I’m unreliable and disappointing? I just gave him wisdom!” Did he totally miss the part of his need to repent of his sins? It could be so easily solved if he just confessed. But then I learned he did hear the part about his sin.

He said “Teach me, and I will keep quiet. Show me what I have done wrong. Honest words can be painful, but what do your criticisms amount to? Do you think your words are convincing when you disregard my cry of desperation? You

would even send an orphan into slavery or sell a friend. Look at me! Would I lie to your face? Stop assuming my guilt, for I have done no wrong. Do you think I am lying? Don't I know the difference between right and wrong?

I could see we were in for a long day. Job had not yet understood what needed to happen. When would he finally realize that confession and repentance were the key to getting his life back?

What did happen? Eliphaz was just trying to help. He earnestly cared for Job. He just wanted to get him off that ash heap and moving forward in his life. Yet Job reacts with a blistering response. Did Job respond inappropriately? Was he just blinded by all his pain and loss to so he couldn't see wisdom in Eliphaz's counsel? Or might there have been something that deeply disturbed Job? Might Eliphaz have thought he was right but in fact had things wrong?

Let's look at little more closely at Eliphaz's counsel. If you have a Bible, I'll be referring to Job 4 and 5. Eliphaz starts in chapter 4 with tactfulness and in a somewhat gentle way. He doesn't charge Job openly with fault. But we don't even get a verse into his words before we can see he gently disapproves of Job's speech. Verse 2 – "If one ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? Yet who can keep from speaking?" It's like he's saying, I'm going to speak now Job. But will you listen or be impatient with me. But how can I not speak after all I heard you say in Job 3?

He commends Job for his help to others. Job instructed many, strengthened weak hands, upheld the stumbling and made the feeble firm. Now Job is feeble and Eliphaz wants to return the favor. But he quickly offers another gentle rebuke in verse 6. "But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you and you are dismayed."

Then he gets to the point. **Eliphaz's understanding of the world leads him to conclude Job's hardships are the result of Job's sin.** This is the explanation he and his friends will try to get Job to accept. "Remember, who that was innocent every perished? Or where were the upright cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity (or wrongdoing) and sow trouble reap the same." Why would he say that to Job? What is he doing here? He seems to be indirectly accusing Job. He talks about a general principle that he's observed in life. "Those who do wrong and trouble, they get wrong and trouble returned to them." This is the simple retribution principle. If you are good in life you will receive good and God will bless you. If you are bad, you will receive bad and God will punish you. What relevance does that have to this moment except to move toward an explanation for Job's suffering?

Eliphaz explains Job's adversity as a standard case of God's retribution for sin. This principle basically worked like the triangle on your inserts. At the top is God's justice. On the left hand side is the retribution principle. On the

right is Job's righteousness or anyone's righteousness. You basically looked at the world through this triangle. God is just. So if there is good stuff happening in your life, God approves of it and the retribution principle teaches that you have done good and are being rewarded. But say something bad happens. Well we can't say God is unjust. We can't conclude that the retribution principle doesn't work. So the only possible conclusion is that you're not righteous. Or Job, you've got something to confess.

But we know something Eliphaz and Job don't know. We have the scenes from heaven in Job 1 and 2. We have already been told that Job is upright. Job did not sin. Job maintained his integrity. So we know that the triangle does not work all the time. The retribution principle does not explain everything. **God's deep ways go far beyond the retribution principle.**

So that's why Job and his friends are at such an impasse. They cling to this model and conclude the only possibility is Job sinned. Job knew and believed in this model as well. Yet he knows he's righteous. So he has to find another explanation. He will end up turning his sights towards God's justice. But that's for later. The friends primary aim is to defend the retribution principle. If you understand that, you can read a lot of Job. It explains chapters 4-26. You have repeating cycles of this theme

"Job we believe and trust in the retribution principle model. So you must be guilty. Just confess your sin and things will return to normal." Job – no I am not. And you are a miserable comforter. You say you want to comfort but you make me miserable." The repeated cycle increase in intensity and emotion. Job's friends drop all politeness and become more intense in their accusation. Job becomes more heated in his defense. Job looks away from his friends for comfort. Now he looks for a mediator between him and God. Or he looks for a hearing before God to prove his innocence and plead his case. Until we reach chapter 25. The third friend Bildad begins speaking and Job cuts him off. From there we see Job's final words.

Within these dialogues there are some famous verses . Chapter 5:13 – He catches the wise in their own craftiness. This is the only saying from Job that is clearly quoted in the NT by Paul in 1 Cor. 3:19. It is one of the many things that Eliphaz and his friends say that are true. But mixed with incomplete or inaccurate counsel, it makes it all the more confusing for Job.

13:15 – Thought he slay me, I will hope in him. 16:2 – Miserable comforters are you all. 19:25-26 – I know that my Redeemer lives. That’s where Handel got his line for the Messiah. So take this understanding with you as you read and reflect on Job 4-26 in the future.

But let’s get back to this dialogue. Eliphaz’s worldview leads him to conclude that Job’s hardships are a result of his sin. Job knows he hasn’t sinned. So this ticks him off. But Eliphaz’s barbs don’t end there. **His counsel leaves Job with no hope.** After affirming the retribution principle in the first half of chapter 4, Eliphaz talks about a strange dream in the second half. He sees the form of a person or spirit. It brings the message that no mortal can stand righteous before God.” That’s true. We can’t stand righteously before God based on our own works. But Job never claimed to be sinless. He was blameless. He walked before God faithfully.

The message of the spirit to Eliphaz continues in 4:18-19. “Even in his servants, God puts no trust and his angels he charges with error; how much more those who dwell in houses of clay.” So apparently this spirit said to Eliphaz “The Lord is superior to his angels and can find fault in them. So how much more is he superior to humans?” He’s arguing that God is infinitely higher than any other being. That’s true too. But then look at how Eliphaz applies this. 5:1 – “Call now; is there anyone who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn?” And the expected answer is no one. How is that in any way encouraging? How does it move things forward for Job? It seems he’s trying to paint Job in a corner where he will have no other recourse but to confess wrongdoing. But this serves only to dash any hope Job might have. It is important in counseling or supporting those who suffer to at least maintain or rebuild a sense of hope. Hurting people need to hear good news about the God who cares and intervenes in real time. They don’t need to hear calling out in prayer is useless. But it gets worse.

Eliphaz’s counsel is insensitive to Job’s suffering. (5:2-7) In verses 2-7 he speaks some generally accepted principles about fools. They seem to do well for a while. But their children are far from safety. Others eat their harvest. They experience trouble and frustration. It’s generally true that children of foolish parents are more at risk. And foolish decisions may result in loss of wealth. But what has just happened to Job? He’s lost all his wealth because of terrorist attacks and a terrible storm. His children have just been crushed in a collapsed house. I can’t help but wonder if Eliphaz is indirectly calling Job a fool here.

Now we begin to see the fuel that fed Job's response. But there's one more piece of Eliphaz's counsel. **He unwittingly counsels Job to prove Satan's point. (5:17-27)** In 5:17 Eliphaz finally comes clean. "Behold, blessed is the one whom God reproves, therefore despise not the discipline of the Almighty." Job, God is correcting you. There is something that needs to be confessed. So just confess it. Then from 18-27 Eliphaz promises that Job will receive all kinds of blessings. You will be at peace. You will get descendants. You will live to a ripe old age. You will laugh in the face of destruction and famine. Do this Job and you will get all your stuff back.

What did the Satan say in chapter 1? The only reason Job worships God is because you have given him all this stuff. So Job, just worship God to get your stuff back.

Eliphaz is done. He maybe thinks that he has delivered sound wisdom to his suffering friend. But he is inept as a counselor. He takes a generalized principle and applies it specifically to Job in an almost cold manner.

Job's blistering response

Job does not have the strength or patience to bear with Eliphaz's blunders. Job first claims he has a right to respond like he did for he is suffering unbearable pain and believes it's God's wrath in 6:1-13. His troubled and hot outburst, far from showing him to be a fool is natural and understandable response to the depth and weight of his misery.

Then in 6:14-23 he laments that his friends have been a huge disappointment. They only intensify Job's pain rather than bringing life. They are as disappointing as what looked like a rushing stream in the desert or even a mirage to desperately thirsty desert travelers.

In 6:24-30 Job challenges them to prove there is wrongdoing in his life. He charges them to identify the wrongs in his life. He throws himself open for examination. But he is confident they will not find anything. But already their relationship has deteriorated. They are now swapping insults.

Now it's one thing to read about this in some ancient document. We might conclude that well-meaning people today cannot do more harm than good. But let's go back to Kelly's story.

She says "I have an outward trial, a trial that I wear on my sleeve and that is exposed and vulnerable for everyone to see whether I want that or not. Some people simply offer their encouragement, support, or prayers, which I deeply

appreciate. Yet I am actually surprised by how many encounters I have had in which people try to explain my “life of suffering,” with good intentions, and all too quickly offer advice or the remedy to my ailment.

Sometimes people tell me that I needed to strengthen my faith, but I had never had so many encounters as in the spring semester of 2009. I was in the midst of a very hard trial period when I was losing control of my left arm. People around me began to feel extremely uncomfortable, confused, and nervous as my situation got worse every day.

During that semester I had seven separate encounters with people who spoke with the right intentions, yet their words were hurtful and detrimental. A woman heard my story and told me that I had a demon of adversity that was attacking my life, because there was no other explanation of why everything in my life would go so wrong. She told me that God wants to bless the children that follow him, so I must be under the attack of a demon. I also encountered numerous situations where people would see my right arm in a brace and ask if they could pray with me. They would usually start by saying that they strongly believed that I was supposed to be fully healed in that moment. So they would pray over me, and nothing would happen and they would respond frustrated with me that I was keeping this miracle from happening that they so strongly felt was supposed to happen at that moment through their prayers. Throughout the semester I had numerous encounters like these, and the effects were frustrating, confusing, and hurtful rather than encouraging or challenging. They would cause me to question my faith, God’s involvement, and myself.

I began praying for wisdom and patience in how to respond in those situations, since I know that many times their intentions were pure.

JHW: Job’s friends continually held out false hopes. How do you deal with false hopes?

Kelly: False hope is a difficult subject and is an area in which I still struggle. When people pray over me, telling me to believe that God will heal me, my emotions are so torn, because at times I allow my mind to think, “Maybe he does want to heal me. Maybe I do need to believe.” Yet every time, nothing happens. It is really hard to enter the emotional rollercoaster. My thoughts become conflicted, and I start thinking that maybe they are right and I could be healed. False hopes then lead to entertaining the thought of how amazing it would be to live a day without pain, yet when nothing changes I feel disappointed and dumb for allowing myself to think that maybe God’s plan was different from what I had thought.

So if I am honest, it has come to the point where I no longer listen to false hopes, because I do not want to risk the pain of being reminded of the outcome. I feel that God has given his answer in my pursuit to remove the excruciating nerve pain from my body; **that answer is no**. I do not even pray for my right arm anymore. At times I'll still pray concerning my nerve pain or my left hand, but I pray with caution. I don't doubt that God has the power to work; I just think he has already given his answer.

So those are my raw thoughts and feelings regarding false hopes, yet I see the flaws in this way of thinking. God has told us to pray the cries of our heart, but should we continue to pray even after God has so evidently given his answer? Perhaps that is a larger question for another time. I know I need to grow in this area, but I believe my heart has become guarded and has decided that if I have low expectations, there is less of a chance that I will get hurt or disappointed.

God's deep ways go far beyond the retribution principle. So when it comes to suffering friends, we must guard against casually general principles at their specific situation. We cannot give informed explanations of God micro managing. We don't deny God's role but we can't explain His role. We can't define the nature of God's providential rule. We may never know the reasons for why things happen – but we know there is a purpose. The big question of Job is not "how do we resolve this problem" but "how do we live through this problem whether it is resolved or not."

John Walton writes *"Can there be true righteousness without the promise of reward?"* Would you serve & love God even if there were no reward? Or, in Kelly's case, can there be true faith without the reward of healing? Are we able to look beyond a consideration of "what is in it for me?" *Will we keep the faith when our desires are not granted, when healing does not come, when the goals we pursue remain beyond our reach.*

As Christians we must first conclude that being motivated by righteousness and faith rather than by benefits should be our goal. For some they never get there. They only think of Christianity as a benefits system, and if there is nothing in it for them, they lose all motivation. Yet Christ has told us that the cost of discipleship is high. We lose our lives, not gain them. God is worthy of this life response. He is a righteous God and has created us with the capacity to imitate him. It is in the imitation of him that we find relationship with him—our highest joy. Our faith and its accompanying righteousness ought not to be self-serving. Righteousness should have its desired end in relationship with God, not in gaining reward from God. This is the teaching of the book of Job, and it is a lesson we still desperately need to learn."

Yet we have been given revelation that can provide us with much more certain encouragement than Job. Though Eliphaz was convinced Job had no one to answer him and no holy one to whom Job could turn, we now know differently.

1 Timothy 2:5-6

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

1 John 2:1

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

There is someone in heaven who will answer us. We can call out and he will answer. Jesus is waiting. His answer will not be a restatement of the retribution principle. Christ's death violates the retribution principle. He did not do anything wrong. He was completely innocent and sinless. Yet He was killed as the worst criminal and received God's wrath for our sin. Through his death, those who receive him have an advocate, the Lord Jesus Christ. They have someone who will speak for them in heaven. Because of His death we have an advocate, mediator and intercessor in heaven. If you don't know Christ, receive the Advocate – Let go of trying to earn rightness before God. Throw your trust and life upon Jesus.