

Saints in the Hands of Angry Counselors

The Hush of Heaven – Part XI

Job 22-24

Introduction

Last Sunday I poked fun at people from the south with their strong southern accent. I said people can hardly understand them. I really did not mean to upset anyone. I want to apologize for bothering people in our church who are native North Carolinians – all seven of you.

I want to get back on friendly terms with the southerners here. This is where I pastor, and I love this place and I love the south.

One of the men in our church sent me a story that I thought I could use to get back on friendly terms with the south.

A Texan, a New Yorker, and a North Carolina resident were drinking their favorite beverage one afternoon in a North Carolina saloon. The Texan drained his glass of tequila, threw the half-empty bottle up in the air, drew and fired his pistol, shattering the bottle. The other two were shocked. The Texan simply announced, “Where I come from, we have plenty of that stuff.”

The New Yorker, not to be outdone, finished his glass of wine and threw his wine bottle into the air, drew and fired his pistol, also shattering his bottle. Looking over at the other two with an air of superiority, he announced, “Back in Manhattan, we have plenty of the finest wines available.”

The North Carolina resident drained his mug of sweet ice tea – which is the only drink in this story I am recommending. He threw his empty mug up into the air, drew his pistol and shot the New Yorker dead. He then caught the glass on the way down and

said to the Texan, “Where I come from, we recycle glass and we have too many people from New York.”

Now the score is even!

What I said was in fun – it really was. However, what would you do if I was really serious? What would you say to someone who really did not like people from New York, or North Carolina, or Canada, or Mexico?

Suppose someone had prejudices toward Hispanics or the Chinese or the British and you just happened to be Hispanic or Chinese or from the UK. Have you ever run into someone who disliked rich people or people in authority? Have you ever had to listen to someone go on and on about “those people on welfare”? They ride their hobby horses into the ground.

What if someone like this took their prejudice out on you? What if they did not like you – and it was no laughing matter?

How do you respond to hateful words? How do you react to personal criticism?

I am not talking about the constructive kind of criticism – I am talking about the kind that is demeaning, discrediting, down-right dirty. I am talking about the gossip mill – and you discover you are the latest topic. Your words have been twisted and your actions have been given the worst possible light – and frankly, it is ugly.

How do you react when the intention of the critic is to harm rather than help – and before you know it, the damage is done?

As we enter the third and final round of speeches from Job's counselors, this is exactly the position in which we find Job.

Job has been enduring, for some time, the hush of heaven. The heavens have been silent; God has not spoken to him, but the counselors surely have. And frankly, it is getting ugly and mean-spirited.

By the time we reach Job chapter 22, we discover that his counselors do not want to help him as much as they want to condemn him. From this point on, Job will become a saint in the hands of an angry counselor.

Understand that one of the most important things about the next encounter with Eliphaz, the wise counselor who missed it by a mile, is the way in which Job responds to his unfair, untrue, unkind criticism and condemnation.

Perhaps you are in this position now. Maybe your actions have been misinterpreted or your words have been misquoted or your heart has been misunderstood and some critic is having a field day at your place of work or inside your family circle or even in your church. Perhaps you are wondering what to do.

This chapter in Job's life is especially for you.

In Chuck Swindoll's commentary on the Book of Job, he entitles his chapter that expounds on Job chapters 22-24 with this title, "How to Handle Criticism with Class".

How true this title is.

Swindoll opens this chapter with an illustration. Let me repeat his words.

Our nation's 16th president was a magnificent model of handling personal assaults on his character. Public criticism against him intensified. One of his biographers said that Abraham Lincoln was slandered, libeled, and hated perhaps more intensely than any man ever to run for the nation's highest office. He was publicly called just about every name imaginable by the press of his day, including a baboon, a third-rate country lawyer, a vulgar jokester, a dictator, an ape, a buffoon, etc. Severe and unjust criticism did not subside . . . and as his enemies increased, so did the criticism against him. But Lincoln, his biographer wrote, handled it all with a patience, forbearance and determination uncommon of most men.ⁱ

Lincoln survived and was later vindicated by history as one of the greatest presidents this country ever had. He was grace under pressure.

Perhaps nowhere in the biography of Job will we see grace under pressure more than in the next few chapters. Not only will we discover how to respond to unjust and harmful criticism, we are going to get another good lesson on how to be a bad counselor.

Eliphaz – An Angry Counselor

Eliphaz, in fact, will commit five blunders; five missteps that can be our own as we attempt to counsel others. I will use these five blunders to serve as an outline as we look at Eliphaz's angry speech to Job. Turn to Job chapter 22.

I find it ironic that this will be the last time Eliphaz speaks before he is ultimately chastised by God and told to ask Job to pray for him so that he will be forgiven.

God Himself, in just a few chapters, will vindicate the character of Job.

Let us look at the wrong way to counsel.

1. **Number one: condemn someone without taking the time to identify the context.**

Notice Job 22:1-3.

*Then Eliphaz the Temanite responded,
"Can a vigorous man be of use to God,
or a wise man be useful to himself?"*

*"Is there any pleasure to the Almighty
if you are righteous, or profit if you make
your ways perfect?"*

These words are dripping with condescension and sarcasm. In other words, "Job, do you think you are of any benefit to God? Do you think God cares about your claim to be righteous? Look around you – where is God's reassurance that you matter?"

What Eliphaz does not know is that Job is under the watchful care of God in ways he could not imagine. God and Satan, and no doubt the hosts of heaven, were directly attentive to what was happening. In fact, God is about to intervene with incredible assurance on Job's behalf.

Eliphaz did not know the context from which Job's suffering had come. Neither did Job, for that matter.

The point for a counselor is to admit they do not know everything. They could speak too quickly; they could deliver a verdict too soon.

Most of the problem stems from the fact that Eliphaz is convinced that Job has hidden sin, and that sinners get punishment from God as evidence that He knows. This reveals all over again, the utter callousness of Eliphaz to the condition of this grieving man who has lost nearly everything.

The truth is that Eliphaz really does not care about Job. Job no longer matters.

What matters is that Job's counselor has to be right. And the fact that Job will not admit that Eliphaz is right has made Eliphaz seethe with anger and resentment.

This leads me to the second blunder Eliphaz will continue to make.

2. Number two: counsel someone based entirely on outward appearances.

Notice Job 22:5.

Is not your wickedness great, and your iniquities without end?

In other words, "Job, the list of your sins is endless. How do I know? Because the obvious judgment of God is endless. Look at you! Your hidden sins are great because the punishment of God is great. It's clear from your diseases and losses that you are not the wisest man in the east, you are the greatest sinner in the east."

How often people view our losses and diseases as proof of God's discipline. However, we know what Eliphaz and even Job do not know. In Job chapter 1, God said to Satan, "Do you want to test a blameless and upright man who fears Me and refuses to do evil things? Then test My servant Job."

The trials of Job were not produced because he was a sinner, but because he was not. He was not perfect, but he passionately hated sin and loved God. Job was,

. . . fearing God and turning away from evil [continually]. (Job 1:1)

Job's trials were not proof that he was in trouble with God, but that he could be trusted by God.

Eliphaz is drawing his angry and condemning verdict from the outward evidences of what looked like God's displeasure, when they were in fact, evidences of God's delight in Job.

God has chosen to hold Job forth as a living testimony to Satan, the hosts of heaven and hell, and to all of humanity since, who have read these words, that it is possible in the midst of great suffering to not only bring God praise, but to be an object that fulfills God's purpose.

People who only look on the surface of things will never seize this deeper truth. Their view of God depends on the weather; the stock market; the job promotion; their health; smooth sailing; etc.

This is Eliphaz the Temanite. He appears to be wise, but in the end, he is shallow and fleshly.

He does not stop blundering. In fact, he has already done all of this before. At this point, Eliphaz goes even further down the wrong path. Let us look at Eliphaz's third blunder, which can be made by all who counsel after the flesh.

3. Number three: take on the role of omniscient God; that is, in our vernacular, take on the role of the Holy Spirit.

Eliphaz is literally going to start making up sins. He is going to literally start accusing Job of stuff Job has never done. He is so convinced that Job is guilty of hidden sins and things that have not been brought by witnesses or reports, that he now starts offering what he thinks they are.

Eliphaz is so angry he cannot keep it in any longer. He will prove Job an unrepentant sinner, even though, as we have just recalled, Job chapter 1 lets us know that Job's reputation was impeccable and upright in the community.

- Eliphaz accuses Job of unbridled greed.

Notice Job 22:6.

For you have taken pledges of your brothers without cause and stripped men naked.

This was a serious accusation. In Job's day, common decency dictated that if a man were forced to give his outer garment as a pledge that he would pay his debt to a creditor; the creditor would normally return it to him for the cold night when their cloak also served as their blanket.ⁱⁱ

Eliphaz effectively says to Job, "Not only do you not return the coat; you take the rest of the man's clothes so that he is stripped naked and left to the harsh elements without covering or warmth."

In other words, "Job, you are a heartless, crass, greedy man – that's your problem."

Job stood up and said, in verse 7, "*You're lying – I did no such thing.*"

Oh, there is no such verse. Job does not interrupt.

- Eliphaz condemns Job for heartless unconcern for the needy.

Note Job 22:7.

To the weary you have given no water to drink, and from the hungry you have withheld bread.

In other words, “Job, you’ve let people starve, when you could have helped.”

What Eliphaz means, as we read in Job 22:8, which drips with sarcasm, is, paraphrased, “*Even though the whole earth belongs to you – you who are supposedly honorable – you’re really heartless and selfish and bereft of any modicum of concern for anyone.*”

Again, in verse 9, Job says, “*That’s not true – I’ve got plenty of people who can testify to my generosity.*”

Oh, no word again from this saint in the hands of an angry, accusing, unkind, condemning, self-centered counselor.

- Eliphaz condemns Job for committing the lowest crime of all; the epitome of false religion – refusing to care for widows and orphans.

Look at Job 22:9.

You have sent widows away empty, and the strength of the orphans has been crushed.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Job’s entire life had been showing concern to those around him. God Himself characterized Job, in chapter 1, as a man who was the prime example of godly living on the earth.

Where did Eliphaz come up with this stuff? Had he heard it from others? Were enemies of Job delivering little bits and pieces of rumors from people who had always envied Job or resented his purity or felt convicted by his close walk with God?

Eliphaz seems convinced, and is saying, “Job, there’s no need to hide it any longer. Fess up!”

Now Eliphaz will make his fourth counseling blunder, which remains a temptation to all who will counsel another.

4. Number four: try to pressure, out of the one being counseled, a quick confession.

These charges against Job are “trumped up”. They are entirely fabricated. They are not true.

Eliphaz is actually working for the enemy, not for God.

Revelation 12:10 tells us that Satan is,
... ***the accuser of our brethren*** ...

Satan delights in bringing the believer under a cloud of guilt and a sense of displeasure from God. He wants us to throw in the towel.

Steven Lawson wrote these perceptive words regarding this scene between Eliphaz and Job. Listen carefully.

We must carefully distinguish between the conviction of the Spirit and the accusation of Satan. There is a difference. The Holy Spirit convicts us of specific sin. He will do so until we confess it. Then He will no longer convict us about that specific sin because it is forgiven.

On the other hand, Satan is a grave digger. He uncovers all kinds of dirt from our past and throws a barrage of sins at us. Sins we have committed but not confessed (to be sure). Sins we have committed but already confessed. Even sins we haven’t committed. Anything to heap guilt upon our heads. He majors on sin that does not need our attention. After we confess our sin, Satan still haunts us with guilt. He’s like a dishonest car mechanic. Even if he can’t find something that needs fixing, he’ll tell us something does. So we end up paying for things to be fixed in our lives that aren’t even broken.

Learn this. The difference between Holy Spirit conviction and Satanic accusation is the difference between a rifle and a shotgun. The Spirit directly targets areas that need confessing; He is clear, specific and true. Satan uses a shotgun approach, firing buckshot at anything and everything. He is vague, generic, and false.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is good counsel.

The truth is that we all have Eliphaz in our lives. Either the unseen enemy or someone that we can see who reminds us of everything we are not but should be and piles on the guilt and buries us under the law.

As spouses, we can play this role. As parents we can refuse to add grace to our leadership. As teachers and colleagues; business partners and classmates, we can refuse to dispense approval and commendation and praise.

Like Eliphaz, we can be more concerned about being right than we are in bringing hope.

These are the blunders of Eliphaz:

- condemning without identifying the context of suffering;

- basing counsel on outward evidences;
- playing the role of the Holy Spirit; acting as if he were omniscient and knew Job’s life and heart;
- trying to pressure Job into a quick confession.

The fifth blunder of Eliphaz follows through the rest of Job chapter 22 – primarily verse 23 to the end of the chapter.

5. Number five: promise quick solutions to the problem and ignore the deeper issues related to the problem.

We would think a switch had somehow been thrown in Eliphaz’s demeanor. Suddenly he is nice, although his pleasantness drips with condescension.

“Job,” he says in Job 22:23,

“If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored; if you remove unrighteousness far from your tent,”

“Job,” he continues, in Job 22:24 paraphrased, “get rid of whatever gold you’ve got hiding somewhere.”

The implication is, “You greedy little man.”

“Then, guess what,” Eliphaz says, in Job 22:25-26,

“. . . the Almighty will be your gold and choice silver to you.

“For then you will delight in the Almighty and lift up your face to God.”

In other words, “Job, just do as I say and all your problems will vanish.”

Look at Job 22:28.

“You will also decree a thing, and it will be established for you; and light will shine on your ways.”

“Job, you can have anything you want – just name it and you can claim it.”

Does this sound familiar?

“Hey, Job, this amazing light is just going to bathe your path from here on out – you’ll never be in the dark again.”

Isn’t this great?!

There is an ancient Hebrew word for promises of this kind – it is pronounced “ba-lo-nee”. Now you know some Hebrew.

Never mind ten graves. Never mind physical affects that Job will carry to the grave. Never mind rebuilding a business and a home from scratch.

Never mind the memories. Never mind the questions. Never mind the tears.

“Just follow my counsel Job, and you will get a brand new life.”

Job didn’t want a brand new life – he wanted his old life back. That one was just fine. But he could not have it back. There was no return to yesterday. There was only tomorrow, which looked bleak, and lonely, and confusing.

Unwise counsel is filled with superficial promises. It does not provide the steel of truth to brace ourselves with – it does not provide the strength of the Spirit of God that we will need to rebuild; to start over again; to walk with our heads up into challenges of tomorrow.

Oh the pain of these unfounded accusations, and now the trivialization of his pain with these unreasonable promises.

Job – A Saint’s Response

Not once, however, has Job interrupted Eliphaz with angry words or condemnation. Not once does Job say, “Who do you think you are?!” In fact, Job never even attempts to set the record straight, justify his character, or even defend himself against these new, sensational accusations.

Not once does Job strike back at his angry accuser. This is a lesson for all of us.

One revered Scottish author, who wrote a number of commentaries that are in my library, died in the middle of the last century. In his spiritual autobiography, he told of the tragedy of losing his 21-year-old daughter and her fiancé, who were drowned in a boating accident. It was a tragedy heard around the civilized world. He received an anonymous letter a few weeks later that said, if you can imagine this, “I know why God killed your daughter – it was to keep her from the corruption of your heresies.”

This is the counsel of Eliphaz.

This author would later write, “God did not stop that accident at sea, but He did still the storm in my own heart so that somehow my wife and I came through that terrible time still standing on our own two feet.”^{iv}

I have always admired men like the apostle Paul who stayed the course, even though near the end of his ministry his accusers had largely won the day and Paul was virtually alone. They accused him of false motives, of ineffective ministry, of lacking skill, of

manufacturing his office as an apostle; of loafing and living off handouts from others – all untrue.

I would have said that Paul was a leading model for staying the course in the face of ridicule and accusation and innuendo and rumor; with Nehemiah coming in a close second place – until this past week when I studied this text in Job. I now have a brand new hero for us all.

Job has endured the most horrific suffering and agony. He is now virtually deserted. He does not even know what he is building anymore. He does not even know what his purpose is anymore. His friends turn against him and now, in this encounter, he is accused of lacking integrity and character and purity that he had lived his whole life pursuing. Yet, Job pressed on in faith, as we will see in a moment.

Most of us have read the biographies of Abraham Lincoln, and found perhaps, more than anything else, that it was his refusal to retaliate and his willingness to bear up under the strain of his role that ultimately led history to rewrite its opinion with respect and admiration.

His biographers said that Lincoln had developed four ways of responding to the criticism of his enemies. He:

- first and foremost, simply ignored it and considered much of it too petty to deserve a response;
- secondly, answered back only back only when it would truly make a difference;
- thirdly, formed the habit of sitting down and writing lengthy letters in defense of his integrity and reputation, venting all his anger and emotions, but then, tearing the letters up and never mailing them;
- fourthly, chose to focus on the brighter side of life and kept a good sense of humor – showing indeed, grace under pressure.^v

One of the things that mark me about Job, as his biography unfolds, is the way in which he responds to his counselors. In this text, in the hands of an angry counselor, this saint of God has endured accusations we cannot imagine, all within sight of ten fresh graves. It makes him even more heroic to me, not that he was slandered, but that he refused to retaliate.

In the next two chapters, Job will respond to angry Eliphaz the Temanite.

My first words would have been to call him “Eliphaz the Termite”. With that out of the way, perhaps I would say something more spiritual.

The remarkable thing is that Job never really responds to Eliphaz at all; at least not directly. He ignores the insults and innuendo. He evidently thought them too petty to even deserve a response.

What he does do is begin to deliver, in effect, an open air prayer. We will not take time to read it, but let me summarize it with two categorical statements.

1. First, Job effectively says, “The heavens are silent, but I will trust the heart of God.”

Job laments, in Job 23:3-4,

“Oh that I knew where I might find Him [God], that I might come to His seat!

“I [want to] present my case before Him and fill my mouth with arguments.”

This is legal jargon for evidence.

Skip to Job 23:8-9.

. . . I [look ahead of me] but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him;

When He acts on the left, I cannot behold Him; He turns on the right, I cannot see Him.

Do you ever feel like this? When the pressure is on and the trials are falling thick and fast, you would like a sign from heaven or some message in the clouds – some proof that God knows what is happening and that He cares.

This is exactly what Job is saying. The heavens are silent!

However, notice the profound statement of trust in Job 23:10.

But He knows the way I take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

Wow!

In other words, “I do not know which way to turn and I do not know which way to take and I do not know which way He is going either, but I do know that He knows where I am going.”

We cannot miss the irony between Job’s statement and the trivial promise of Eliphaz.

Eliphaz had promised, “Job, if you submit to God, He will be gold to you.”

Job says, “Oh, no, because I have surrendered to God, when He’s finished with me, I will be gold to Him.”

Job is saying, “He is purifying me for His own pleasure and purpose.”

There is the other subtle thought that even though Job has lost all his possessions – all his gold – he is declaring his faith when he says, “God isn’t necessarily going to give me more gold, but He is making me like unto fine gold.”

Job is being refined by the furnace; purified by the heat.

Job delivers a great statement of faith:

- God knows what is happening to me!
He knows the way that I take
- God has planned what is happening to me!
When He has tried me
- God has a purpose for what is happening to me!
I shall come forth as gold.

This text was the inspiration behind John Rippon’s great hymn:

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.^{vi}*

Job’s first statement is, “The heavens are silent, but I will trust the heart of God.”

Let us look at Job’s second statement.

2. Secondly, Job says, “Evil surrounds me, but I will trust the hand of God.”

This is saying that God is sovereign, no matter what.

Chapter 24 is simply the cataloguing of sins and evils that plague mankind. In a culture that does not seem to punish everything listed, we see:

- verse 2 – greed and theft;
- verse 3 – oppression;
- verse 14 – murder;
- verse 15 – adultery;
- and more.

This is actually a subtle answer to Eliphaz who had said that Job was obviously guilty of great sin

because he was being punished. Job says, in effect in these verses, “If God always punishes people because of their great sin, then how come so many sinners aren’t being punished?”

Even though it seems God is not in control – He is. Sin will be judged.

The sinner who refuses to repent takes heart that God does not seem to be anywhere near – but He is.

The saint can lose heart because God does not seem to be anywhere near – but He is!

No matter what happens, no matter how difficult, God has not abandoned His sovereign post. Beloved, God has not abandoned you.

William Frey was an undergraduate at the University of Colorado in 1951. He spent a couple of hours a week reading to a fellow student whose name was John. John was blind. William writes,

One day, I asked him how he lost his sight. He told me of an accident that happened when he was a teenager and how, at that point, he had simply given up on life.

“When the accident happened and I knew that I would never see again, I felt that life had ended, as far as I was concerned. I was bitter and angry with God for letting this happen, and I took my anger out on everyone around me. I felt that since I had no future, I wouldn’t lift a finger on my own behalf. Let others wait on me. I shut my bedroom door and refused to come out except for meals.”

William Frey writes,

The [young] man I knew was an eager student, so I had to ask what had changed his attitude. He told me this story.

“One day, my father came into my room and started giving me a lecture. He said he was tired of my feeling sorry for myself. He said that winter was coming, and it was always my job to put up the storm windows, and that I was to get those windows up by suppertime tonight, or else! He slammed the door on the way out.”

“Well,” said John, “that made me so angry that I resolved to do it. Muttering to myself, I groped my way out to the garage, found the windows, a stepladder, all the necessary tools, and I went to work. ‘They’ll be sorry when I fall off the ladder and break my neck,’ I thought; but little by

little, groping my way around the house, I got the job done.”

Then he stopped, and his sightless eyes misted up as he told me, “I later discovered that at no time during that afternoon had my father ever been more than five feet from my side. I didn’t know it until later, but all the while I was climbing up and down that ladder, muttering to myself . . . fumbling with the tools and sweating my way through that horrendous project – in the dark – my father had been beside me all the way.”^{vii}

John Rippon wrote further in his hymn text:

*Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;*

I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,

Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,

I will not, I will not desert to his foes;

That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,

I’ll never, no, never, no, never forsake.^{viii}

Remember:

- Even when the heavens are silent, we can trust the heart of God.
- Even when the earth is filled with evil, we can trust the hand of God.

Even when we are in the dark,

Even when we do not know which way to turn,

Even when we are in the hands of an unwise counselor,

We are still in the hands of our all-wise, ever near, gracious God.

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ⁱ Charles R. Swindoll, Job: Man of Heroic Endurance (W Publishing, 2004), p. 181.

ⁱⁱ Steven Lawson, Holman Old Testament Commentary: Job (Holman, 2004), p. 195.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Marlin Vis, “The Blame Game,” <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.

^v Swindoll, Job, p. 182.

^{vi} John Rippon, “How Firm a Foundation,” (1787).

^{vii} Charles R. Swindoll, Getting Through the Tough Stuff (W Publishing, 2004), p. 224.

^{viii} Rippon.