

"The Advice of Eliphaz"
Job 4:1-7:21
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Clarity or Faith? Posted on December 4, 2023 by David Timms

As the story is told, renowned ethicist John Kavanaugh once traveled to India to meet with Mother Teresa for spiritual guidance and advice. He visited her ministry in Calcutta (now called Kolkata, the original Bengali name) and set up a time to speak with her. She asked him, "What can I do for you? How can I pray for you?" to which Kavanaugh said, "Please pray that I might have clarity about the future and what God wants me to do." Mother Teresa surprised him by saying, "I will not pray for you to have clarity." Kavanaugh was taken aback. He had not expected her to refuse him like that, so he asked why not. She said to him, "You do not need greater clarity. You need greater faith. That's what I will pray for."

As illustrated in this story, people often want to have "greater clarity" from God, when what He wants us to have is faith in Him for direction of our lives. It is when we are in the depth of our trials; when we are in pain and distress that we desperately desire for God to explain His purpose in this and how it will come out in the end – for clarity.

In chapters 1 through 3, we learned that Job experienced not just one terrible event in his life, but three: the loss of his wealth, the loss of his family and the loss of his health. And he expressed his grief and loss before God and friends.

When we experience just a partial loss in any of these areas, we can feel devastated and grieve in desperation. Job, in his grief, wished he had never been born so that he would not have to live through such devastating loss anymore. He was asking the "Why" question that we also ask God when we have such trying events in our lives.

His good friends came to sit with him, trying to comfort him. (Job 2:11) Seeing "how great his suffering was" (2:13), they were silent for seven days and nights. They too were hoping to give clarity to Job – to perhaps help step him back from the brink of despair by examining the nature of God and how God deals with people in this world.

In chapters 4 and 5 Eliphaz is the first friend to venture answers to Job's "Why" question. He proposed that the answer is in God's character.

1. God is the Righteous Judge (Job 4:1-18)
2. God is the Beneficent Provider (Job 5:1-14)
3. God Disciplines in Mercy to correct sin. (Job 5:15-27)

It is thought that Eliphaz was the first friend to speak because perhaps he was the elder of the group, or had been a friend to Job the longest. He felt he had to speak up because of the misery Job expressed.

Sometimes we feel that we must say something to our friend who is sick, grieving or depressed. But these friends of Job sat silently for seven days and seven nights. They

understood that sometimes our friends are just not ready to hear our well-meaning words. Merely being there with them is enough. Sometimes we simply need to let our friends vent their feelings.

But because Job voiced his despair, Eliphaz recognized he had to say something to help. He began with a recognition of his respect of Job as a counselor himself. "Think of how you have instructed many, how you have strengthened feeble hands. 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 be your hope?" [Job 4:3-6] Eliphaz did know Job's life and reputation.

However, Eliphaz recognized that God is the Righteous Judge of mankind. He wanted to give Job the hope that God knew the reason for Job's situation. In verse 7 he encouraged Job to remember God's fairness in judgment. "Consider now: Who, being innocent has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it." [Job 4:7,8]

Eliphaz was making a point that when people act wickedly and sin, they reap the consequences of that sin, no matter how mighty they may seem. He gave an illustration of clearing out a lion's den that had troubled nearby villages. When the great lion's teeth are broken, the den mates can't be fed and they are scattered.

Next, he related that he was given a vision in a dream at night where a spirit spoke to him. The spirit asked him, "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can even a strong man be more pure than his Maker? If God places no trust in His servants, if He charges His angels with error, how much more those who live in houses of clay, whose foundations are in the dust, who are crushed more readily than a moth!" [Job 4:17-19]

These two illustrations emphasize that "might doesn't make right." Our Righteous Judge has no problem bringing down the strongest person when He punishes their sins. He knows all of the evil of mankind. And, since He punishes even His servants the angels for disobedience, such as casting Satan to the earth for his rebellion, He will surely punish people for their sins.

Eliphaz also spoke of observing a fool who lets envy and resentment destroy himself. Then his children were left defenseless and his wealth was crushed in the courts, his harvest is taken by others. (Job 5:1-5)

He makes the point in verse 6, "For hardship does not spring from the soil, nor does trouble sprout from the ground." [Job 5:6] Consequences are the results of our actions. Troubles don't just suddenly spring upon us. "Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward." [Job 5:7]

Eliphaz is speaking in generalities in this chapter. But these illustrations he used were probably meant to remind Job that perhaps his wealth and family had been lost due to some

sin that Job had done in his past. Even though Job had wealth and respect, God as the Righteous Judge would not let him live in sin.

But Eliphaz didn't linger on such accusations. He moved on to speak of God as a Beneficent Provider to all. In verses 9 and 10 he reminded Job that because God performs wonders and miracles, Job should appeal to God and lay his case before Him.

Up until this point, Job was lamenting his pain and loss. He had not asked God for leniency, but to stop his pain by ending his life! Since God surely stops even powerful, evil men from hurting others and, in His mercy, God gives the poor help and hope, surely God will hear Job's case and bring him hope too.

Eliphaz challenged Job to examine his heart to see if he had any sin he had not confessed. Although Job was known as a man of integrity, his friends saw his trouble and worried that maybe he had unconfessed sin in his heart. David in the Psalms also realized that people easily overlook sin in their hearts. He knew he needed God's examination to root out any sin that remained – even after he had confessed all he knew.

David penned Psalm 139 with this in mind. His request in verses 23 and 24 have helped many of us place ourselves willingly under our Lord's scrutiny. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." [Psalm 139:23, 24]

Job had been a man who realized this principle. He conscientiously attempted to keep his children living pure lives, and had even offered sacrifices for them just in case they had sinned unknowingly. (Job 1:5) Eliphaz put it this way in our memory verse: "Behold, happy is the man whom God corrects, therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty." [Job 5:17]

In Hebrews chapter 12 Christians are reminded that God loves us like His own children and so corrects those He loves. Verses 10 and 11 explain, "...God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." [Hebrews 12:10b, 11]

The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin. He also reminds believers to confess our sin. The disciple John challenged believers to consistently pray to keep our hearts clear from the contamination of sin. 1 John 1:9 encourages us that God is ready to forgive us. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." [1 John 1:9] God provided this way of confession for His people to keep sin cleared out of our lives – He purifies us from even the ones we don't remember.

Eliphaz reminded Job that although God disciplines us for our sins, God corrects His children in Mercy. "For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal." [Job 5: 18] The phrase "he wounds" refers to using a knife as a scalpel to make a cut in order to remove diseased tissue. But God does not merely wound, he also "binds up" the

wound to help the resulting wound to heal. His discipline is to cause healing from the disease of sin. In His mercy, God will not leave us to the destruction of sin in our lives.

God rescues those he loves:

1. from famines (v.20, 22)
2. from battle wounds (v. 20)
3. from wild animals (v. 22)
4. from destruction (natural disasters) (v. 21, 22)
5. from adversity (stones in the field) (v. 23)
6. from thieves (v. 24)
7. from lives cut short (v.26)

In all these ways, Eliphaz said, God, mercifully rids our lives of sin and seeks to bless those who live according to His ways. Therefore, he closes his first speech with the words, "We have examined this, and it is true. So, hear it and apply it to yourself." He has shared how he observed sin to be at the root of mankind's troubles. He has done so, in hopes of helping his friend, Job.

We have heard the adage: "Actions speak louder than words." But in this case, Job's pain is screaming so loudly that he can't hear the love and concern behind Eliphaz's words. His own response seemed to be that his friends have discounted his sorrow. Instead, he heard them say that he is making too much of his distress.

Job sincerely wished that he could visibly place his anguish and misery on a scale and weigh it so his friends could understand where he was coming from. He was convinced, "It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas – no wonder my words have been impetuous." [Job 6: 3] Surely God, the Righteous Judge would hold the scales and they would see how unbalanced his sorrow was up against any sin he had done!

Job felt as though the Almighty was shooting him, again and again with arrows. Surely he had every right to complain, just as wild donkeys and oxen will bellow if they are deprived of grass or fodder! In fact, food was a problem for him too! "Is tasteless food eaten without salt, or is there flavor in the sap of the mallow (or, in the white of an egg)? I refuse to touch it; such food makes me ill." [Job 6:6, 7]

I love foods of many kinds! But when I'm ill, nothing tastes good. I can't even be tempted with chocolate! Job here referred to the words of Eliphaz; such "food" or words made him ill. He just couldn't stomach Eliphaz's implied accusations.

So, Job returned to his heart cry, "Oh, that I might have my request, that God would grant what I hope for, that God would be willing to crush me, to let loose his hand and cut off my life!" [Job 6: 9] His misery was so devastating that he wished his life to be over; to bring an end to his pain.

I have been in depression like this in my life too. My mother died when she was 69, and I was 49. I was overwhelmed with my grief over losing her and could barely function.

Yet I still had good health and could occupy my days with teaching, housework, closing Mom's estate and doing probate. Yet still there were days I crumpled to the floor and pleaded with God to answer, "Why."

God has His purposes and we may never know "Why?" But Job had determined that no matter what, he would not deny the words of the Holy One. That kind of faith and trust is foundational to see us through whatever God allows into our lives.

While his friends had tried to comfort him, they gave no relief to Job's anguish or grief. Job described their attempts "as undependable as intermittent streams." [Job 6:15] In the arid wilderness, it would be necessary for travelers to know where water could be found. Caravans could find water during winter and early spring in wells or in the wadis that flowed with the melting snow.

But as spring ended, the sun would dry up these sources of water. If the caravan leaders didn't keep apprised of the changing availability of water, "Caravans turn aside from their routes; they go off into the wasteland and perish." (v.18) disappointed that the stream was now dried up. Residents of the land knew that such a source of water was undependable.

Job was saying that the advice of his friends was just like those wadis. "Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid." [Job 6:21] Could they really find the words that could bring him comfort when the sight of him in his sore infested body overwhelmed them with fear?

He had not asked them for anything. He didn't need them to pay a ransom to thieves. He didn't need them to rescue him from those enemies. They didn't need to fight ruthless robbers to rescue him from their clutches. Did he need such "friends" at all?

Job relented. Perhaps his friends may yet have something to say that could give him comfort. In verses 24 and 25 he requested, "Teach me, and I will be quiet; show me where I have been wrong. How painful are honest words!" [Job 6:24, 25a] Eliphaz had hoped his words would help Job, but instead Job's response was, "But what do your arguments prove?"

Don't we sometimes feel any words we might say would come up equally short in the ears of a suffering friend? Sometimes we won't visit a friend in desperate need, for fear that our words will just compound their pain. But when a friend is talking about ending their life, we must say something – just as Job's friends did.

Addressing the idea that Job may have some unrepented sin, Job asked, "But now be so kind as to look at me, would I lie to your face? Relent, do not be unjust; reconsider for my integrity is at stake. Is there any wickedness on my lips? Can my mouth not discern malice?" [Job 6: 28-30] Even though his pain and sorrow were unrelenting, Job tried to consider the direction of his friend's words, to see if they had validity.

Criticism hurts. Being challenged about something we've done that offended another, or was taken as an unintended insult, is difficult to bear. But, just as Job did here, we should always examine ourselves to see if there is a valid point in the accusation, and then take it to God. As the Righteous Judge He alone can purify us from our sins and faults.

In his consideration of God as the Beneficent Provider, Job spoke about the general state of mankind on the earth. He compared his own situation first with that of the life of the hardworking man. Verses 1 and 2 of chapter 7 say, "Do not mortals have hard service on earth? Are not their days like those of hired laborers? Like a slave longing for the evening shadows, or a hired laborer waiting to be paid?"

Have you tried to go about your daily chores or a job when you felt lousy? The day drags on. No matter how hard you try to immerse yourself in your responsibilities, you find yourself counting the hours and minutes, waiting for the clock to say that you can finally go home, or go to bed.

But Job didn't have any relief even when he went to bed. For months he experienced only futility by day and misery by night. "When I lie down I think, 'How long before I get up?' The night drags on, and I toss and turn until dawn." [Job 7:4] His physical sores were infected and would not allow any relief through sleep. (v.5) When he did sleep, he had terrible dreams! (14)

He described his misery again with word pictures, comparing his life's brevity and fragility. But Job is no longer speaking to his friends. Job now is speaking to God; God the Righteous Judge; God the Beneficent Provider; the God who Disciplines in Mercy.

To the great Provider, Job asks whether God understands how brief his life can be. "Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again." [Job 7:7] When we are in the fog of depression, it's easy to feel like things will never get better. Our focus is on our problems and not on the God who knows and provides for everything we need.

"As a cloud vanishes and is gone, so one who goes down to the grave does not return." [Job 7:9] Using the nature of the clouds above him, Job desired that he too could vanish and end this life of misery. He remembered that life can go quickly, like the weaver's shuttle on the loom. If only this portion of his life could end as quickly as the last slide of the shuttle.

Job considered God's Mercy. If God was disciplining him because He saw some sin in his life, could He be persuaded to ease up on such painful attention? "What is mankind that you make so much of them, that you give them so much attention,...Will you never look away from me, or let me alone even for an instant?" [Job 7:17, 19] Job never turned his back on God. He recognized that it was God's close scrutiny that Job was feeling.

Yet he didn't want to live or die with sin in his life. So, Job asked God to show him what he could have done. "If I have sinned, what have I done to you, you who see

everything we do? Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you? 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 no more." [Job 7:20, 21]

That is where our Scripture for today ends. We would worry about his state of mind, like his friends did, because he felt that death was his only way out. Yet there are a few ideas that we can examine from these chapters that help us realize the misunderstandings and truth believed by Job and his friends.

First of all, Eliphaz had the misunderstanding that all the trouble in our lives is the result of unconfessed sin. They took the principle that mankind reaps what it sows, and made the assumption that this principle explained all trouble. But there are other reasons for our difficulties. Sometimes we do reap the consequences of our sin. If I commit a crime, I should pay the penalty of jail or repayment of compensation.

However, sometimes we are caught up in disaster that is not from our own sin. Abel was killed because of Cain's sin of jealousy. David was persecuted by King Saul for years through no fault of his own.

Jesus answered His disciple's similar question in John chapter 9 when they saw a man born blind. "His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' said Jesus, 'but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.'" [John 9:2,3] God's glory was the goal of Job's pain too.

Yes, we do get ourselves into enough trouble by our sin. But we must also know that God brings glory to His Name when we keep our eyes on Him during our trouble whether caused by ourselves or not. Because we know that He is working all things out for the good He has planned. Consider how this story of Job's trouble has been used through the ages to encourage God's children when we have to walk through our own difficulties.

My daughter told me that while she walked through her 24-year-old daughter Abigail's death, by way of cancer, she didn't remember every word people used to encourage her. But later a phrase would return at just the right time, that touched her heart and helped her make it through. It was phrases that turned my heart to see God's love, that finally pulled me out of my depression too.

Let us purpose to be a friend who sits quietly beside another who is hurt or ill. Let the words we do say, be the uplifting ones bathed in God's grace, to help them see God's loving care in their distress - to build their faith - even though they may have to wait to get future clarity about "why."

Let's pray

Please stand with me while we sing the Doxology.

