

March 5, 2006
 When Good Friends Give Bad Advice
 John 9:1-7 / II Thessalonians 1:3-10 / Job 4:1-6

Today we have our first opportunity to hear from one of Job's three friends—Eliphaz the Temanite. But before we take a look at what he says, let me introduce you to him so that you get an idea of what he is like. One scholar describes him this way:

“Eliphaz is the most mature member of the group. A kindly and articulate older man—balanced and diplomatic—with a keen intellect and a dignified presence.”

Jewish scholar, Robert Gordis, agrees. He writes:

“Undoubtedly, Eliphaz is the most dignified, courteous and polite of the three friends, and is the profoundest spirit among them. His intense religious convictions have not robbed him of sympathy for the distraught and suffering Job.”

He says this by way of contrast, since he points out that Bildad, on the other hand,

“is a traditionalist, who contributes little more to the discussion than a restatement of accepted views.”

And in general agreement with most scholars, he says of Zophar:

“Zophar is probably the youngest, and possesses the brashness and dogmatism associated with youth. He is not deterred from drawing the most extreme conclusions about Job's real character, if they seem to be called for by his theological attitudes. He never let's facts interfere with his theories.”

[Zophar appears to think everything is knowable, and that he knows everything there is to know!]

Likewise, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch said that Eliphaz was the grander of the three—grander in the volume of his intellect and securer in his wisdom. Bildad is a more stand-for-no-nonsense type person, and Zophar is a noticeably mean-minded (or mean-spirited) type person.

But Bildad (whom we won't hear from until chapter 8), and Zophar (whom we won't hear from until chapter 11) are not our focus for this morning! This morning we must focus on what Eliphaz has to say—the wisest, most balanced, most educated and theologically astute of Job's three friends.

And yet, wise and astute as he is, his wisdom and advice fall far short of ever achieving their stated purpose—that of bringing COMFORT to Job in his affliction.

WHY DOES IT FALL SHORT? Simply this:

Because just like Bildad and Zophar (who will speak after him—or like every other religious perspective in the world—and these three men do represent sophisticated yet heathen ideas of near eastern religion)—like every non-biblical religious system in the world, the under-girding principle of Eliphaz's religious thought and confidence for salvation, and hope for restoration, is centered in HUMAN PERFORMANCE rather than God's gracious acts in redemption.

His theology, like so many others who do not understand the Gospel of God's grace, is man-centered rather than God-centered! His focus is upon human merit, ethical striving, or moral achievement. It's performance-based, and focused on works righteousness, rather than being grace-based and focused upon the sheer unmerited mercy, and the covenant faithfulness of God!

So what does this passage have to teach us? **FIRST** it teaches us that the person who knows the Gospel can only be disappointed (severely disappointed) by the advice Eliphaz gives Job. Because although he makes some very true and solid scriptural assertions (especially when we get down to verse 17), the conclusions he draws, from the knowledge he has, is totally off-base!

In fact, anyone even slightly familiar with the Gospel would know that the **ONLY ANSWER** anyone can give to his question in verse 6, is a loud, resounding, unequivocal—
NOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!

To his question: "Should not your piety (your fear of God evidenced by your godly lifestyle) be your confidence, and your blameless ways your hope?" — I scribbled in the side column of my Bible—"ABSOLUTELY NOT!!!!" To trust in one's spiritual performance when going through hard times, is NOT practice of a wise man, but the ploy of a fool!

It doesn't bring comfort, but rather feeds anxiety, fear and doubt! It doesn't shore up one's confidence, it erodes it! Instead of pointing us to the rock solid foundation our hope, it points us to a pit of quicksand! His advice is sort of like asking a person spiraling downward in a plane out of control, to jump onto the nearest cloud, in order to be saved!!!

Yet you know what? Foolish as the advice Eliphaz gives us is, it is NOT all that uncommon—even among Christians! Because what Eliphaz is essentially asking Job to do, is to look to his sanctification for the assurance of his justification or acceptance with God.

He essentially says, “look for some evidence of spiritual fruit (either past or present) and make THAT the basis for believing that God has accepted and forgiven and is pleased with him and loves him! **The very thing the Bible, and especially the Gospel, tells us NOT TO DO!**

This question, then, which Eliphaz believes Job should answer with an unhesitating YES, should actually be answered with an unequivocal NO! It’s foil material! It’s bad advice, given by a good friend! It is meant to comfort Job, but if Job were to take it to heart and actually do what Eliphaz suggests, it would merely serve to deepen Job’s despair, increase his doubts, and strengthen his fears!

So what does one do when a good friend gives them bad advice? And the answer?

You go back to the Gospel! You test everything by the Gospel! That’s what you do!

AND PLEASE HEAR ME WELL: Lest you fail to make the connection between what I’m about to tell you, and how I can say it in light of this passage in Job, you must understand that the Gospel is **NOT** a New Testament invention!

Many still cling to the erroneous belief that somehow people in the OT were saved by their obedience to the Law, while people in the NT are saved by grace through faith. And if you have inadvertently adopted that type of thinking, you will never understand how I can say of an O.T. saint that he should test everything by the Gospel—a Gospel which, by that way of thinking, he would have been unaware of!

Yet the clear teaching of the NT is that SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH is just as much an OLD TESTAMENT teaching, as it is a NEW TESTAMENT teaching! That’s Paul’s whole point in Romans 4! Abraham was saved by grace through faith, before there even was a “Law. “The promises (of salvation by faith), Paul says in Galatians 3:17 as well, “were spoken to Abraham 430 years before the law was introduced.”

Salvation was by grace through faith in the Old Testament, just as it is in the New! The only difference is the perspective from which one’s faith looked to Christ.

Old Testament saints looked FORWARD in faith (to the Christ who would come to crush the serpents head and Himself be crushed for our iniquities—Gen. 3:15 / Is. 53). And New Testament saints have always looked BACK in faith (to the Christ who did crush the serpents head, and was crushed for our iniquities—Romans 3:21-26).

As NT saints our perspective of Christ and the Gospel is CLEARER (since hindsight is ALWAYS clearer than foresight), but it is not DIFFERENT in any way! It IS, and ALWAYS HAS BEEN, "salvation by grace, appropriated through faith."

Saints in BOTH Testaments were admonished to look to the righteousness of another for their acceptance with God. That's the whole point of the OT sacrificial system (with which Job was well acquainted according to Chapter 1)!

One's sins were laid upon an innocent substitute (a lamb without spot or blemish)—clearly showing everyone that even the Law pointed to a forgiveness and acceptance with God that was secured entirely by faith, that God accepted the sacrificial death of another, as atonement for their individual and corporate sins!

But it wasn't merely faith in a lamb without spot or blemish. It was faith in a lamb whose spotlessness, and blemish-less-ness foreshadowed the promised Messiah, who would come and be the "Sinless Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world." Showing us that OT saints were also saved by believing the Good News or the Gospel, that God, by His grace, would send a Redeemer who would come to make satisfaction for the sins of His people.

And THAT is what Job believed. Something we know because he tells us so! Speaking in chapter 19 of the Messiah who was to come, Job declares, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth."

Which means WHAT? Which means that regardless of how wise and astute and eloquent Eliphaz was (or seemed to be) his advice to Job is totally off base! Because the Gospel would NEVER admonish anyone to look to their piety for their confidence, or their blameless ways for their hope! NEVER! "By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified," says Paul. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

To look to ourselves, or our own righteousness, is precisely what the Gospel would tell us NOT TO DO!!! EVER! Especially NOT during times of intense trauma and unmitigated suffering when every vile aspect of our sinful human nature raises it's ugly head in defiance of a God who would allow such excruciatingly painful and horribly agonizing calamities to befall one of His own children!

It's bad enough to look to your own PIETY or SPIRITUAL PERFORMANCE when you "think" you're doing well (that's simply self-righteousness)! But it's just plain ludicrous and insanely foolish to do so when your whole being is racked with pain / feels distant from God / is

wrestling with angry feelings toward God / confused / doubting / struggling to even muster up a desire to believe / and has “no rest or quietness or peace, but only turmoil” (as Job puts it in the last verse of chapter 3)!

At this point in his life Job has no “piety” or “fear of God” or “blamelessness” to hope in! The person suffering intensely has usually lost all but small traces of any of those things!!! Telling a person to base their hope and confidence in those things, is like telling a person struggling with a sense of spiritual desertion to put their confidence or hope in their feelings of close intimate communion with God! They don’t have such a sense! That’s the whole problem!

Job’s thoughts are so black and so dreary, and his inner state so void of piety that telling him to look to those things for comfort is like telling him to hope in something that doesn’t exist! Telling someone to look to something in them or done by them when they are going through severe trials and overwhelming temptations is foolishness, even if it comes from the lips of a wise man!

Which brings us to the **SECOND** thing we can learn from this passage. The lesson of asking ourselves ahead of time: What do WE put your hope in? Everyone clings to something to get them through difficult times. What is it with YOU? When you go through severe trials (or what St. John of the Cross called “The Dark Night of the Soul”) what do you, or will you look to, to assure yourself that God still LOVES you, or that He ACCEPTS you and has PARDONED you? That He is PLEASED with you and CARES FOR YOU despite the fact that everything that’s happening to you implies just the opposite?

Do you take Eliphaz’s advice and hope in YOURSELF? In the INSTABILITY of your own PERSONAL PIETY? The SPORADIC nature of your RELIGIOUS ZEAL and AFFECTIONS? The UP and DOWN quality of your RELIGIOUS PERFORMANCE maybe? What about on your bad days, or weeks, or years?! What do you trust in THEN?

Which brings me to my **THIRD** point—the only WORTHY objects in which, or upon which, to ground your hope and confidence and trust when you have been knocked to the mats, and like Job, are stinging from the searing blows inflicted by the Evil One—the Promise of God in the Gospel.

In the Gospel, GOD PROMISES that anyone who trusts in Christ will be forgiven and put right with God—eternally! They will be accepted, declared not guilty, and innocent of wrongdoing.

They will be justified—NOT ON THE BASIS of their own innocence or sinlessness, but on the basis of Christ's innocence and sinlessness—NOT ON THE BASIS of our PIETY or the BLAMELESSNESS OF OUR PERFORMANCE which always falls short, but on the basis of Christ's piety, and His impeccable performance.

The glory of the gospel lies in this: That we being terribly UNRIGHTEOUS, are counted perfectly RIGHTEOUS, PLEASING and ACCEPTABLE to God, as by His grace, He credits to our account, the FLAWLESS RIGHTEOUSNESS OF HIS SON—a gift received by faith alone!

Unbelievable as it sounds, my friends, it is true: We as unworthy sinners are counted as worthy and sinless, for Christ's sake! The merits of Christ are taken and credited to our account—making us totally acceptable, pleasing to God—irregardless of our spiritual performance.

The question is: Do you believe it? Do you believe that God's acceptance of you DOES NOT REST upon you and what you do, but upon Christ and what He did for you? Do you believe it? Because if you don't, I dare say you DO NOT YET believe the Gospel.

You see, Eliphaz was just plain WRONG! He sought to comfort Job by asking the WRONG question, and pointing him in the WRONG direction, and encouraging him to place his faith and hope in the WRONG object—in himself and what he did! What Eliphaz should have said (but couldn't because he didn't believe the Gospel of God's Grace), was:

"Should not the piety of your REDEEMER be your confidence, and HIS blameless ways be your hope?"

THAT could have brought immense comfort to Job. WHY? Because the true believer knows that our piety and our ways are so terribly fleeting and so hopelessly flawed, that only a deceived person could ever derive comfort by looking to them for their assurance of acceptance with God.

"If God's blessings were dependent on our performance they would be meager indeed," says Jerry Bridges, "since even our best works are shot through with sin—with varying degrees of impure motives and lots of imperfect performance. We are always, to some degree, looking out for ourselves, guarding our flanks, protecting our egos. It is [merely] because we do not realize the utter depravity of the principle of sin that remains within us, and stains everything that we do, that we entertain any notion of earning God's blessing through our obedience [or performance]."

Dreams of perfection and meritorious performance tend to be the trap of newer or younger Christians. Because older, battle-worn saints have had illusion of merit and perfectionism dashed to pieces so many times, that they KNOW beyond any shadow of a doubt that were it not for the righteousness of Christ credited to their stead as a gift received by grace, through faith, they would have no hope whatsoever of ever being saved!

If I may expand on what Robert Haldane wrote almost 200 years ago:

"To the righteousness of Christ the eye of the believer's faith must ever to be directed; upon that righteousness his soul must ever rest; by that righteousness he must always live; in that righteousness must he die and be prepared to meet his Maker and Judge; hoping in nothing else but that righteousness he must appear before the judgment seat on the Last Day; and in eternity he must continue to stand humbled and grateful for that righteousness which made him forever able to even enter into the presence of a Holy and Righteous God."

Then **LAST**, by way of making practical what I just said, let's apply this truth to our lives. Jerry Bridges insightfully writes this in his book "The Discipline of Grace":

"Consider two radically different days in your own life. The first one is a good day spiritually for you. You get up promptly when your alarm goes off and have a refreshing and profitable quiet time as you read your Bible and pray. Your plans for the day generally fall into place, and you somehow sense the presence of God with you. To top it off, you unexpectedly have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is truly searching. As you talk with the person, you silently pray for the Holy Spirit to help you and to also work in your friend's heart. The second day is just the opposite. You don't arise at the first ring of your alarm. Instead, you shut it off and go back to sleep. When you finally awaken, it's too late to have a quiet time. You hurriedly gulp down some breakfast and rush off to the day's activities. You feel guilty about over-sleeping and missing your quiet time, and things in general go wrong. You become more and more irritable as the day wears on, and you certainly don't sense God's presence in your life. That evening, however, you quite unexpectedly have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is really interested in receiving Christ as Savior."

And here is where the advice of Eliphaz comes in. Bridges then asks:

"Would you enter those two witnessing opportunities with a different degree of confidence? Would you be less confident on the bad day than the good day? Would you find it difficult to believe that God would bless you and use you in the midst of a rather bad spiritual day? If you answered yes, you have lots of company among believers.

I've described these two scenarios to a number of audiences and...about 80% indicate that they...would be less confident of God's blessing while sharing Christ at the end of a bad day."

WHY? Their typical response was, "I wouldn't be worthy," or "I wouldn't be good enough." In other words, although they may claim to be saved by grace, their responses, as he rightly points out, "reveal an all-too-common misconception in the Christian life—that we earn or forfeit God's blessings in our daily lives by our performance...[Yet this is not true, for]... On our very worst days we are never so bad that we are beyond the reach of God's grace, and on our very best days are never so good that we are beyond the need of God's grace."

You see, they have fallen prey to the advice of Eliphaz. They are looking to "their own piety for their confidence, and their own blamelessness for their hope." And what a miserable existence that leads to! It's like being on an endless emotional roller-coaster ride! UP when we perceive we've done well, and DOWN into the pits of self-berating despair when we realize we've done badly.

BUT LISTEN: That's NOT what the Gospel teaches! We are not only saved by grace, we stand or live in that grace all our lives. And the only way to be delivered from that horrible UP and DOWN emotional cycle—is to get our eyes off ourselves and fix them upon Christ and Christ alone!!!!

"While we are looking at God we do not see ourselves," said Tozer, "Blessed riddance! The man who has struggled to purify himself, and has had nothing but repeated failures, will experience real relief when he stops tinkering with his soul and simply looks away to the Perfect One."

Yet what Eliphaz (and millions of Christians with him) make the mistake of doing, is looking to their performance (or their sanctification) for the assurance of their justification! And nothing could be more disastrous to your Christian life! That's why the Puritans used to teach their people **DON'T EVER DO IT!**

In the mid-1600's Thomas Wilcox wrote:

"Christ's infinite satisfaction, and not your sanctification, must be your justification before God...He that sets up his sanctification (that is, his religious performance) to look at to comfort him, sets up an idol which will only strengthen his doubts and fears. Look away from Christ, and straightaway, like Peter, you will sink in doubts and fears."

Let that be God's word to us today—no matter who we are. *Get your eyes off YOUR PERFORMANCE and fix them SOLELY ON CHRIST, for only then can you have true HOPE in the midst of painful trials, and CONFIDENCE when your whole world seems to be falling apart.*