

Miserable comforters

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[0 : 00] Here's the point I think. Don't blame innocent sufferers.

! Don't do it. When you see a friend suffering and you want to be with them and help them and speak Christian truth to them, that is good. That's how it's meant to be. But as you sit with your friend, there'll be so much you don't know about their life.

There'll be so much you don't know about their circumstances and their suffering in their heart and therefore it would be so wrong, be so very cruel to say this is your fault.

Don't add to their suffering by what you say. Don't blame innocent sufferers. This is Job 4 onwards in our little series in Job and the speeches of Job's friend.

A little recap. Do you remember what's happened? In a couple of days of extreme and appalling tragedy, all the blessings of life were taken away from Job. Do you remember that? His wealth, his family, his health ripped away from him awfully.

[1 : 12] And at the end of chapter 2, Job, with his possessions destroyed, his children dead, his sores festering, sits on a rubbish heap and scrapes himself with a piece of pottery.

At which point, chapter 2, verse 11, Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuite and Zophar the Naamanite come to him. And as they sit on the ground with him, Job doesn't curse his God.

He doesn't do that. But his suffering is so intense that he bursts out in a frighteningly dark lament, a death wish, really.

As in chapter 3, he curses the day of his birth and longs for the grave and he groans. Why? Honest, raw, deep despair from a man who is suffering.

When you see a friend suffering and you want to help them, what could you say? It's not a niche question, it's a really important question.

[2 : 13] For all of life, for a church, St John's is a church family. We're a family of brothers and sisters. When suffering comes, we mustn't turn away from one another.

We're meant to be involved with one another as Christian friends walking together through life.

When you see another here suffering in some awful way, what could you say to be a helpful friend?

And one answer is, do not say what these friends say. Don't do what Miranda read to us and speak like that. At the end of the book, in chapter 42, verse 7, God will say to Eliphaz the Temanite, whose words we've just read, I am angry with you and your two friends because you've not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has.

So what Job's friends say is basically wrong. God says that. Not just wrong, it's cruel. And yet, so much of what they say sounds wise and right.

It sounds God-centred and truthful. And it sounds the kind of thing Christians might say to those who are suffering. Job chapters 4 to 28.

[3 : 32] We're not going to read all of them over these coming weeks. Job 4 to 28 take us through a cycle of speeches. Eliphaz will say something. Job will reply. Bildad will speak. Job will reply.

Zophar will have his turn. Job will reply. And then round we go again and again to 24 chapters of the Bible, as much as Luke's Gospel. Why give us all this conversation?

When basically the friends are wrong and a bad example. In part, I think, because the Lord wants us to listen very carefully. He wants us to tease apart how they do say stuff that's right, yet are wrong.

He wants us to hear how certain and clear and biblical they sound, yet are cruel. And I think he wants us to get to the point, if you make it through all 20, however many chapters, where we say, do you know what?

We're done with this now. We will not speak as they speak. And that would be so good. Be such a help to those suffering around us if we were not like these guys.

[4 : 44] So let's dive into it and notice a few things together. A couple of things to say this morning. Dive in and notice, firstly. Notice, firstly, the friends saying lots that is right.

And yet they're wrong. With our Bibles open, listen carefully to chapter 4 and verses 1 to 11.

Then Eliphaz the Temanite, hearing Job's dark despair and groaning why, he replied with a ready answer. Someone ventures a word with you.

Will you be impatient? But who can keep from speaking? Think how you have instructed many, how you've strengthened feeble knees. Your words have supported those who stumbled.

You have strengthened faltering knees. Job, you're a wise man. You've been sharing your wisdom with sufferers for so long and helping them. But now, verse 5, trouble comes to you and you are discouraged.

[5 : 46] It strikes you and you are dismayed. Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways, your hope? Do you hear that?

Job, if you are godly and blameless, surely you can have confident hope that things will go well for you. Because we know, don't we, that good things happen to those who are good.

Verse 11 is a bit more sharp. Consider now who being innocent has ever perished. Where were the upright ever destroyed? As they talk to their perishing on the edge of death friend, would you give me an example, Job, of when an innocent person has died an early death?

Or a morally upright person has been cut off in the prime of life? Of course you can't. Because it doesn't work like that in God's world. The innocent suffering.

So what does that say about you? Let me put it like this, verse 8. As I've observed, those who plough evil and those who sow trouble reap it.

[7 : 00] At the breath of God they perish, at the blast of his anger they are no more. Do you see what Iophas is saying? You are not innocent, Job.

The reason you are reaping trouble is because you've sown trouble. You're suffering because you've sinned.

Verse 10. The predatory wicked lions may roar and growl, yet the teeth of the great lions are broken by God. The lion perishes for lack of prey and the cubs of the lionesses are scattered.

That's how it should be and that's how it is. Because we live in a moral universe. And God is just. And it's not the innocent who perish. God punishes evil.

And when you sow trouble, you reap it in your life. You are suffering because you have sinned. I'll put it up on the screen there.

[8 : 00] That is the basic message of the friends to Job all the way through their speeches. And we should say, as we look at verses 1 to 11, that lots of what Eliphaz says here is right.

It is right. Think about this. If you believe that there is no God. If you're an atheist. Then really suffering is just random.

It's just meaningless. In a chance universe that accidentally began at some point. And so Richard Dawkins can write, in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice.

There is in our universe, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good. There's nothing but blind, pitiless, indifference.

Your suffering is just bad luck. That's it. What Eliphaz says is more truthful. Because we suffer in God's world.

[9 : 14] This is God's world. I mean, what Eliphaz says here is more truthful than imagining God simply leaves us to suffer. As in, he so values our free will that he folds his arms and lets us get on with making a mess of life.

And though he weeps at what we go through, he chooses never to intervene or get involved. He just leaves us to sin and stew and suffer as he stands back. But that's not right either.

And Eliphaz knows that. No, no, this is God's world. And he is in charge. And he rules and his lives are in our hands.

Eliphaz is right about that. And he's right that God is just and fair. And he does punish sin personally. That is right too. Because the New Testament says God cannot be mocked.

A man reaps what he sows. There will come a future judgment day when those who won't accept Christ and die in their sins will perish at the breath of God.

[10:24] That's true. Let me say just a bit more. Even in our lives today, it could be that we suffer because we've sinned.

If you abuse alcohol, your liver may pack up. If you're mean and vindictive to your family, you may end up alone. You sow trouble, you reap it.

It could be. It could even be that suffering now is God's direct response to sin in our lives. It could be.

In John's Gospel, Jesus had healed a man who'd been an invalid for 38 years. He said to him, And when King David, on purpose, covered up his sin from God, he wrote in Psalm 32, If he decides to, the God who rules our world in response to our disobedience, he can lay his hand heavily on us in the here and now.

That is true. Uncomfortable though it may sound. And yet, as Eliphaz speaks to Job, he's wrong.

[11:55] He's wrong. As he starts to say to the man in front of him, You are suffering because you have sinned. He's wrong, isn't he? Why is he wrong?

Because Job is innocent. He is not suffering because he sinned. Back in chapter 1, verse 1, This man was blameless and upright.

He feared God and shunned evil. God himself said to Satan, There's no one on earth like my servant Job. He's blameless and upright. For sure, Job sins as we all do.

And he's a forgiven friend of God. But as Job suffers, Is it some kind of punishment for him? It's not. Is his suffering his fault?

Is Job to blame? Nope. But his friends won't have that. They can't have that. Because in their world, There is no space For undeserved suffering.

[13:00] They don't believe in it. I think, in fact, They can't cope with the scary idea That sometimes suffering just happens to us.

And it's not our fault. And we're not to blame. They have no space For undeserved suffering. It must be your fault.

When we sin, It must be our fault. And so, as they speak to Job, On and on they bash. Eliphaz, in 5, verse 17, Don't despise the discipline of the Almighty.

Bill, Dad, in 8, verse 4, When your children sinned against him, He gave them over to the penalty of their sin. Zophar, chapter 11, verse 14, If you put away the sin that's in your hand, And allow no evil to dwell in your tent, Then free of fault, You will lift up your face.

You are suffering Because you've sinned. It's your fault. That's how it works. We've spent ages just thinking about that question.

[14:08] Do you ever hear this doing the rounds? Do you ever hear this? You might say, actually, in all sorts of ways, yes. There's a kind of gut feeling, Street level way of thinking about life, isn't there?

She had it coming. What goes around, comes around. It's bad karma. Adam just told me, with the rooted lot now, They're going to listen to a Taylor Swift song.

Taylor Swift, a song, I don't know if it's called this, About good karma. Why am I rich? Says Taylor Swift. Because I've been so good. Good karma. Are you not rich? Well, what does that say about you?

She says it more poetically. But you're poor and you're suffering because you've sinned. As the disciples speak in the Gospels, Jesus, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? In serious church circles, there must be things you need to repent of. To be honest, if you're a spiritually sensitive person, you can fall so easily into thinking this.

[15:23] What have I done to deserve this? Especially if others are suggesting it. So when life doesn't turn out the way you imagine, your stuff gets stolen or broken, or you're poorer than you thought you would be, and you think, what did I do wrong?

Or you lose a child, or you can't get pregnant, or someone you love dies, and you think, am I to blame? A diagnosis is revealed, and secretly you fear, is he punishing me for something?

I am suffering. God is in charge, and he's just, I must have sinned. And so sensitive Christians can guiltily scrape around inside themselves, trying to find stuff to say sorry to God for, because it must be me, it must be something I've done.

It's good to be sensitive to your sins, but it's wrong to think, I am suffering, I must be to blame, and it's equally wrong to point the finger at your suffering friend, and either think, or gently and boldly say, I know what's going on, I know why, and it's your fault.

Don't blame innocent sufferers. As we suffer ourselves, as we aim to be helpful friends to one another, know that in God's world, just and fair though he is, suffering is so often undeserved, and we are not to blame for it.

[16:59] Don't blame innocent sufferers. It's not just wrong though. It is also very, very cruel. And that's the second thing, just to notice here in Job 4 onwards, how Job's friends are so certain and clear, and they're cruel to him, they're really cruel.

So remember, Job is sat among the ashes, and he's lost everything, and he'd rather be dead. And he has to listen to Eliphaz, so spiritual sounding and certain and full of God talk.

Just get a flavour of it, just get a flavour of Eliphaz speaking as Job is sitting there. In verse 12, Eliphaz shares a spiritual experience.

A word was secretly brought to me, my ears caught a whisper of it, amid disquieting dreams in the night when deep sleep falls on people. Fear and trembling seized me and made all my bones shake.

A spirit glided past my face, and the hair on my body stood on end. This is a spiritual vision. It stopped, but I could not tell what it was. A form stood before my eyes, and I heard a hushed voice.

[18:10] Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can even a strong man be more pure than his maker? There you are, Job. I'm a higher level in touch with the spirit world, man.

I've had a revelation. No one is more righteous than God. In chapter 5, 1 to 7, Eliphaz presses on. Listen to this. Remember that Job has lost his wealth.

His eldest son's house has collapsed, and his children are dead. Call if you will, but who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn?

Resentment kills a fool, and envy slays the simple. I myself have seen a fool taking root, but suddenly his house was cursed. His children are far from safety.

Crushed in court without a defender, the hungry consume his harvest, taking it even from among thorns, and the thirsty pant after his wealth. For hardship doesn't spring from the soil, nor does trouble sprout from the ground, yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upwards.

[19:20] So little understanding, or love, or kindness, or sympathy. In verse 8, Eliphaz says, why not pray?

But if I were you, I would appeal to God. I'd lay my cause before him. In verse 17, blessed is the one whom God corrects. So do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.

For he wounds, but he also binds up. He injures, but his hands also heal. Which sounds so God-centred, and wise, and biblical.

And in part it is. But God isn't correcting and disciplining Job. And so how cruel to be spoken to like this.

In chapter 5, verse 27, Eliphaz finishes with a flourish. That's because he's a wise man. And he knows God's ways. And he knows how the world works. And he knows that Job is suffering because he's sinned.

[20:24] Verse 27, we have examined this, and it is true, so hear it, and apply it to yourself. Let me ask this.

is it possible that, faced with someone else's suffering, you or I could speak too confidently, too clearly, about God and his ways and what he's doing?

Could we ever be like that? I could because I'm a Bible man, and I know that God is in charge, and he's just and fair, and it says in the Bible that the Lord disciplines the one he loves.

And maybe I think I probably know and understand your circumstances, and your suffering, and your heart, and so I speak for God into your life.

Is it possible that actually I don't know as much as I think I do? Is it possible that someone else's suffering is more complicated than I imagine?

[21:35] It really is. You think, how terrible. To speak into another's suffering so confidently and clearly, and yet be wrong and cruel.

Because it is cruel. It really is cruel. And we didn't read on, but in chapter 6, Job replies, expressing his anguish.

He expresses his anguish, not only that God's arrows are in him, but also that his friends are causing him pain. And these verses in a moment, but before that, verse 14 of chapter 6, anyone who withholds kindness from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty, but my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams.

Chapter 6, verse 21, now you have proved to be of no help. You see something dreadful and you're afraid. Chapter 6, verse 25, how painful are honest words.

But what do your arguments prove? Do you mean to correct what I say and treat my desperate words as wind? You would even cast lots for the fatherless and barter away your friend. Be so kind as to look at me.

[22 : 49] Would I lie to your face? Relent. Don't be unjust. Reconsider for my integrity's at stake. But they won't. And on and on the friends push him.

You're suffering because you've sinned. You've sinned. You've sinned. So repent. And Job will rightly say towards the end of their speeches, you are miserable comforters, all of you.

Will your long-winded speeches never end? And how long will you torment me and crush me with words? This morning's sermon, the message is very, very simple for us to hold on to.

Don't blame innocent sufferers. Don't think you know. Don't think, of course, it's their fault.

Don't add to their suffering by what you say. Instead, well, what? How should we be with those who are suffering?

[23 : 55] How should the friends have been with Job? And you think, I want to know. But frustratingly, maybe, we're not told in Job.

Not explicitly. But the thing Job really wants to get to us is stop it. Stop blaming people. But maybe we could say this morning, I'd love us to talk about this and hear what you think.

Maybe doing the opposite of the friends might help. Don't you think? With one another? Instead of saying what's wrong, only say what's true.

Instead of a super confident, I know. Maybe with one another a little bit more, I don't know. Instead of a cruel blaming of one another, kindness.

How about this, to starters? Just for starters. What could they have said without chapter four and five and seven and eight? How about this?

[25 : 03] I am with you. God is for you. As you suffer, I don't blame you.

I will pray with you. In fact, I will sit and wait with you until God restores you. Let me leave this up on the screen for a moment.

And then I'm going to lead us in a prayer and we'll sing. Almighty God and Father, we praise and thank you for this unsettling and uncomfortable book given to us by you.

we confess and say today that you are God and you are just and you are fair.

And it is true that those who sow trouble will reap it. And yet there is so much we do not know.

Thank you for opening up for us in this book that suffering can so often be undeserved and that we are not to blame.

[26 : 47] Please would you help us and train us to not be like Job's friends. Please grant us the wisdom that we lack and the kindness that is sometimes so far from us.

Please make us faithful friends to one another and those around us. Save us from cruelty. Save us from saying more than we should.

Please make us those who don't blame, who do pray, and who do sit and mourn with those who mourn. We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.