

Empathy: How To Minister To The Broken

August 5, 2018 - Job 2:11-13

Job's Three Friends

11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. 12 And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. 13 And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

C. Job's comforters (2:11–13)

2:11. Hearing about Job's perils, **three** of his **friends**—**Eliphaz ... Bildad**, and **Zophar**, apparently prominent men—**met together** and visited Job. "Eliphaz" is an Edomite name (Gen. 36:4), and as a **Temanite** he was from either Teman in Edom, known for its wisdom (Jer. 49:7; Obad. 8), or Tema in Arabia. "Bildad" is not used elsewhere in the Bible, and **Shuhite** may suggest a relationship to Shuah, Abraham's youngest son by Keturah (Gen. 25:2). The name "Zophar" is used only in Job, and his lineage as a **Naamathite** is unknown, though some have suggested that Naamah, a Canaanite town inherited by Judah (Josh. 15:41), was his hometown. Elihu, was also present though he is not mentioned till later (Job 32).

Eliphaz was probably the eldest of the three, for he is listed first (2:11; 42:9), he spoke first in each of the three rounds of speeches (chaps. 4–5; 15; 22), his speeches were longer and more mature in content, and God addressed him as the representative of the others (42:7).

The purpose of the three comforters was to **sympathize with Job and comfort him**. But their speeches soon became anything but comforting!

2:12–13. Job was so disfigured by the disease that **they ... hardly** recognized **him** (cf. 6:21). Then they expressed their grief and despair in three ways; **they wept aloud** (in emotional shock and sorrow), **tore their robes** (in brokenheartedness; cf. 1:20), and threw **dust on their heads** (in deep grief; cf. 1 Sam. 4:12; 2 Sam. 1:2; Neh. 9:1).

Sitting down in silence with him for a week may have been their way of mourning over his deathlike condition, or it may have been an act of sympathy and comfort, or a reaction of horror. Whatever the reason, in the custom of that day they allowed the grieving person to express himself first.¹

Three friends of Job heard of his misfortune. How long a time intervened between Job's second affliction and the arrival of his friends cannot be ascertained. From various allusions (chs. 7, 19, 30), it is probable that a considerable time elapsed. The three friends who came to Job in his distress would have been semi-nomadic princes like himself, men who were all but his equals in rank, wealth, wisdom, and influence.

From Teman came Eliphaz. He may be the same Eliphaz who was the firstborn of Esau and the father of Teman (Gen 36:11, 15, 42; 1 Chron 1:36, 53). Though the site has not been conclusively identified, Teman is thought to have been in the vicinity of Petra. Scripture represents Teman as one of the principal locations of Edom. The Temanites had a great reputation for wisdom (cf. Jer 49:7).

Less is known about the other two friends. Bildad came from Shuah, a site in Edom or Arabia perhaps named after one of the sons of Abraham and Keturah (cf. Gen 25:2). Zophar made his way to Job from Naamah, the location of which is unknown. These three men came with good intentions. The three friends had agreed among themselves to come to mourn with Job and to comfort him. This suggests that Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar lived in the same general vicinity (2:11).

When they first laid eyes on Job, the three friends did not even recognize him. His disease had completely disfigured him. They joined Job in mourning. They lifted up their voices, tore their clothing, and threw dust into the air (a gesture of anger and disdain). For seven days and nights—the time normally allotted to mourning for the dead—the four friends sat upon the ground. No one spoke during that time because they could see that Job was in too much pain to engage in conversation. Comforters were not permitted to say a word until the mourner opened the conversation (2:12–13).²

Job and His Friends

Job 2:11–13

¹ Zuck, R. B. (1985). Job. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 722). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² Smith, J. E. (1996). *The wisdom literature and Psalms* (Job 2:7–13). Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co.

2:11–13 To delve beneath the surface of the moral tale, the narrator leads us not into a third heavenly council scene but into a “council chamber on earth,” where Job’s decision-making process is attended by three very human friends. (I am indebted to Professor Norman G. Habel’s commentary on Job in the Westminster Press Old Testament Library series for this provocative insight.) For the next thirty-six chapters, we hear nothing but human voices ringing the changes on the reality of human suffering and the reality of God, and passionate human thoughts about how these realities relate to each other.

Job’s three friends do not turn out well as the story unfolds, but at the beginning they are models of compassion. Each hears independently about Job’s distress, and each cares enough to drop other affairs and hasten to his side. Like God’s servant in Isaiah 52:14, Job is so ravaged by suffering that he is “marred ... beyond human semblance,” so that his friends cannot recognize in him the Job they had known before. Rather than turning away from this horror, however, they join Job in the signs of ritual mourning (compare Job 1:20 and Job 2:12), indicating that Job’s distress is their distress, to be lamented before God. The high-water mark of their compassion comes during these seven days when they found grace just to *be* there with Job—and to keep their mouths *shut*, “for they saw that his suffering was very great.” Consoling words rarely improve on the silent comfort of a friend’s presence. In the case of Job’s friends, the words destroy the comfort altogether, especially when they “plead the case for God,” as Job puts it in 13:8.³

Three good men and true

(Job 2:11–13)

Job’s friends enter the narrative somewhat abruptly at the close of chapter 2 and we must be careful how we consider them. Like Job’s wife, they have acquired something of a reputation in the minds of many, as is evidenced by the derogatory expression ‘Job’s comforter’. Such an estimate of them is not without support in the text, for later Job describes them as ‘miserable comforters’ (16:1) and later still Jehovah declares that they had ‘not spoken of [him] what [was] right’ (42:7–8). But we must not read those assessments back into this passage, as if they were true from the very beginning. We must keep pace with the narrative and include all the relevant data about the Friends that we are given in the book. This means giving these verses their full weight, irrespective of whatever adjustments need to be made later. That is what we shall now do.

What we are told about them in these verses indicates that they were kind, wise and good.

³ Wharton, J. A. (1999). *Job*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (p. 23). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

2:11. Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him.

They were kind men

They are here called Job's **'three friends'** and that indicates something of what made them special. Job refers to a degree of intimacy having existed between him and them (see 19:19) that he compares with a relationship to the Almighty (6:14). There was therefore some solemn mutual commitment involved between them, as between David and Jonathan. That they were not friends of the 'fair-weather' kind is shown by what they did after they heard of Job's calamity. They arranged to meet and to travel to bring him some comfort by not leaving him alone in his grief. Theirs was a noble, gentle spirit. They were sincere, and that is shown by their reaction when they saw him. There was an immediate outburst of fellow feeling. They knew it was he, even from a distance, but what a change!

They wept and tore their robes because Job's condition rent their hearts and they could not but show how they felt. They threw dust **'towards heaven'**—that is, upwards, so that it descended **'on their heads'** in order to identify with him as closely as they could (see Josh. 7:6). They were stunned and sat in silence for seven days, as Joseph did when mourning for his father (see Gen. 50:10).

They were wise men

This is how Job describes them, although he does so sarcastically (12:2–3), and it is what Eliphaz claims, albeit pompously (15:10). But that is what they were—and so was Job too. Their places of origin may be said to point this out. The information we are given about Eliphaz is the easiest to identify and it supplies an indicator for the other two. The descendants of Teman, the first-named of Esau's grandsons (Gen.36:11), were in Edom in Ezekiel's day (Ezek. 25:13). Teman was well known for its wisdom (Jer. 49:7; Obad. 8–9). Uncertainty exists about both Shuah and Naamah, where Bildad and Zophar came from respectively. The former name exists in connection with Abraham and Keturah (Gen. 25:2) and the latter with both Cain and Solomon (Gen. 4:22; 1 Kings 14:21).

They were good men

The comfort and wisdom they brought Job was offered to him in God's name. They sought to advise him (5:27), relating what they knew to his condition and circumstances. They spoke of God's justice and goodness, of his power and his kindness. They declared that God punished sin, answered prayer and rewarded piety (see 4:7–9, 17–18; 8:3; 11:5–6). All this

was true and they were also sincere, a fact that was demonstrated by their obedient response to Jehovah's rebuke and directive (42:9).

But, as was mentioned at the beginning, there are other facts to consider about them that are of a different kind. These too will be given due weight at the proper time and place. Here we shall just draw attention to the question of how these things can *all* be true. How can sense be made of them all? These men came to comfort Job with truth from God, but they were soon mangling Job and misrepresenting God. How could things take such a course? Merely to frame that question in the light of what has just gone before is to answer it.

It is not enough to say that Job's sudden outburst in the following chapter (3:1-26) contributed to their reaction, though doubtless it did. Nor is it enough—and this is more to the point—to say that Job's firm and repeated rejection of what they were confident was the explanation of, and remedy for, his condition greatly increased their concern about him. Someone else was at work in them as well as in Job, and by setting them at odds with each other his identity is revealed. Satan is the one who sows strife and he is 'the accuser of the brethren'. Like Job's wife, the Friends unwittingly became a further weapon in Satan's arsenal against poor Job.

It has been mentioned that Satan left the Lord Jesus until 'an opportune time' and returned via one disciple who betrayed him and another who denied him (John 13:26-27; Matt. 16:22-23) and then when the rest fled. Joseph Caryl says, 'Satan used Job's wife to jeer him out of his religion and his friends to dispute him out of it.' (Whether or not we agree with Caryl in his view of Job's wife, we should agree with him about the Friends.) It is the only view that does justice to the whole text and is supported by the following considerations:

1. Their coming was 'timed', just as in the case of Job's servants. He had been left alone on the rubbish heap with his losses, pains *and his thoughts*.
2. They mourned with him—or was it over him, as if he were already a dead man? They said nothing to him. They were like a mirror in which he could see himself and his own funeral.
3. The fact that they were friends gave them (as in the case of Job's wife) a unique entrance into his anguished thoughts and made their remarks all the more hurtful.

4. But finally, it was they who consistently depicted God as punishing Job for his sin. Job's wife had not done that. This meant that Job was faced with a choice—an awful choice between his own integrity and God's injustice, and one he faced repeatedly.⁴

2. *Friends—vv. 11–13*

News of Job's experience would have traveled fast. He was the most well-known, wealthy, respected man in the land. However, an interval of weeks, perhaps months, passes before their arrival. We know this because: (1) there had to be time for news to reach them; (2) there had to be time for them to communicate and arrange to meet; (3) there had to be time for the journey to Uz; and (4) Job speaks of "months" of pain he has already endured (7:3).

Friends in the ANE often entered into covenant with one another to meet for comfort and support in times of trouble. Thus, they came with good intentions.

- they "weep aloud", a customary expression of mourning
- they "tore their robes", also a sign of mourning
- they "sprinkled dust on their heads", the same
- they sat with him "seven days and seven nights", a customary period for mourning; though they did not speak to him, they certainly mourned aloud and perhaps discussed among themselves his condition

Concluding observations:

First, sometimes the best approach when someone is suffering is simply to sit and weep with them. Sympathy is often a better remedy than words.

Second, try not to theologize, i.e., try not to relieve their pain by explaining all the reasons why it may have happened.

Third, avoid the peril of interpreting providence. Don't try to draw moral conclusions from physical events. In the OT, chronic illness such as boils/sores was a divine punishment for sins committed (cf. Ex. 9:8–12; Dt. 28:35). But to draw that conclusion here would be totally misguided. See esp. Eccles. 9:1b–3a; 7:14; 9:11–12.⁵

⁴ Jones, H. R. (2007). *A Study Commentary on Job* (pp. 69–72). Darlington, England; Webster, New York: Evangelical Press.

⁵ Storms, S. (2016). *Biblical Studies: Job* (Job 2). Edmond, OK: Sam Storms.