

Women's Bible Study ~ Fall 2017: #WhenLifeStinks
What to Say to a Suffering Person ~ Job 2:11-13
Excerpts from Jobs Friends (Job 4-5, 8, 11, 15, 18, 20, 30-37)
October 4 ~ Jann Wright



Welcome to Women's Bible Study. This is the third lesson in our series: #When Life Stinks. We are studying the Book of Job. In this lesson we will tackle the issue of Job's friends, specifically, "What to Say to a Suffering Person." As you open your Bibles to Job chapter 2, beginning in verse 11, let's take a few minutes to recap what has happened so far.

Review

In chapter 1, we learned that Job was a very wealthy man. He had many livestock and servants, both signs of great wealth. He had a large family composed of sons and daughters. In the context of ancient culture and even by modern non-Christian cultural standards we would say that he was blessed.

He was also a righteous man. He wasn't perfect, but he loved, worshipped, and served God. Verse 1, says he turned away from evil. He was a man of deep integrity and he lived his life intent on following God.

He is the focal point of a heavenly confrontation between God and Satan. God points out to the accuser that Job is his servant, blameless, upright, serves God and shuns evil. The accuser counters by charging that Job is only willing to serve God because he experiences so many blessings and God has put a hedge of protection around him.

Satan is given permission to attack Job and the hedge is withdrawn. Waves of destruction follow and it seems Job hardly has time to catch his breath from one calamity before he receives the report of the next.

He loses: his livestock (oxen, donkeys, sheep, camels), his servants, his sons and his daughters. In round two he loses his health, he has sores and boils amid other graphic ailments.

Scripture Passage

Let's pick up the narrative in Chapter 2, beginning with verse 11:

¹¹When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.

¹²When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. ¹³Then they sat

on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.¹

What to Say to a Suffering Person

The example of Job's friends reminds us there is a lot to do before we ever speak a word to a suffering person. Job must have had an international reputation. His friends are from three different countries. The first lesson they teach us is to:

Go and Say Nothing

Notice that Job's friends made an intentional plan to go and visit Job. They planned, they prepared, and they went. This is a helpful pattern for us. When we have close friends that are suffering we too can make a plan to go.

Take in the Context

When you go, take in the context. Really spend the time and effort to look and see what is happening in the person's life. Notice physically what might be a challenge for them. Notice what might be some of their needs. As a friend you probably know something about the rhythm of their life that will help you understand what is now different about their context.

Do they have a need for meals? Do they have small children? Is their yard in need of attention? Job's friends saw a picture of their friend, distressed, disfigured, and sleep deprived.

Listen

Next, Listen! Job begins speaking in chapter 3. This graph from Svea shows all the chapters in which Job speaks (Colored Graph). Listen to some excerpts from chapter 3 and even though it is out of chronological order, subsequent chapters. The references are all in the notes so for now just listen.

¹¹“Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? ¹²Why were there knees to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed? ¹³For now I would be lying down in peace; I would be asleep and at rest (Job 3:11-13)

²⁵What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. ²⁶I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.” (Job 3: 25,26)

²⁴If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! ³It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas—no wonder my words have been impetuous. (Job 6:2-3)

¹ All references are: Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

⁴When I lie down I think, 'How long before I get up?' The night drags on, and I toss and turn until dawn. ⁵My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering. (Job 7:4-5)

¹³When I think my bed will comfort me and my couch will ease my complaint, ¹⁴even then you frighten me with dreams and terrify me with visions, (Job 7:13-14)

²⁰If 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? ²¹Why 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 7:20-21)

We learn a lot when we listen to suffering people. We learn Job is in great pain. He is afraid. He has no sense of peace, he is in turmoil: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He feels his relationship with God has been destroyed, that God is angry at him and he doesn't know why.

Have you ever been with someone who is in the midst of suffering and all the social niceties are removed and it is just raw? As a listener it is heart wrenching.

At that point we must fight the urge to pour out words. I am a wordy person. I write a lot of words no matter what the situation. I speak a lot of words, I say too many words, and I interrupt others way too often. I am working on that!

We have to learn to listen. I notice that Job's friends at this initial encounter do a good job of not saying a word. The text says they sat with him for seven days and seven nights and said nothing. Perhaps the seven days is symbolic for a perfect amount of time. I don't know, but how about if we start with seven minutes. I challenge all of us the next time we go to someone who is suffering, let us try just taking it all in for seven minutes. Just enter into the raw pain and ugliness and listen.

Job's friends did well in this first stage. They made an intentional plan to go. They spent time taking in the context, and they said nothing. Whether they actually were listening is debatable. However, it was when they opened their mouths that trouble began.

Speeches

Job's interaction with his friends consumes the bulk of the book. It is hard to know what to term the exchange of words in the next chapters. Is it a discussion? Is it a debate with all sides of the issue being considered? Is it an argument like in a courtroom with the prosecution presenting their side and Job as the defendant responding? Even scholars find it hard to agree on the terminology for this middle section, not to mention the words exchanged between Job and his friends don't conform to a neat outline.

Let's look at some excerpts from Job's friends and see how they defined Job's problem and what they proposed as a remedy. Let's begin with Eliphaz.

Eliphaz

Eliphaz was likely the eldest of the friends and that is why he spoke first. He begins with some compliments in the opening verses of chapter 4. Then he utters the proverbial BUT and starts right in on Job. The references are in your notes.

⁵But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged; it strikes you, and you are dismayed. ⁶Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope? ⁷“Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? ⁸As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. (Job 4:5-8)

He goes on:

¹⁷“Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can even a strong man be more pure than his Maker? ¹⁸If God places no trust in his servants, if he charges his angels with error, ¹⁹how 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)

The short version of the problem is Job you have sinned and you are being punished. Eliphaz also notes that he has received a special revelation regarding this matter when he says a spirit appeared to him in a dream (Job 4:12-19) The remedy of course is for Job to confess his sin and be restored.

The Holman Commentary notes that in round one of the speeches Job's friends hint at his sin. In round two they insinuate his sins. In round three they cite Job's sin. So as we listen to his friends we will hear this progression.² Next we encounter Bildad, chapter 8 beginning with verse 1.

Then Bildad the Shuhite replied: ²“How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind. ³Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right? ⁴When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.

Wow! To a grieving and devastated father, he has just said that his children were killed as a result of their sin! He continues . . .

⁵But if you will seek God earnestly and plead with the Almighty, ⁶if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous state. ⁷Your beginnings will seem humble, so prosperous will your future be. ⁸“Ask the former generation and find out what their ancestors learned, ⁹for we were born only yesterday and know nothing, and our days on earth are but a shadow. ¹⁰Will they not instruct you and tell you? Will they not bring forth words from their understanding? (Job 8:1-10)

Bildad identifies the same problem as Eliphaz, Job has sinned and his suffering is an appropriate punishment. The remedy is to confess and be restored. Bildad doesn't claim special revelation, rather he refers to the teachings and traditions of their ancestors.

Themes

²Anders, Max, ed. *Holman Old Testament Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004. Print. page 44.

I could go on with additional excerpts and examples, but they really are all along the same theme. Job has sinned and his suffering is punishment for that sin. The remedy is confession and repentance.

Cultural Setting

It might help to better understand these passages by looking at the cultural setting. While this is an ancient book, it is very Israelite in thought.

Israelite Thought³

To an Israelite there was no question that:

- God is all powerful and sovereign over everything.
- God is absolutely just and everything He does is just.
- No human is completely innocent.

Therefore, the logical conclusion was if a person was suffering; especially in the severe way that Job was, clearly he had sinned and was being punished. We see this thought in action when Jesus and the disciples encountered a blind man in John 9:1-2. *As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* To them the disease of blindness was obviously caused by sin and the only remaining question was whose sin.

Implications

Our worldview impacts our thinking which influences our actions and our words. To the Israelite, prosperity was an outward indicator of spiritual well-being. So suffering was met with little compassion, after all people like Job deserved suffering. Another implication is that there was only one solution to the problem and that was to confess their sin, be forgiven, and then they would be restored.

Obviously this presents several problems, even we can look around and see that righteousness is not always rewarded on this earth and wickedness is not immediately punished. We also can observe that riches are not an indicator of spiritual health. Job could see it, surely his friends observed this as well no matter what they said.

A second problem was that the righteous person would have to torment themselves to figure out what they were to confess because while they were not perfect they would have had no clue what sin would result in this kind of devastation. We see at points Job trying to go through a list of possible sins. Thirdly, the confession would not necessarily result in material restoration and so there would never be adequate evidence to others that confession had been made.

Western Thought

Lest we be too hard on the disciples and the Israelites, we in the Western World have our own set of postulates in the logical equation as well.

³NIV Study Bible, 10th Anniversary. Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan. page 723

- We consider humans to be the innocent victims of all that happens to them.
- We doubt at times whether God is all powerful and sovereign.
In fact, the argument runs something like this quote from the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary⁴, "If God were perfectly good, he could not tolerate the existence of violence, disease, etc.; therefore there must be some limit to his ability to control such events, that is he is not almighty."
- We also doubt whether God is just.
"Alternatively, if God does have complete power over everything that happens, his failure to curb the wrongs that occur must be due to the fact that he does not see anything wrong in them, that is, he is not good."⁵

Implications

There are implications to this thinking as well. One is that sin is not acknowledged, confession is not made, and accepting the forgiveness offered through Christ is not even considered. Additionally without a powerful, sovereign, and just God we have little to offer a suffering person. If God is not in control and if he is not good where do we go for help?

Biblical Perspective

Clearly both the Israelite and Western perspective have errors. We must look at the Bible for the true perspective. This is what makes listening to Job's friends so hard. They were in fact accurate about a great many of the theological truths that they "preached" to Job.

Sin is a real concern. Sin has deadly consequences. Sin separates us from God. It creates consequences in our daily lives like damaged relationships. It inflicts pain and destruction on others. There is truth in the assertion that we reap what we sow. Sin has eternal consequences. (Romans 6:23)

They are correct in their assertions that there is No one who is righteous but God (Romans 3:10). We have all fallen short. We have all sinned. (Romans 3:23)

Yet, there is a provision for our sins. There is a mediator between us and God, Jesus Christ. He will grant us his own righteousness which makes us righteous before God. (Romans 5:8)

Job's friends had much of their theology correct, it was the application that caused difficulties. Job was a righteous man. God tells us he was righteous. We can have no greater authority. Job clearly understood the concept of sacrifice for one's sins which was the shadow, the glimpse of the ultimate provision, a perfect sacrifice, Jesus Christ. Job wracked his brain trying to figure out what he should confess and he just couldn't come up with anything substantial.

⁴Andersen, Francis I. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1976. Print page 67.

⁵Anderson page 67

But through Jesus' discussion with his disciples we learn that sin and suffering are not always cause and effect because in response to the disciples' question about the blind man. He says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him". (John 9:3) Suffering can be a demonstration of God's mighty works.

Seven Practical Applications

What do we say to a suffering person?

1. Go and Say Nothing

Going is for those who are in that close relationship. It is not appropriate for all of us to go in every situation. But if we are one of the close friends, we must realize when we are allowed to enter into the place of another's suffering, we are on Holy Ground, and we must take in the context, listen, and then choose our words very carefully.

2. Offer Words of Compassion

Eventually, whether we are close friends or not with someone we will encounter those who are suffering and we need to know what to say. Offer words of compassion. "I am sorry this is happening to you." "Your heart must be breaking." "I can't imagine what this must be like for you."

3. Speak the Truth of Scripture

Remember the misapplication of theology was what got Job's friends heading in the wrong direction. Speak the truth of Scripture. Start with the absolute clearest pieces of theology.

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer last year, I remember sitting in my doctor's office, tears running down my face, saying "How will I get through this?" She said, "you will get through this by relying on the words you have taught in Bible Study these many years, only now we have to remind you of those truths".

Even faithful Christians in crisis, while they know the truth they need encouragement from fellow believers to remember those truths. Start with basic simple truths: God is loving, God is compassionate, God is sovereign, God is just. We need a Savior, Grace and Mercy are available. We have the gift of eternal life.

Also consider short bits of scripture to share with a hurting person, not long passages, or whole books for them to study. Often those suffering are in pure survival mode, not often at a place where they can take in academic textbooks.

4. Acknowledge the Elephant in the Room

Sheryl Sanberg is the chief operating officer at Facebook and best-selling author. In 2015 on a vacation with friends she found her husband, Dave, dead on the floor of the hotel gym. In her book, Option B she described what it is like when people avoid the hard topic of grief.

"I couldn't understand when friends didn't ask me how I was. I felt invisible, as if I were standing in front of them but they couldn't see me. When someone shows

up with a cast, we immediately inquire, "What happened?" If your ankle gets shattered, people ask to hear the story. If your life gets shattered, they don't.

People continually avoided the subject. I went to a close friend's house for dinner, and she and her husband made small talk the entire time. I listened mystified, keeping my thoughts to myself. *"You're right, the Warriors are totally crushing it! And you know who really loved that team? Dave.*

I got e-mails from friends asking me to fly to their cities to speak at their events without acknowledging that travel might be more difficult for me now. *Oh, it's just an overnight? Sure, I'll see if Dave can come back to life and put the kids to bed.* I ran into friends at local parks who talked about the weather. *Yes! The weather has been weird with all this rain and death."*⁶

Acknowledge the elephant in the room.

5. Ask, "How are you, today?"

Another helpful phrase from Sandberg is to ask "How are you, today?"⁷ This is a much better question than, "How are you?" How are you is so overused most people are not sure that you really care, especially when you ask as you walk down a hallway and don't wait for an answer. "How are you?" also leaves the suffering person at a loss as to where to start. Do they give you an updated history? Do they give you a quick synopsis? Do they assume you want a friendly, "I am fine." It is a hard question to answer.

But, "How are you today?" acknowledges that each day is hard and brings its own challenges. Having to answer for only one day, gives a person a lot of choices. I asked someone recently whose husband had just died a few weeks prior, "How are you, today?" She said, "Today, was hard, I was sorting my husband's clothes to give them away." That gives a real window into their reality and practical ways to help .

6. Avoid Speaking for God or Answering the Why Question.

When Job's friends tried to speak for God or answer the why question that is when they got off the mark. We know they were off the mark because God tells us that Job was righteous and in the end condemns the words of his friends and tells them to offer a sacrifice and ask Job to pray for them. (Job 42:7-9)

Avoid speaking for God. Consider Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was in agony as the reality of the cross was unfolding. He left the disciples to sit while he prayed, but he took Peter, James, and John further into the garden.

³⁸Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." ³⁹Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." ⁴⁰Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. (Matthew 26:38-40)

⁶Sandberg, Sheryl and Grant, Adam. *Option B*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2017. Print. page 32.

⁷Sandberg, Sheryl and Grant, Adam. *Option B*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2017. Print. page 36-38.

Jesus didn't need those men to speak for God. He was God. He didn't need them to answer the why question either. What he needed from them was to be present, to watch and to pray. As for what to say, try, "I don't know or understand the path you are walking, but I am going to walk with you".

7. One of the most powerful ways to use your words is to pray.

A couple of years ago I was beginning a walk with a friend through a very deep valley of sickness and suffering. I asked how I could pray for her and I will never forget her words, "Pray my faith won't fail." It was one of those raw moments that in retrospect taught me why it is so important to listen and use words carefully. I wondered in that moment how you help someone when their foundational faith core is rocked. My overwhelming thought was the Armor of God. You know the pieces we learned about as children, the breastplate, the helmet, but the piece I was thinking of was the shield of faith. I know it is not historically accurate, but the one I pictured was the play set that is advertised for children, you know with the little roundish plastic shield, which doesn't seem much of a defensive weapon at all.

Actually, Roman shields were more rectangular and bigger. But my thought was what happens when you are just too weak or worn down to hold up your shield since it is such a big part of your protection. What then? I asked several friends, but couldn't seem to find an answer that was consistent with the Bible.

In the summer of 2016 we were in England for Ashley's graduation. (picture) While we were there we decided to do some sight-seeing. Our children really wanted to go to Hadrian's wall, of which I knew nothing, but learned a great deal. Part of our tour included the Roman Army Museum. Our guide said as long as we were in the area we had to see it and he was so adamant that he threw in the entrance fee for free.

So we went and as I walked into the museum this is what I saw. (Picture) That shield is huge. As I stood right in front of the life size replica, I marveled how massive it was and how a person could hide behind it. And the shield of faith made a lot more sense than it ever had before to me. Then I walked over to a video presentation that explained some of the methods of battle readiness for Roman Soldiers, not really my cup of tea, but Scotty loved it. There I discovered a great treasure.

You see the Roman shield was often used to protect soldiers as they worked together. Look at this picture⁸. (Picture) They each used their shields to help protect one another, and to move as a group. They were much stronger when they worked together. In fact, in this formation they would test the strength of this particular stance by driving a cart over the top of it.

It was in this picture I saw the real beauty of Christian community, each of us coming together with the shield of faith to fight off the flaming arrows of the evil one. It also seemed to be a perfect picture of our prayers helping to shield and strengthen those who are suffering.

⁸Brocklehurst, Ruth. *Roman Army*. Usborne Discovery. Print. page 23.

Many of you have likely been on the receiving end of words from Job's friends. However, let us give more thought not to how we have been injured by words from others, but the sobering thought of how we can injure, or bring great comfort and encouragement to others by what to say to suffering people.

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