

Cold Comfort

Scripture: Job 4:7-21, 5:17, 27

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People of God: What do you say to someone who is suffering? When you go to visit a friend, a family member, a fellow believer, someone who is dealing with a great burden, what words of comfort can you bring? Yes, eventually words do need to be said. After showing up, after mourning along side of the person, after simply just sharing the moment in silence, what do you say?

Words eventually need to be said. But what words? Or perhaps more importantly, what words should not be spoken? It is unsettling to realize that it is possible to say the wrong thing and make matters worse. And it is truly unsettling to think that it is possible that even our pious words, our seemingly correct biblical words, actually do more harm than good.

How would you have responded to Job? Not just to his suffering, as intense and harsh as it was. But also to his lament in chapter three, when Job curses the day he was born and asks why was he ever born. How do you deal with that? I would think that you would speak with some hesitation and caution, with some semblance of sympathy and pity.

But that's not how Eliphaz responds. Reading through his opening speech, it sounds as if he hadn't heard a word of Job. This sounds like a well-rehearsed speech, as he expresses his opinion, with a condescending attitude. He's quite certain and dogmatic about his position. He even claims divine inspiration for it. In 4:12, he says, "A word was secretly brought to me, my ears caught a whisper of it." He implies that God has given these words to say to him through a dream. And who can argue with God?

I hear from time to time that sentiment. The Lord spoke to me. The Spirit leads me to this. I do not question the leading of the Lord in our lives.

But I do question, how we can use the Lord to back up our case. A red flag rises in my mind, when someone begins “The Lord spoke to me...” Because it is often used to stifle debate. Who am I to disagree with God? But then, we have the final revelation of God in Jesus Christ, as revealed in his Word.

Eliphaz claimed divine inspiration for his words. Oh, what a dangerous and foolish thing to do, especially when you end up being completely wrong!

So what is Eliphaz’s answer to Job’s suffering? Well, it is very clear to Eliphaz that God punishes the evildoer and rewards the righteous. That basic perspective is stated in 4:7-9:

Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed.

In Eliphaz’s mind, there is no alternative; there are no exceptions. This is the way it is, the way it always is: Sin equals suffering, righteousness equals blessing.

And if that is the case, then we just have to apply that standard to the case before us: Job, you must have sinned because you are suffering. God must be punishing you. God is disciplining him. And that’s a good thing, because then Job can repent. Eliphaz puts it this way: (5:17)

Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.

And so, with a strong sense of arrogance and certainty, Eliphaz concludes: “We have examined this and it is true. So hear it and apply it to yourself.” (vs. 27) Eliphaz’s formula gives him no alternative. Suffering is the punishment for sin. Job is suffering. So he must have sinned. It’s as simple as that.

The theology of Eliphaz is alive and well in the church today. We come across it most clearly in the health and wealth gospel, though milder versions abound everywhere. But it is most consistently expressed in the health and wealth movement, also known as the prosperity gospel. It’s been promoted by the likes of Jimmy Baker, Benny Hinn, and Kenneth Copeland.

It’s an appealing message: God wants to bless you. God wants to do more than just save you from your sins. God wants to shower blessings upon you. God has a complete plan for your health and wellness. In Christ, you are victorious. You can overcome not just sin and temptation, but also disease and financial debt. You can have it all in Christ.

Of course, the implication is that if you do not have it all, it’s because you do not have Christ. You must not be faithful enough. You must not be praying enough. You must have sinned and that’s blocking your ability to

live the victorious life. Because a righteous person can have it all: not just forgiveness, but health and wealth is yours. The prosperous life. Guaranteed.

What an appealing message! Where does this theology come from? Where does Eliphaz get his theology? From the Bible. That's right. It's all found in the Bible. It comes from two complementary ideas.

First, isn't suffering due to the result of the curse? Yes, it is. Disease and death, suffering and affliction were never part of God's original good creation. They entered our world with humanity's fall into sin. They were the consequences of Adam and Eve's rebellion. To the extent that we—all of humanity—share in this original sin—and we do share in it—we are responsible for what happened. We can't blame God for making a mess of our world. It's humanity's fault.

And so suffering is due to the reality of living in a broken, sin-stained world. In a world where sin, evil and Satan can run amok, there will be suffering. We all bear the effects of the fall into sin. It's what we call "total depravity": sin affects the totality of life.

But does that mean we can make a direct correlation between specific sin and suffering? Is it the case that the more we sin, the more we will suffer? Do we have suffering coming to us? Aren't we getting our just desserts?

If humanity should get what we deserve, we'd all be already dead. No one deserves life. No one deserves a good life. We've all fallen short of the glory of God. We all deserve death—eternal death. But God in his mercy didn't allow that to happen. He restrains the effects of sin and the curse. We do have life. We can enjoy a good life. We can have eternal life in Christ.

But the complete effects of the fall into sin have not yet been completely wiped away in Jesus Christ. Until our glorification, until the purification of this creation, the effects of sin will continue to stain our world and touch our lives. As a result, disease and suffering is still part of human experience, even the Christian life.

But some ask: But can't there be a direct connection between our sin and our suffering? Don't certain sins lead to certain diseases? After all, if a person sins by driving drunk and ends up being injured, when he smashes into a tree, isn't that his fault? Others view AIDS as a judgment upon the gay community. And indeed, sexual promiscuity can lead to certain diseases.

So yes, there can be a direct connection between sin and disease, but even in these cases the situation is not clear-cut. After all, the drunk driver may indeed get into an accident, but the person who dies could be the innocent victim in the other car, while the drunk driver just walks away from the scene. And there are plenty of cases, where it is the unfaithful husband

who passes the HIV virus to the unsuspecting wife, who passes it on the unborn child.

As a result, while we can say the presence of disease and suffering is due to the fall into sin, we cannot simply draw lines between this sin and that disease. Eliphaz tried to do that with Job. But as we who know the opening chapter of the book, Job did nothing wrong to deserve his particular misery. He was caught up in the conflict between God and Satan.

In addition, to reflecting upon the general connections between sin and suffering, we also need to deal with the biblical view of blessing and curse. Eliphaz and the modern day advocates of the health and wealth gospel are also working out the implications of bible passages like Psalm One.

Psalm One reflects the basic perspective concerning the two ways a person can follow in life. The way with God and the way with wickedness. “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, but his delight in the law of the Lord... Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked... For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

Psalm One makes clear that God blesses the righteous and curses the wicked. This is echoed throughout the Psalms, as well as the book of Deuteronomy, where God promises to bless his people in the Promised Land if they remain faithful to him. But if they disobey, they will be punished.

Eliphaz works out of this basic framework. So do the preachers that peddle the prosperity gospel. They are tapping into something biblical and right. God does promise to bless the righteous and punish the wicked. So where does Eliphaz go wrong? (Again, we know he is wrong, because of what we know from the opening chapter. Job is suffering not because he is wicked, but precisely because he is righteous—seeming the opposite of Psalm One). So where does Eliphaz go wrong? Where does the health and wealth gospel go wrong?

Because they fail to take into account that these blessings and curses are not always realized here in this life, but possibly only in the life to come. In this present world, there are many who live a life rejecting God, many who carry out injustice and they seem to get away with it, while the faithful are trampled upon.

In Psalm 73, the psalmist struggles with that dilemma. He sees how the wicked prosper, they are carefree and increase in wealth, while he suffered trying to be faithful to the Lord. What’s up with that? But then he realized their final destiny. In the end, the unrepented wicked and unfaithful will perish, while those who are true to the Lord will be taken to glory.

And so the perspective Psalm One requires the long-term view. In this present world, it is not a neat, simple equation, where faith leads to health and wealth. In fact, in this present world, faith may actually lead to suffering and persecution. But in the end, God's people are indeed richly blessed. That's where the prosperity gospel goes wrong. They fail to take into consideration, the long-term perspective. They seek to take what can only be fully realized in the future and apply it too crudely, and too materialistically, in the present.

In the ministry of Jesus, Jesus often encountered disease and suffering. He also encountered the perspective of Eliphaz. An episode in John 9 provides an example of that. Jesus encounters a blind man. And the disciples asked him: Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" That's the perspective of Eliphaz. There must be a direct connection between sin and disease. Here was an opportunity for Jesus to affirm the perspective of Eliphaz, but instead, Jesus rejects it. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." Then, Jesus proceeded to heal the blind man.

Jesus did not seek to lay blame. Instead, he came to overcome suffering.

And in Jesus, we have one who was more righteous than Job. And we have in Jesus, someone who suffered far more than Job. Throughout his life, but especially through his death on the cross, Jesus endured a type of suffering that no one else could have endured; that no one else could bear. According to the framework of Eliphaz, Jesus must have had it coming. But Jesus was a perfect man. According to the promises of the health and wealth gospel, Jesus should have had it all. But he was born in a manger and he died upon the cross.

And so in Eliphaz, we are cautioned in how we respond to suffering and disease. We need to be careful in how we use the Bible, because we can easily get it wrong. When I hear, "if only you had enough faith", "if only you prayed more," "it must have been God's will," then I cringe and ask whether we have the full biblical perspective.

We do know why there is suffering and disease in our world. It's all part of the effects of the fall into sin. But one person suffers more than another is a mystery to me. Unless we get a glimpse of what is going on behind the scenes, like in the case of Job, we may never know why one person suffers more than another. But what we do know is how God, in Christ, is overcoming the suffering of our lives. We know that in Christ, God is making all things new. And that long-term perspective is the word of hope we bring to a broken, sin-stained world. Amen.