

March 19, 2006
Prayer and the Need to Pretend?
Lamentations 2:10-20 / John 9:1-7 / Job 5:1-7

I have two books in my office entitled: "Children's Letters to God" (Volumes 1 and 2), which could very easily be called or "Children's Questions for God," or even "Children's Prayers to God." Some of you may have seen the book, or even have a copy.

I mention them because I find them very refreshing! In fact, I have often turned to them when I've wanted a good laugh—OR—when I've wanted to read some real, honest, uninhibited, down-to earth conversations with God, devoid of inhibition, pretense or false piety. One of my favorites (in the second volume) goes like this:

*"Dear God, It rained for our whole vacation, and is my father mad!
He said some things about you that people are not supposed to say,
but I hope you will not hurt him anyway."*

A young girl named Anita writes:

*"Dear God, Is it true my father won't get to heaven if
he uses his bowling words in the house?"*

A boy named Larry wrote:

*"Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much
if they had their own rooms. It works with (me and) my brother."*

And a girl named Jane writes:

*"Dear God, Instead of letting people die and having to make
new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now?"*

They are questions, and concerns only a child could ask, because only a child is too young to know what they will soon be taught in most churches as they get older—that there's a RIGHT way to pray, and a WRONG way to pray; APPROPRIATE things to ask for and INAPPROPRIATE things to ask for!

That's surely what Eliphaz would teach them were he still around today. Because as we can see from this text, Eliphaz obviously feels that honest expression and transparent sharing of negative feelings is not only inappropriate, but actually disqualified that person from being able to call out to God in prayer. "Call if you will," says Eliphaz to Job in verse 1, "but who will answer you?"

You see, Eliphaz is apparently of the opinion that Job has forfeited his right to have his prayers heard by God (v. 1a). He even suggests that Job would not be given a listening ear by the “angels” or “holy ones” (as he calls them in v.1b).

WHY? Because of his disrespectful outburst in Chapter 3—where he curses the day he was born (3:1-10), and even questions God’s providence and wisdom in not letting him die at birth—like the stillborn infant who is spared a life of suffering because he rests in the peace and tranquility of death (3:12-16).

In order for one to be heard in prayer (Eliphaz suggests) people must stifle what they really think and really feel, and are really wrestling with. They must stifle all negativity, and anguish of soul, and irreverence, and pray reverent, respectful and polite prayers. “Worthy prayers” which stuff all feelings of anger, or disappointment, or bitterness, or discouragement into some hidden closet in the soul, put on a happy face and pretend all is well.

He even seems to suggest (in a very indirect and yet pointed way) that Job’s refusal to hold back his verbal outburst of resentment, or his irreverent barrage of angry words—cursing the day he was born, and envying those who have died—may have been the reason for his children’s fate as well as his own.

“Resentment (which is precisely what Job expressed in Chap. 3:1-10) kills a fool, and envy (which is precisely what Job expressed in 3:11-23) slays the simple. I myself, says Eliphaz, have seen a fool taking root, but suddenly his house was cursed. His children are far from safety...”

Do you see the pointed connection to JOB? The subtle hint that maybe Job’s resentment and envy caused his house to be cursed, and his children to be far from safety? That somehow what has happened to Job and his family is ALL JOB’S FAULT—God’s punishment for his foolish, public, verbal outburst—an outburst that God, being omniscient, would have foreseen ahead of time and punished Job for in advance?

After all, says Eliphaz (and thus is the crux of his entire argument):

*“For hardship does not spring from the soil,
nor does trouble sprout from the ground.”*

In other words: Bad things don't merely happen to people for NO REASON! You have to DO BAD THINGS to make bad things happen! They don't just "spring up from the soil" or "sprout up from the ground!" For something bad to sprout up, someone had to plant some bad seed!

And that someone, in this case, was obviously Job! It's Eliphaz's way of saying, "You Job have to have done something bad! Otherwise all these bad things never would have happened to you, because bad things don't simply happen, we make them happen!"

In other words, "It's all your fault Job! You have somehow done something to bring all this upon yourself, and your estate, and your children. Things like this don't just happen to people, people make them happen."

It's the very thing Job needed to hear, isn't it!? He's in intense physical and emotional pain, grieving the loss of everything, including his children—and Eliphaz essentially comes to him and says: "It's all because of you Job! You did something to tick God off, and you're merely receiving your payback—Divine justice and retribution for your foolish, resentful, envious words." It's the biblical principle of "sowing and reaping" taken to an unhealthy and completely unbiblical extreme!

You see, it IS true that many people do indeed bring a lot of their own troubles upon themselves. They do. Proverbs makes that clear, and Paul likewise alludes to that fact in Galatians 6:7: "Do not be deceived," he says, "a man reaps what he sows."

The person who sleeps around shouldn't be surprised if he ends up with a sexually transmitted disease. / A contentious, hotheaded, argumentative person will have relational problems. And what Paul says in Gal. 6 is this: "You can't feed sinful thoughts, desires and passions and then not expect them to grow! Feed sinful passions and they increase, feed godly passions and they'll increase."
That much is true!

But the biblical law of "reaping and sowing" is not such a "hard and fast," "across the board rule" that we, like Eliphaz, can therefore conclude that on every occasion, whenever something bad things happen to someone, it is proof-positive that they did something sinful to bring it on themselves! That is just plain beyond the scope of our ability to know! In fact, it is to make assumptions that we as finite human beings have no right to make!

LISTEN: It is true that all pain and suffering and trial and hardship and sickness and death is **ULTIMATELY** the **RESULT OF SIN** in the world. That is true. If sin were eradicated (as the Bible assures us it will some day be), then none of those things would exist!

BUT, to say that all suffering, and pain, and sickness in a person's life is the result of **SIN IN GENERAL**, is **FAR DIFFERENT** than saying it's all the result of some **SPECIFIC SIN** which that individual personally and knowingly committed!

Yet Eliphaz (and he's by no means alone here)—he believed the latter. He believed that all suffering that happens to any person is the direct result of some particular sin that person committed. Trouble, sickness, and suffering, he would say, are signs that God is punishing a person for some bad thing they've done.

And you know what? It was a belief system still around hundreds of years later, for when Jesus comes to the man born blind and sitting by the Pool of Siloam in John 9, some of his own disciples (Peter, James or John maybe) ask this question: "Was it he who sinned, or his parents, that caused him to be **BORN** blind?"

In other words, "Whose sin caused his blindness? It had to be someone's sin!!! Was it his parents who sinned, or did God (being omniscient) foresee that he himself would sin after he was born, and therefore punish him in advance with blindness from birth?"

After all, they seem to be saying (in complete accordance with Eliphaz), bad things like this **DON'T JUST HAPPEN!** People make them happen "So who was it Jesus? Who sowed the bad seed by sinning—him, or his parents?"

You see, when one takes the biblical principle of "reaping and sowing" to an unbiblical extreme, they believe all trouble / all birth defects / all sickness / all hardship / and trials **HAS TO BE BLAMED ON SOMEONE!** For those who hold to such an austere theology, there is really no such thing as a person who doesn't **DESERVE** the suffering that comes their way!

Yet of Job God says, "There is no one on earth like him, he is righteous and blameless." And of the man born blind Jesus says: "Neither this man, nor his parents sinned—(NOT in any way to say they were "sinless," but simply as a way of saying that neither one had done anything **IN PARTICULAR** to cause the man's blindness)—"No," says Jesus, "this happened that the works of God might be displayed in His life."

So what does all this tell us? **FIRST**, it tells us that some things befall us and others because of SIN, and not because of SPECIFIC SINS! A distinction, which if overlooked, can and will inflict much emotional pain on both ourselves and others. It also tells us we cannot apply “the law of sowing and reaping” in an absolute, across the board sense! And in keeping with that it tells us we need to AVOID placing blame when trouble, or hardship, or suffering, come upon us or others!

Trials and hardships (as the Author of Hebrews tells us) are “training in righteousness.” They are “discipline” (a word that originally meant “to educate, influence, instruct, nurture, or essentially train up a child in the way they should go”).

But trials and hardships are NOT (in the life of a believer) vindictive punishments from God, nor are they divine retaliations for some particular sin we have, or will, commit (as Eliphaz, and the disciples in John 9, both suggest).

For instance, the people whose children were born with birth defects or died of leukemia due to the corporations who dumped their toxic waste into the ground around the “Love Canal” thirty some years ago, DID suffer as a result of sin—but it was NOT as the result of any particular sin on the part of them, or their parents.

The people who died in the attack on the Pentagon and World Trade Center on 9/11, DID die as a result of sin—but they did NOT die because they had somehow sinned MORE than others who happened to be out of the building at that time, or didn’t make it into work that day due to illness or oversleeping.

The 1200+ Confessing Pastors who were put to death in Germany during WWII, because they refused to submit to Hitler’s Nazi Regime... / The 500,000 Christians systematically rounded up (and often dragged from their churches) to be killed by Idi Amin’s soliers in his genocidal sweep of Uganda back in the 1970’s... / And the countless believers who were fed to the lions in the Coliseum in Rome—all died because of SIN. That’s true. If there were no sin in the world they would not have died.

But *WHO*, I ask, would be so bold, unwise or presumptuous, as to even suggest that it was because of some specific sin in their lives, that they, as opposed to other believers, met such an unfortunate fate? That they, as opposed to other believers, “brought it on themselves by sinning.”

I'll tell you who would have been SO BOLD and PRESUMPTUOUS! Eliphaz would have! Because that's essentially what he does say in this passage, in relation to Job! His theology was such that he found it necessary to lay the blame for all the bad that happens to any person—on the sins of that particular person! And in doing so, he inflicts even more pain upon a heart already suffering from pain so intense that he wanted to die!

Far from comforting Job (which was his original purpose in coming), he instead weighs Job down with guilt-inducing accusations. Accusations which if believed, would force Job to accept responsibility, not only for his own suffering, but also for the suffering that befell his children as well.

And it's not just Job. Think how many people there are down through the ages suffered from illnesses, or birth defects, or physiological and psychological ailments who were led to believe (by the Eliphaz's of this world) that their suffering was their fault. That they somehow brought it on themselves by something they did. People whose children died, or business dealings went sour, or lost their jobs only to be told it was because they sinned or didn't have enough faith, or didn't think positively enough.

One pastor says of a lady in his church "her husband left her after 30 years of marriage, for a younger woman, right after she was diagnosed with lung cancer. Devastated and alone, she is slowly trying to follow Jesus in the wreckage of her situation. She was made to feel guilty by her former church because her marriage fell apart, her faith didn't heal her cancer, her children are not in a good place, and she is having bouts of depression (which "spiritual" Christians shouldn't have, according to her "spiritual" friends)."

It's the spirit of Eliphaz still alive and well in the church today! A spirit that should be given a proper burial once and for all!

Then **SECOND**, we can know if we've fallen for the Theology of Eliphaz by asking ourselves a couple of questions—such as this:

When bad things happen to me, what is my first inclination? Is it to think I've done something wrong (and am being punished for it) or to see it as part and parcel of living in a fallen world, where sin has infected every part of the creation—including our genetic code, and family dynamics. The social, economic and political structures. The educational system, ethical codes, and even our theological or religious beliefs.

And I ask if you that question in reference to yourself in particular, because it's hard, if not impossible, to believe bad things happen to US as a direct result of some sin we have committed, and not believe that same exact thing in regard to OTHERS. If we believe OUR sufferings are the direct result of some sin we've committed, then we also (to some degree) believe it in regard to OTHERS.

Or you can ask yourself the opposite question: "When things go well for you, do you feel they come your way as rewards for good behavior—that just as bad things happen because you planted bad seed, so also good things happen because you planted good seed?" Because you see, you can't believe in sowing and reaping in the one sense, without also believing it in the opposite sense!

And if you do believe it, let me warn you ahead of time: when trouble and hardship come your way, it will only increase your pain, and lead to unnecessary guilt, shame, introspection and despair! It will even lead to a distorted perception of God (actually it stems from a distorted view of God!), makes it difficult to relate to Him, and a fosters a distinct INABILITY to be intimate with Him.

You will even find yourself repenting for things that have nothing to do with your struggles, and therefore focusing on things that can only distract you from learning the REAL lessons God has to teach you through your trials.

And if you believe it in relation to the good things that happen to you, it can only enflame pride, breed self-righteous, and cause you to become self-congratulatory in your spiritual walk—even pridefully seeing yourself as the "example everyone should follow," as in the case of the "spiritual" friends of that lady with lung cancer.

Then LAST, we can learn that as believers we don't have to earn the right to have our prayers heard. To Eliphaz's question: "Call if you will, but who will answer you?"—we have this blessed assurance—our Father in heaven will answer us! The Holy Spirit will intercede for us. Our prayers will be heard regardless of how unkempt, messy, or disorganized they are.

In fact, they will be heard regardless of whether or not we foolishly express resentment, envy, disillusionment, and doubt—because it isn't US that earn the privilege of being heard, it's Christ who earned that privilege for us!

And how freeing that is! Because that means I can come to God in prayer Just as I am! Warts and all. Expressing exactly what I'm feeling, and voicing exactly what I'm thinking—even if it includes

resentment and envy—cursing the day I was born, questioning God’s wisdom in giving me life, and telling Him I wish I was dead!

Eliphaz, of course, would say NO! Anybody who did that would forfeit their right to be heard! Prayer, he would say, must be reverent! When you struggle, you must be sure to cover up what you’re really feeling! You must bury all your dirty laundry, not air it for all to see—and especially not for God to see! We must pretend we are not feeling what we’re really feeling, or thinking what we’re really thinking.

But let me say this: Our view of God alone should be enough to assure us that such praying is not only a useless smokescreen, it’s a downright insult to God! Because that type of praying implies that we somehow believe we can put one over on God! That somehow God is somehow unaware of what’s going on in our hearts and minds!

Absolute, unmitigated honesty in prayer (even if it seems irreverent), is really the only way to pray! In fact, expressing exactly what we feel, and saying exactly what we’re thinking is the only way to pray redemptively—that is, to pray in a life-changing way!

WHY? Because anything less is falsehood! It’s acting! It’s an attempt to deceive God! It’s to insult God and belittle His Omniscience!

You know, sometimes I think God must sit in the heavens and laugh at all our crazy diversionary tactics! At a former church I had one young man come to me who had been raped by a male neighbor when he was a child. And as I counseled him I told him, “You really need to get all the rage out.”

It was affecting his relationships and driving him into severe bouts of depression (as repressed anger often does). “Get it out,” I told him. “Tell God how angry you are about what happened to you—because you are angry! It’s like a poison or spiritual cancer that just keeps eating away at your soul the longer you hold it in!”

And you know what he said to me (good Christian that he was!)? “I couldn’t do that, it would be wrong—it would be irreverent.” To which I responded, “And it’s not wrong or irreverent to try and deceive God? / If YOU know all that anger, bitterness is there, don’t you think GOD knows it too?! / And if God knows it (which He does) isn’t it kind of silly to pretend it’s not there—to pray nice, happy, “everything’s ok,” “reverent” prayers, when inside you’re boiling like a caldron?!”

It took time, but he did start praying what was REALLY in his heart and mind—something I believe God was waiting for him to do all along! Because like Job, expressing his resentment and envy was not sin, it was an expression of godliness—being honest enough to stop pretending! Contrary to what Eliphaz says, hiding our real thoughts and feelings (which God knows anyway!) does NOT make our prayers more acceptable to God!

Michael Yaconelli expresses it well when he writes this:

"In many religious circles, there exists an unwritten rule: Pretend.... Give the impression everything is okay in your life when it's not. Pretend you believe when you doubt. Hide your imperfections. Maintain the image of a perfect marriage with healthy and well-adjusted children when your family is like any other normal dysfunctional family! And whatever you do, don't admit that you sin. Practically speaking, pretending is uncomplicated, and quick. Answering "Fine" to the question "How are you doing?" is much easier and quicker than saying, "Not very well thank you, my back is bothering me, my teenage children are disappointing me, I'm unhappy with my body, my husband never speaks to me, and I'm wondering if Christianity is true! Pretending is the grease of modern non-relationships. Pretending perpetuates the illusion of relationships by connecting us on the basis of who we aren't. People who pretend have pretend relationships."

And that's as true of our relationship with God as it is of our relationships with others. Don't do it my friends! Eliphaz would have you think that you must pretend if you are to be heard by God during your times of struggle—pretend your doing ok, pretend your not struggling, pretend you have it all together, and pretend you can handle everything by yourself.

DON'T LISTEN TO HIM! Yaconelli is right: *"Pretending perpetuates the illusion of relationships by connecting us on the basis of who we aren't and leads to pretend relationships."*

That's NOT what God wants! Christ purchased for us the privilege of being honest with God, so that our relationship with Him might be REAL! And only a real, honest, transparent relationship with God through prayer will ever change anyone!