

The Friends Gather

October 1, 2017

Job 2:11-13

We're back! Once more we are drawn into the drama that is the life of Job. So far, we have seen this bizarre sequence of events play out resulting in Job's faith being put to the test by taking away everything that he has, even his health. He has been tempted to, urged to yield to the circumstances and curse God. But he does not. He has passed the test. He has maintained his integrity before God. Yahweh has won the wager.

But where does that leave us? This is the text before us. It leaves us with Job as an unrecognizable, pathetic creature...and that is the launching point for the body of the book. We are at the end of Job 2, and there is no dialogue, no conversation in the text before us. Instead, we have a scene, a very descriptive scene, and the introduction of three new characters in the story: Job's three friends. Here at the end of chapter 2, they enter the stage, react to what they find, and they sit silently.

Now, this would not make for good theatre because they sit silently for 7 days and 7 nights. This might not make for gripping movies, but it makes for powerful literature. And that is my point. This great book is painting a picture here in chapter 2, a picture that will yield to dialogue for the next 39 chapters. This dialogue is the core of the book, but the scene is set up, the context for the dialogue is given here.

So, you might not think there is much here in these few short verses, but trust me, this text is very powerful and we would miss out if we just glanced at it on our way to the dialogue. Yes, I know you want to get to Job's thoughts about what has happened to him, but you're going to have to wait a week while we are introduced to his friends. In fact, in my mind this is the high point for the friends. For them, from here it is all downhill. This is the last point at which they are exemplary. Once they open their mouths, they get it all wrong.

Now, I see evidence right here that this is going to be the case. See if you can spot it as we read the text, Job 2:11-13. How does this text set up the dialogue between Job and his friends over the next 30 plus chapters? READ.

Did you see it? Let me give you a clue. You see it in the words you can't pronounce.

Main point: The world has no answers to the questions of the hurting.

In fact, they would be a whole lot better off just sitting silently. But even as they sit silently, they ought to guard their thoughts, because those thoughts could turn into words and those words will prove to be foolishness.

Once more, remember where we are in Scripture. The book of Job is a wisdom book, not historical narrative. It is a piece of fine literature intended to draw you in and make points in a way that only comes from thinking, pondering, appreciating the depth of the text. You will need to do that this morning. (2 parts)

I Well meaning friends work together to comfort hurting friends. v.II.

This sounds a bit strange, but clearly this is what happened. In the dust and destruction of Job's calamity, three friends gather together to "sympathize with him and comfort him." So far, so good.

v.II- When 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.

With the deaths of Job's 10 children, and the dismissal of his wife, we need some new characters. And we are introduced to them as Job's 3 friends. It is important that they are identified as his friends. These are not three news commentators, or the city fathers, or Job's cousins. No, these are friends, they are connected to Job, they love him, and they are close enough to feel compelled to do something about it.

In other words, these are not professional do-gooders, nor social commentators, but friends, people who ought to and do care. So, what do we know about them. We see that in the descriptions of each one, "Eliphaz the

Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite.” There, that is everything we need to know about them.

As I began my study and pondering of this great book while on sabbatical, I came to this verse and paused. I almost stopped completely. I knew there was something there, but I didn’t have the tools to determine what it was. I knew it had to be significant that they are identified by their home, by location, but I didn’t know enough about the locations to get the point.

Remember, how was Job introduced? Where was he from? Only “the east” in 1:3. We characterized it as “this guy from somewhere.” He is not Job the Israelite, or Job the son of Isaac, or Job the Jerusalemite. He is Job, this man of God who was known as the greatest man in the East. As I put that lack of detail together to the explicit details here of his three friends, I see a point being made. Let’s see it unfold.

“Eliphaz the Temanite”— This is the only one about whom we have any real information. Who were the Temanites? Anyone know? Where is Teman? This is where I needed help. I invite you to turn to Jeremiah 49. Now, Jeremiah 49 was surely written hundreds of years after Job 2, but we cannot escape a connection. In this chapter, Yahweh is making decrees against certain countries, in this case enemies of God’s people, or peoples surrounding God’s people. The second group being addressed were the Edomites in v.7. Edom was east and south of Israel, on the other side of the Jordan river and south of the Dead Sea. But notice here in v.7 the wording, “Concerning Edom: This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Is there no longer wisdom in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom decayed?” There it is, Teman, as in Temanites. So Teman was a city in Edom. And here, what were they known for? Their wisdom. Teman was associated with wisdom. The rhetorical question asked is where that wisdom had gone. It would be like saying, “Are there no longer any leaders in Washington?”

So, Teman was seen as a place of wisdom, even hundreds of years later. And the first of Job’s friends is Eliphaz the Temanite. The name probably means “God is victorious” and is identified in Genesis as one of the sons of Esau. These sons of Esau established Edom and in particular Teman. So, what’s the big deal? Eliphaz (and the other 2 friends) represent the wisdom of the east, the wisest of the wise men of the east. They represent the wisdom of the world.

This friend is from this place, that friend is from that place, and so on. And they have all gathered together to minister to their hurting friend.

I trust you can already see where this is going. Because we know how this book goes, we know that these three friends get it all wrong. They are condemned in the end by God. They spoke eloquently and said things that seemed to make sense, but they were dead wrong. And here we are told from before the dialogue even begins that they represent the wisdom of the world, the wisdom of those who do not speak for God.

Bildad the Shuhite—the meaning of the name is unknown, the place, “Shuah” is not specifically known as well. But clearly, he is someone from some other place, from the East somewhere.

Zophar the Naamathite—again, the meaning of his name is unknown and his place of origin, “Naamath” is not certain either. What we do know is that they represent their places, their homes, and their homes are not in Israel, they are not representing God. Can you see that?

Here’s what we know about them: their names and places, their connection to Job as friends, the fact that news of Job’s demise had reached them, they made a concerted and planned effort to come to Job, and their intentions were to sympathize and comfort. There, that’s what we know. It’s not much, but it is a whole lot in the context of the book. They represent well-meaning friends seeking to do the right things to help a friend who is hurting. This is all good. But their names tell us that their perspective does not represent God. They represent the best of the world, not God. And that is going to be the core of the book. This is what the world thinks is a good perspective on suffering. Here is how the world thinks you minister to hurting people. . .and it is all wrong! Can you see where I am heading? It is all going to sound so good and so right, but the truth is it is all wrong. And, we have been warned of this before the dialogue even begins. The world’s perspective on hurting and suffering people is all wrong. Their intentions may be noble and good, but their perspective is wrong.

Pause: so you will know where I am headed, I believe we will too often see ourselves in the dialogue of the friends. They will be thinking our thoughts. They will represent us. We are the ones who will need to change our perspective. And when it comes to hurting and suffering people in our world, the truth is that both conservatives and liberals get it wrong. We all point

fingers at each other as if the other guy is all wrong and we are right. But the beauty of this book is and the truth it teaches is, unless we have God's perspective we will never get it right and will actually, probably do more harm than good. Unless we share His perspective, our "wisdom" will prove to be simply foolishness. That is a central point of the book (among several). But at this point in the text, remember their purpose: to sympathize and comfort. This is good, this is right. Where they go wrong is when they try to explain and chastise.

II. The reality of broken people's lives too often leads us not knowing what to do. vv. 12-13

We can think we are prepared, we can plan on what we are going to do, but seeing the reality of true calamity will destroy our perceptions and simply drop us to our knees, as it did to these friends of Job. True calamity is tough to look at.

12 When 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.

The picture is that they came together and approached Job as a group. Again, picture the drama of the scene. They think they are ready, but when they get there, they find out they are not ready at all. In fact, they can hardly recognize the man they knew so well. Something dramatic, horrible has happened to him. Their rich friend, great in all ways is now a pathetic blob of hurt. He is not lounging in his living room or feasting with his family, but sitting alone on a pile of ashes (v.13). He is not the picture of God's blessing, but is so disfigured from disease and distraught from depression that they cannot recognize him. To them, he is not the same person. He is someone else.

And so it is with those who are deep in the hole. We go in to help, thinking we know them. But when we actually get there, we do not even recognize them. We don't understand them. We wonder where the person we knew went. The problem has taken over their identity. Now, this could be in a literal sense (accident victims in the hospital), or in a particular setting (like a hurricane or tornado) or some other sense (someone bound up spiritually, or

battling deep depression). In such cases, their appearance looks normal, but entering into conversation with them will reveal that something is drastically wrong. Things are NOT okay. They are not the people we know.

Pause: can you see why so many people going through such times of darkness and tumult try to hide it from everyone? No one wants people to look at them and say, “What happened to him!” “Who is this person and what happened to my friend?” But the truth is you cannot hide it, and even if you think you are, you will never find help and healing without revealing the truth about where you are at.

The problem is that we too often have no room in our world for truly hurting people. I have said this several times over this past week in various settings, but the truth is that helping hurting people means facing the mess, accepting brokenness among us. It has to be okay that broken people be who they are at that particular moment. We must not expect them to hide it. To help hurting people, we must be ready to accept their broken condition. And too often, the church has not. The church is way more comfortable being a huddle of the holy than a hospital for the hopeless. We need to see ourselves as first responders, expecting to find messes when we come upon the scene. Resume.

So these friends were shocked at the sight of Job, leading them to cry out in weeping, tear their clothes out of anguish, and sprinkle dust as a connection with death (think dust to dust). In short, they joined in Job’s suffering.

13 Then 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.

As you might have already picked up, this is my favorite part but it wouldn’t make good theatre. They joined Job, sitting right on the ground, right on the ash heap, right where this burned out shell once walked...and said nothing. For 7 days and 7 nights they said nothing. This is true ministry. This is how you minister to the suffering. Now, I know there is more than this, but this is a good start. As someone who is a fixer, I struggle with this. My first instinct is to help, fix, offer counsel. Others of you will bring in food, or give to causes. But we must not overlook the need to just join and sit silently. Several times over this past week in dealing with hurting people, I have heard the phrase, “be

there for me.” It’s the same thing. Just your presence is more meaningful than anything you can do or say.

I remember learning this lesson on my first trip to Haiti. It was shortly after the earthquake and I was taken along on a trip from the countryside to Port Au Prince. There, among the ruins of the earthquake and the stench of trapped decaying bodies we met with a distraught widow, whose husband had been murdered just a few days earlier. What could I do to help? I didn’t know her, didn’t speak the language, knew nothing of the culture, and couldn’t imagine the pain she was experiencing. But as my Haitian pastor friend ministered to her, I sat with another friend, praying and humming hymns. We said nothing. There was nothing we could say. But we could sit and pray and hum hymns. We WERE doing something, perhaps the best thing we could possibly do. Now, we didn’t stay there for 7 days and 7 nights, but you get the picture of what ministry to the hurting entails. And I ask you, “Can you do that?” Too often, we shy away, we occupy ourselves with other things, because we don’t know what to do and we don’t want to do the wrong thing. That’s who we are. But really, how much does it take to just sit alongside? How much does it take to just hug? Where can you go wrong with sitting with tears in your eyes, humming hymns? None of us may consider ourselves experts at helping the hurting, but we can all sit alongside silently. Can’t we? Can’t we wade into the mess and be there? Oh the difference that would make!

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) Like Job’s friends here, we will purpose to minister to the hurting.

2) Unlike Job’s friends, we will prepare ourselves for seeing the mess of hurting people.

(No one wants to hear you scream when you see them in the hospital room! Trust me.)

3) Like Job’s friends, we will first seek to come alongside and sympathize, rather than fix or offer explanations.

4) Like Job's friends, we will be prepared to be there for the long haul.

5) Unlike Job's friends, we will resist the urge to utilize that time to concoct well-intended but totally foolish explanations for why things are the way they are.

(Or said another way to prep you for the text ahead, this is where Job's friends went wrong!)