

Avoiding the Error of Eliphaz

The Hush of Heaven – Part III

Job 4-5

Introduction

There is something wonderful about well-timed, well-delivered, encouraging words.

I thought it was so kind of the students of one of our third grade Sunday school classes to write little notes to me a few months ago. Evidently they were studying the book of Acts and specifically focused on serving God.

The teachers of this class, who will remain nameless, wrote a note saying, “We talked about the many ways God is using you as a pastor.” They ended by saying, “We hope you enjoy these brief thank you notes.”

I did! Let me read a few of them to you.

Stacy wrote,

Thank you for preaching the gospel . . . I see you at 8:00 almost every Sunday morning and you do a great job. It must take a long time to think of everything God wants you to say. I'll be praying for you.

Love,

Stacy (with three kisses and three hugs and a picture of a heart with a cross inside)

A very mature Angelica wrote,

I am the one who had open heart surgery. I want to thank you for everything you have done for the church, my family and I wanted to just thank you for everything. You, the Lord, and the church have given me a blessing. If you want to talk to me I will be in church and maybe I'll see you in the hallway. So anyway, I just wanted to tell

you I love the work you've done – conferences; studies; meetings; emails, you get the point.

Your friend,

Angelica

Here is one that I did not quite know what to do with. These are my thank you notes, right? Katie writes,

I am 9 ½, almost 10. I like the people you picked out for preaching in the summer. I like your idea of the new church. I like it when you play your guitar.

I guess I am going to have to share this one with our worship pastor, David.

I love this kid, who wrote,

In Sunday school they asked us to write you a thank you note so here it is. I want to thank you.

He goes on to introduce all his family members by name, and then writes,

I really don't have anything to say so bye.

Sincerely,

David

I can just see him in class, thinking, “Whose idea was this? Pastor Davey . . . Pastor Shmavey.”

This was one of my favorites from another bold child, who wrote,

Thank you for helping the church and preaching to my mom. [I guess she needs it!] My name is Valerie and I'm sure you've

heard about me. I hope you get this building done. I will be praying for you.

Love,

Valerie

So let us get this building done! I do not want to have to face her!

What encouraging words these are from kids.

Solomon was right when he wrote,

Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. (Proverbs 16:24)

He also wrote,

Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes it glad. (Proverbs 12:25)

He adds,

. . . how delightful is a timely word! (Proverbs 15:23b)

Solomon also warned of the deadly power of words, when he wrote,

A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit. (Proverbs 15:4)

In the New Testament book of James, the tongue is compared to a forest fire that,

. . . sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. . . . it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. (James 3:5-8)

There is nothing more refreshing, timely, encouraging, uplifting, or instructive than words.

At the same time, there is nothing more destructive, defeating, discouraging, deflating, or depressing than ill-timed, unwise, uncaring, unfeeling, self-centered, self-promoting words.

In seven days of silence, on the ash heap in intense pain and grief, sits one of the greatest and godliest men of the East. His name would become synonymous with suffering. For one week, his three esteemed friends who traveled from afar to be with him, sat there in silence.

Finally, after seven days, Job breaks the silence and pours out his pain and grief. While he does not curse God, Job does curse the day he was born.

In Job chapter 3, he says, "Why did I not die at birth? . . ." (Job 3:11); "Why wasn't I miscarried?..." (Job 3:16 paraphrased), "at least those who are dead are at rest" (Job 3:17 paraphrased). But I had to be born so that I could grow up and experience 'the

worst of any man's fears; the terrors that I dreaded beyond my wildest nightmare have happened to me' (Job 3:25 paraphrased)."

It was an explosive, lamenting, depressed and despairing cry of a man who just wanted to die.

Now, following this eruption of bitter emotion, the oldest of Job's three friends delivers a speech.

The Comfortless Words of Eliphaz

Eliphaz will speak. His words are fairly easy to outline with four different characteristics.

In his opening words, he pretends to care.

1. Number one: Eliphaz pretends concern.

Look at Job 4:1-2a.

Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered,

If one ventures a word with you, will you become impatient? . . .

In other words, "Are you going to get mad at me if I say something?"

By the way, Job will actually control his anger and hurt and not interrupt Eliphaz, even though the words of Eliphaz are uncaring and arrogant. You will see what I mean as we go along.

Continue to Job 4:3-4.

Behold, you have admonished many, and you have strengthened weak hands.

Your words have helped the tottering to stand, and you have strengthened feeble knees.

If I could summarize his meaning in these opening remarks, it is basically, "Job, you've done a wonderful job in the past of helping people who are discouraged. You've admonished them to walk the right way; you've strengthened people who were defeated and filled with despair . . . and . . . and . . . this isn't a bad start . . ."

We would want to read next,

And now, Job, it is time for someone to come along and strengthen your hands; to put wind into your sails . . . We're here to reassure you and comfort you.

These are the words Job probably hungered to hear. However, notice the next word in Job 4:5,

But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you and you are dismayed.

In other words, "You can dish it out, but you can't take it. You can tell others what to do to get

back up on their feet, but now you won't do it yourself."

The words, "You are dismayed," literally mean, "You are in a panic."

These heartless words of Eliphaz ignore something very obvious – even though someone has encouraged others in pain, they cannot easily encourage themselves.

Our words are powerfully encouraging to others, but when did you ever look in the mirror on Monday morning, give yourself a speech, and then say, "Wow, was that uplifting or what?! I'll get back to you at the same time tomorrow morning."?

At this point, it should be Eliphaz who is saying, "It's my turn now, Job, to encourage you!"

He begins by pretending to care, but he is not really concerned and he really does not care very much.

Why?

Because he does not think Job needs encouragement – he is already convinced that Job needs discipline.

So Eliphaz moves on from pretending concern.

2. Number two: Eliphaz conveys personal condemnation.

Notice Job 4:7-8.

Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed?

According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity and those who sow trouble harvest it.

This is the classic theory of human suffering, which millions of Christians believe to this day: the innocent do not suffer and the upright are not destroyed.

In other words, "The good guys always win and the bad guys always lose."¹

Everything Eliphaz will say to Job could be summarized with these words, "Job, it's all your fault!"

Can you imagine? Even if it is true, the time to tell someone this is not when they are covered with boils and mourning over the fresh graves of ten kids.

Even if Eliphaz is right, he wins the gold medal in tactless, heartless, unfeeling, uncaring, unsympathetic counsel.

Later, in Job 5:4, Eliphaz implies that Job's sons all died because of Job's foolish sin that was evidently covered up and hidden away.

What makes it even more devastating is that Job is likely to believe him. What parent has suffered the loss of a child and not wondered if they were not worthy of him. Maybe they did not deserve this child; maybe it was their fault.

I have had parents weep in my arms, asking, "Did God take my son or daughter because of something I did?"

This is a common response of a parent who would gladly have taken their child's place!

Instead of words of comfort, Eliphaz goes right for the jugular with words of condemnation.

His basic premise is:

- sin = suffering;
- suffering = judgment.

Job is suffering, therefore Job is sinning – and since Job is sinning, his suffering is ultimately the judgment of God.

Eliphaz failed to consider that Job was not sinless – no one is – but Job was innocent.

Eliphaz also overlooked the fact that while sinners will be *ultimately* judged by God, they are not all *immediately* judged.

Some sinners live a long life of wickedness and ease and then, die at an old age with plenty of money in the bank and plenty of children to fight over the inheritance.

This was Asaph's quandary when he wrote in Psalm 73:3-5, 13-14,

. . . I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For there are no pains in their death, and their body is fat.

They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind. . . .

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure . . .

for I have been . . . chastened every morning.

It is not true that sinners are judged immediately – what is true is that sinners are judged ultimately . . . finally.

Likewise, contrary to the advice of Eliphaz, the righteous do not always prosper immediately, but they will prosper ultimately . . . finally.

So what kind of evidence does Eliphaz bring to the table to prove that all sinners are judged on earth, and that Job, therefore, must be sinning?

3. Number three: Eliphaz expresses proud condescension.

From Job 4:12 all the way through Job 5:16, we could summarize Eliphaz' words with this statement to Job, "Fortunately for you, I have the answer and plenty of evidence!"

It is ironic, but this original prosperity preacher's first evidence given to Job is that he had seen a vision. Look at Job 4:12-13a.

Now a word was brought to me stealthily, and my ear received a whisper of it.

Amid disquieting thoughts from the visions of the night, . . .

Skip to Job 4:15-17.

Then a spirit passed by my face; the hair of my flesh bristled up.

It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance; a form was before my eyes; there was silence, then I heard a voice:

*"Can mankind be just before God?
Can a man be pure before his Maker?"*

These are rhetorical questions, applied to Job, and the answer is obvious – "Job, you're not just and blameless before your God."

When someone says, "I had a vision from God . . . I know the truth about you," how do we argue with that?

Once God has spoken, who can wiggle out from underneath that?

Christians use this angle all the time!

Any time a letter or conversation begins with the sentence, "God has spoken to me," there is no room for discussion.ⁱⁱ

I cannot tell you how many times over the years I have heard from people who have heard from God. Turn on your television and listen to the preacher and teacher who will spend more time telling you what God has told him or her, rather than what God has already said in His word.

When someone says, "God told me," there is nothing we can tell them! There is no chance to correct their thoughts or challenge their decisions.

What makes it doubly hard for Job is that this supposed vision is theologically correct.

It is true that:

- no man is justified before God (Job 4:17);
- men and angels err (Job 4:18);
- we live in bodies made of dust (Job 4:19);
- life is short (Job 4:20-21).

This is all theologically correct, but Eliphaz is absolutely wrong in the application of his vision to Job.

How do we know this?

Because of what God *said!* Earlier, in Job chapter 1, God made it clear that Job was not being punished for being unrighteous; he was about to be severely tested because he was righteous!

Eliphaz, the proud, arrogant, block-of-ice-for-a-heart counselor had it absolutely turned around.

Job was not suffering because he was a sinner; he was suffering because he was a saint.

However, because Eliphaz was so caught up with his own little system; his own opinion; his own self-deceived arrogance with his personal dreams and visions and experiences, which he goes on to chronicle in Job chapter 5, he now perverts his counsel and reverses godly wisdom and utters what Solomon warned,

*A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit.
(Proverbs 15:4)*

Eliphaz moves from pretend concern to personal condemnation to proud condescension, and fourthly, offers the next part of his speech.

4. Number four: Eliphaz gives perverted counsel.

We could summarize Eliphaz' words with this arrogant statement that was in his heart, "I understand God best and you've gotten on His wrong side."

Notice Job 5:8,

But as for me, I would seek God, and I would place my cause before God;

In other words, "If I were you, I would confess before God my sin and repent."

Eliphaz continues in Job 5:11, 16-18 (paraphrased), "Listen, Job, you do this and,"

. . . [God will] set on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn [will be] lifted to safety.

You will get your hope back,

Then you can be happy again, because God has disciplined you.

He inflicted pain on you, but He will give you relief; He wounds, but His hands also heal.

“Listen Job, if you’ll just admit your sin and repent, you’ll be saved from seven things that God never allows to touch the righteous. Don’t miss this – godly Christians do not suffer!”

From six troubles He will deliver you, even in seven evil will not touch you. (Job 5:19)

- Famine (Job 5:20);
- Defeat in war (Job 5:20);
- Physical abuse or violence (Job 5:21);
- Harm from wild beasts (Job 5:22);
- Financial loss (Job 5:24);
- Barrenness (Job 5:25);
- An early death (Job 5:26).

“Job, if you lay out your cause before God and walk with Him, you will have everything you’ve ever dreamed of and you will never need to fear anything.”

Notice Job 5:26a.

You will come to the grave in full vigor . . .

In other words, “You’re not even going to get sick before you die. You’re going to cross the tape without disease or any aching joints or weary limbs . . . You’ll die in the saddle.”

Continue to Job 5:27 (paraphrased), “Listen, Job,”

. . . we have investigated this, and we are telling the truth. Hear it, and know for yourself.

Instead of offering words of comfort, Eliphaz has only added to the agony of Job’s suffering.

Eliphaz has based everything he has said on a wrong assumption. Job was not suffering because he lacked holy living; he was suffering because he was the leading example of holy living on planet earth.

Eliphaz meant well, but his effect, as we will see in our next session, was devastating. His words did not help, but only deepened the hurt.

Observations for Those Who Would Offer Counsel

How can we avoid the error of Eliphaz?

Let me give several observations for those who would offer counsel.

1. Acknowledge the sufferer’s pain before you challenge their perspective.

The sufferer needs your ear and your heart before they will listen to the words of your mouth. For example:

- “I can’t imagine how difficult it must be for you to be a single mother.”
- “It must be agonizing to be facing a ten year sentence.”
- “I’m so sorry that you lost your family in that car accident when you were driving under the influence of alcohol.”
- “I’m so grieved with you that you lost your family over your adulterous lifestyle.”
- “Listen, I can’t imagine what it’s like to live with AIDS – I’m sorry that your sinful decisions brought this disease in your life.”

Even when it is their fault, and all the suffering is the consequence of their own sinful behavior, you will not be viewed by them as condoning their sin if you sympathize with their consequences.

Acknowledge their pain before you challenge their perspective.

2. Do not dissect someone’s speech; deal with their spirit.

One author called Job’s friend “Eliphaz the Exterminator”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Eliphaz listened to the despair of Job’s grief and pain and criticized what he said, rather than deal with Job’s crushed spirit which brought such words of despair to his lips.

Listen to what is being felt, and not just to what is being said.

Warren Wiersbe put it this way, “A wise counselor and comforter must listen with his heart and respond to feelings as well as to words. You do not heal a broken heart with logic; you heal a broken heart with love.”^{iv}

3. Make sure the content of your counsel is biblical truth, not personal experience.

We can illustrate truth with personal experience, whenever helpful. However, the basis of true hope and true healing is not what we have experienced, but what God has revealed. It is not what we have seen, but what God said.

If someone tells you how they are hurting and you hear yourself responding by telling them what happened to you, you may miss the mark as badly as Eliphaz.

Every time you hear the name of Eliphaz, think of an elephant – because when he got through with Job, Job felt like he had been stepped on by an elephant.

People who are in pain do not mind hearing a sermon, but they would really like some sympathy too.

Put some sugar in your medicine.

Warnings for Those Who Would Receive Counsel

As you have gone through this speech, perhaps you have not identified and been challenged by Eliphaz, but have identified with Job. You do not want to give counsel, you want to receive counsel. As you have climbed into this passage, you find yourself, not standing before Job with answers, but sitting alongside of Job with questions.

After studying this revered man's counsel – sound theology, but absolutely wrong conclusions, along with an arrogant spirit – I believe I need to give several warnings to those who identify at this time with Job.

1. Be prepared – well meaning people may only add to your pain.

One book calls them “well intentioned dragons”. They intend well, they are just unable to walk in your sandals. They cannot grasp the depth of your pain. In fact, they really do not want to hear about it!

The truth is that they have God all figured out – and your life too.

You bare your soul to them and the first thing they do is rebuke you and then correct you, or worse, ignore what you even said because they do not want to hear it or deal with it.

I read one lady's personal testimony after she discovered she had cancer. When she shared it with her mom; her mom sat there for a few moments and then said, “What do you think we should have for dinner?”

They would rather not have to handle your pain, so they change the subject as quickly as they can change the channel.

You are as crushed as if an elephant had stepped on you.

The disregard and unkindness of Eliphaz will pin Job to the ground rather than lift him up on his feet.^v

Well meaning – yes. In fact, Eliphaz is the most compassionate of the counselors who will address Job. If you can imagine, he will give Job the most sympathy of all of these men who traveled great distances to help Job get back on track.

This gets back to my point – be prepared – well meaning people may only add to your pain.

Let me give a second warning.

2. Be cautious – wrong counsel is often more readily available than wise counsel.

Since bad counsel did not stop with Eliphaz, make sure you do not give equal weight to everyone's advice.^{vi}

Are you having trouble with your marriage? The guy next to your cubicle at work might be ready with advice, but he might be out to lunch; the woman who lives next door might be full of advice, but she might be biased by her own experience and failure.

I have had couples come to my office, that were advised to divorce and to remain unmarried, yet live together.

One pastor told me recently that a couple in his church, who were faithful workers and committed church members for years, had actually gotten a divorce fifteen years earlier and were living together, along with their young children. When asked the reason, they responded that an earlier pastor had recommended this approach to keeping their bankruptcy from taking their home and possessions. They had followed his advice, transferred everything into her name, and gotten a divorce in Las Vegas. For the next fifteen years, they kept their secret. Finally, their grown children said, “This is wrong. According to the Bible, you are living in immorality – you are not married.”

This couple repented of their secret lifestyle, remarried, and reconciled with their family.

Not only should you choose your counselors carefully, even if they wear a collar or have a cross hanging on the wall or a television program on Star Angel; you should filter their advice through the word of God, prayer, and common sense, which is not really all that common anymore.^{vii}

3. Be aware – the path of pain often runs parallel with the mystery of God's plan.

Pain and the will of God are often traveling companions – and it does not make any sense to us.

The path of pain often runs parallel with the mystery of God's plans.

However, your path of pain is no mystery to God. Job will say in Job 23:10.

But He knows the way I take . . .

God knows how long you will be on that path; where it will take you; how deeply it will lead you, and why.

A young theological student came one afternoon to the great preacher C. H. Spurgeon for counsel. Spurgeon was himself a sufferer with so many pressures and so many physical ailments. This student was struggling with his lack of understanding

concerning some matters that were very troubling to him. To this Spurgeon replied, "Young man, allow me to give you this word of advice. You must expect to let God know some things which you do not understand."^{viii}

Sometimes the wisest thing to say is, "God knows – He knows and He understands."

Eliphaz, you do not know. Eliphaz, you elephant, crushing spirits with your words, you think you know everything, but you do not know anything about this.

God knows, however, and in the end, that is all that matters.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/15/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Roy B. Zuck, Job (Moody Press, 1978), p. 32.

ⁱⁱ David McKenna, Mastering the Old Testament: Job (Word, 1986), p. 60.

ⁱⁱⁱ Steven Lawson, When All Hell Breaks Loose (Navpress, 1993), p. 74.

^{iv} Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Patient: Job (Victor Books, 1991), p. 27.

^v Steven Lawson, Holman Old Testament Commentary: Job (Holman, 2004), p. 48.

^{vi} Charles Swindoll, Job: Man of Heroic Endurance (W Publishing, 2004), p. 88.

^{vii} Ibid., p. 88.

^{viii} J. Allen Blair, Living Patiently (Loizeaux Brothers, 1966), p. 39.