

September 10, 2006

Dense or Deaf? When People Refuse to Listen, Budge or Grow
 II Corinthians 1:8-11 / Galatians 1:3-10 / Job 15:1-35

It's hard to summarize 35 verses in one sentence, but if I had to do so, I would sum up Eliphaz's whole discourse in this chapter in these words:

"This is what I was always taught (vv. 17-19), and many wise old people (older than your father!) agree with me (v. 10). So I will not change my opinion, nor alter my beliefs in any way... even if they're wrong."

Someone mentioned to me this week that some of the stuff in Job is repetitive. They're right! We see that today as Eliphaz merely spouts off the same basic set of beliefs he shared before in slightly different words.

No ADJUSTMENTS in light of all that's been shared. No WILLINGNESS to consider that Job may at least have some helpful insights. No ROOM for any compromise at all. Nothing but hard, unbending, uncompromising adherence to the generally accepted view that has been passed down from one generation to another in his culture — even though parts of that view are just plain wrong!

In verses 2-6 he essentially says to Job:

"The reason you don't agree with me is because sin has corrupted the way you think (v. 5). Because if you were thinking straight, you'd think like me!"

Then in verses 7-8 he bashes Job again and essentially says:

"You think you know everything! (v. 8b) In fact," Eliphaz implies, "you seem to think you're somehow as wise as God Himself!" (vv. 7-8a)

And then in verse 10 we discover how it is that Eliphaz determines it is Job, and not himself, who is wrong, when he basically says:

The vast majority of grey haired and aged people agree with us (me, Bildad and Zophar), and therefore WE must be right and YOU must be wrong.

And in those words contained in verse 10, Eliphaz gives us the TWO presuppositions which he apparently uses to discern what is true and what is false (presuppositions, by the way, that are still commonly used in our day).

The **FIRST** presupposition implied by his comment is that “older people, having been around longer, know more, are wiser, and are therefore right.” And though such a suggestion has never been very popular among young people there is some truth to that suggestion — wisdom does often come with age.

The longer one has been around, and the more they have experienced, the more insights they have hopefully gained, and can therefore help those with less life-experience to avoid the unnecessary pitfalls in life, or the pain associated with learning things the hard way.

But you know age and grey hair does not always guarantee wisdom! I’ve known some very wise older people, but I’ve also known an equal number of very unwise older people who were merely stuck in their ways. Which means that Eliphaz has a 50/50 chance of being right, or a 50/50 chance of being wrong if he believes it merely because aged people hold to it. Because it all depends on which “aged” people he asks — the wise ones or the unwise ones!

I always try to seek the counsel of the aged, because the righteous and discerning elderly (which includes many of you!) have much to offer one like me (who has less grey hairs)! But I am also aware that wisdom comes from the advice of many counselors (Prov. 1:5 / 12:15 / 13:10 / 15:14 / 18:15) — both old and young alike. For the young also have insights which I need, and which the elderly may lack.

And the **SECOND** presupposition that Eliphaz seems to hold to (one that is still very common today) is the belief that truth is somehow determined by whatever the majority of people in any given society believes at that certain point in time (thus the American fascination with polls and percentages).

It was a presupposition I encountered one time at a pro-life rally in Washington, D.C., where one pro-abortion demonstrator was holding up a sign that read this: “73% can’t be wrong.” The person was referring to a poll taken in the mid to late 1980’s where people were asked if they favored abortion rights, or wanted them taken away, and 73% answered in favor of abortion rights.

Thus, since 73% constituted an overwhelming majority of the American population, they jumped on the bandwagon with Eliphaz and basically asserted that: “Truth is determined by majority vote. Or as the sign boldly and yet unwisely declared, “The majority can’t be wrong.”

Yet as a lover of history, my response to them (and others like them) is to point out the fact that in the free elections of 1938 in Germany — **98 % the popular vote went to Hitler** — showing that the majority (a vast, overwhelming majority) can indeed be **WRONG!** Dead wrong!

Just because a majority of people in any society believes something to be true does not make it true! In Galileo's day the majority of people in the church, and in the entire world, believed that the earth was the center of the universe and that the sun revolved around the earth. They even used scriptural references such as "the sun rose" or "the sun set" (Ps. 50 and 113) to prove their case against him and condemn him as a heretic. Yet it turns out that he as a minority of one was right, and the overwhelming majority were wrong.

The Psalmists, it turns out, were doing what we often do — describing what they saw and not making a scientific observation about what they saw. I still, to this day, will frequently say: "What a beautiful sunset," or "What a gorgeous sunrise." But that doesn't mean I'm an illiterate person who actually believes (in 2006) that the sun rises or sets, or revolves around an earth that remains stationary!

Not at all! I'm merely doing what the Psalmists and other authors of the Bible were doing when they used descriptive language, rather than scientific language, to express what they saw!

Because to be honest, even today in 2006 I would still find it awkward to say, "Look at the luminescent colors of the sky, created by the angle of the sun to the earth as the earth revolves on it's axis, and the rays of light from the sun reflect off particles of water and other elements hanging in the atmosphere."

It's just plain better, wiser and less of a hassle to use non-scientific descriptive language like the Psalmists, figuring that everyone will know what I mean when I say it, even though it IS scientifically inaccurate to do so!

Which brings me to my FIRST point — that unbending, uncompromising adherence to traditional systems of belief is not always wise, nor is it necessarily a Christian virtue, nor an expression of godliness. Or if I may put it in cruder terms — stubborn-ness and bull-headedness are nowhere spoken of as Fruit of the Holy Spirit!

Let me explain! I grew up in a very liberal church environment. An "anything goes" type church environment. An environment where compromise and the gradual abandonment of every cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith was the norm — a church I assume was very similar to the one this church broke off from.

And thus, having grown up in such a compromising environment, and then being converted out of it, I thought that being a Christian meant being just the opposite—stubborn, bull-headed, unteachable, uncompromising and unwilling to even entertain a notion I didn't already agree with!

And I was good at it! It came naturally to me! (Sin always comes naturally to sinners!) And as a result I alienated a lot of people from the faith, for I portrayed it as an aggressive, unbending, graceless, dogmatic, stiff religion filled with a lot of rules and regulations.

I was very quarrelsome and most of the people I witnessed to in those days rejected the Gospel I proclaimed—and can I say they were RIGHT in doing so?

Because the legalistic faith I proclaimed, and the Gospel of Grace which the Bible proclaims, were two very different entities! Which means people were RIGHT to reject it—at least in the way I portrayed it. Because the Gospel I proclaimed was (as Paul wrote in our passage from Galatians 1:6 -7) “a different Gospel — which is really no Gospel at all.”

I even remember fighting (on occasion) what I believed at that time to be Satan tempting me to compromise, and be less dogmatic! Only to discover later that it wasn't Satan at all, but the Spirit of God Himself merely seeking to work in me the Fruit of His Spirit — the Fruit of gentleness, patience, and kindness — three spiritual fruits that I lacked immensely.

Then about a year and a half into my Christian walk, I came across a poster hanging on the wall in a house in the Dominican Republic. On it was the picture of a river flowing down over large outcropping of rocks.

And on it was written a little (but extremely wise) saying that is good for all Christians and “missionary types” to hear! It now hangs in my office next to my desk, as a continual reminder to me as a pastor. It says this: *“In matters of principle stand like a rock; in matters of taste swim with the current.”*

They're the words of Thomas Jefferson (who was far from being a believer). But they still express a biblical attitude, and offer a needed corrective to many, including myself.

***Because as a new believer I tended to “stand like a rock” on EVERYTHING!
(regardless of whether it was principle or taste; truth or opinion; the Bible or my
particular interpretation of the Bible)!***

And part of wisdom (the part Eliphaz doesn't understand) is that the wise, godly and discerning person doesn't merely hold to something because that's what people have always held to; nor are they to hold to it because that's what the majority now hold to. But rather, the godly person seeks to know what's TRUE even if it means re-evaluating what they've always been taught, or examining and actually going against what the majority now believes.

Which brings me to my **SECOND** point. That although the Bible (in my estimation) is infallibly true in all that it teaches and declares, that is NOT to say that my interpretation of it, or my understanding of it is infallible! One's interpretation is always given to the possibility of human error, and thus it should always be accompanied by a continual air of humility, and a willingness to at least consider other valid points of interpretation.

Nothing was more disturbing to me (in my church in Honduras) than missionaries who would not even consider an alternative understanding of a text of Scripture other than "the one their denomination taught." I mean what's the use of studying the Bible if your never going to honestly and objectively grapple with the text, or let what it says, in its context, challenge what you believe?!

I mean I actually had one missionary walk out (literally, storm out of her house and slam the door!) during a Bible Study on Romans 8:28 - 9:20, merely because, I responded, "Yes, I do," when she asked me if I believed what it said about God's grace in election and predestination!

Another man (from the same denomination) also struggled with what Paul says in those verses. And when I told him, "But that is what it says," he responded by saying, "Yes, but my Bible says I can interpret it any way I want to."

The **first** person (the lady whose house the study was being held in) came back, and over the next few weeks earnestly struggled through the text, because, as she said, "If that's what it really teaches, that's what I want to believe."

The man (on the other hand) never did come back again. And in a sense you can understand why: If you feel you can interpret any passage of the Bible any way you want, why bother studying it?

You only grow when you let what it says challenge the opinions you already hold! Otherwise all you do is deflect its instruction, and make it say what you already believe, instead of letting it form and mold what you believe.

The same was true, in a different way, in Galileo's case (which I mentioned before). The people of his day were NOT really interested in wrestling with, or being challenged by TRUTH — (as if truth rightly understood will ever contradict truth)!

When Galileo presented his observations, the Church felt he was attacking the BIBLE, when in reality he wasn't "attacking" anything! His discovery merely challenged their long-held (yet wrong) INTERPRETATION of the Bible!

They even forced him to recant and repent, though we NOW know it wasn't Galileo, but the Church that needed to recant and repent for wrongly interpreting those particular passages in the Bible as literal scientific language, when in reality, they were using symbolic or descriptive language! It was they, and not him, who needed to adjust their understanding of the Bible, and divine inspiration.

And I'm not saying we need to question everything we believe! There's no need to reinvent the theological wheel from scratch! But I am saying that there may indeed be some things we do need to reconsider when someone comes up with a valid, justifiable, Scripturally defensible opinion or observation — even if its contrary to, or slightly different from, what you, or I, or the majority, have always believed.

The same was true in the time leading up to the Reformation, when Hus, and Wycliffe, and Tyndale, and Luther (an infinitesimally small band of troublemakers and malcontents — heretics and rebels in the eyes of the established church) began pointing out that salvation was by GRACE, and not by MERIT; a GIFT received by FAITH, totally apart from WORKS!

To the church of the 1500's that was abhorrent! It was the teaching of people who needed to be burned at the stake, as Hus was, and Luther would have been, had not Fredrick the Wise, Prince of Germany, secretly kidnapped him and hidden him in the tower of a castle for 8 months! What they taught went against what MOST in the church had taught and believed for hundreds of years, yet it was that small band of faithful protesters who were RIGHT, and the vast majority who were WRONG.

The same is true of Job. In the past 14 chapters, Job has given Eliphaz much to think about. He has even pointed out the flaws in Eliphaz's beliefs, and tried to get him to see things from a different standpoint—even citing irrefutable discrepancies in his argument (As he did in chapter 8:20 - 9:24 where he point out the obvious fact that the wicked do NOT always get punished in this life, but rather they often prosper while the righteous suffer, just as Psalm 73 likewise points out.)

Yet Eliphaz will not budge! He's so deaf and dense that despite the fact that Job has PROVEN his beliefs to be flawed, he still spouts them off again in verse 32 where he says: "Before his time (that is, before he dies) he (the wicked man) will be paid in full..." That is, God carries out all his judgment on the wicked in this life, which just isn't true, as we've seen before.

Or again in verse 35, where he says: "For the company of the godless will be barren, and fire will consume the tents of those who love bribes (and he means IN THIS LIFETIME)."

You see, despite the fact that Job has proven Eliphaz's beliefs to be flawed at best, and at some points just plain wrong, Eliphaz refuses to adjust them. He refuses to budge an inch! Instead of merely admitting he needs to rethink SOME of his beliefs in light of Job's insights (not all of them mind you, but some of them) he instead digs his heels in, and is NEEDLESSLY stubborn, bull-headed, unteachable, combative and uncompromising — even though wrong!

And I say to YOU: There is NO virtue in that whatsoever! Stubbornness, merely for the sake of being stubborn, is not a Christian virtue! Holding tenaciously to what is NOT TRUE just because "that's what we've always believed," or "been taught" is not commendable! Our goal is not to affirm tradition, but to affirm Scripture as God intended it to be understood! It is to grow in our knowledge of His Word, or as Peter put, "grow in the Grace and Knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

You see, as Christians we are not allowed to get stuck where we are! The will of God for every Christian is our sanctification, and sanctification involves growth and change — including the transformation or renewal of our minds — as Paul puts it in Romans 12:2.

You can't "grow" without changing your opinions / and altering your perceptions, and adding to existing knowledge / and revamping or doing away with previously held beliefs that were muddled, or just plain wrong!

In fact, I know I've made a few people uncomfortable when I've said this in the past (since churches hire me (at least partially) on the basis what I believed at the time I was hired!) — but I'll say it again anyway:

What I believe today will NOT be what I believe 5 years from now, and what I believe 5 years from now will be different from what I believe 10 years from now! Because hopefully, by then, my beliefs and worldview will be more biblical than it is now!

It has to be that way if I'm growing — integrating and applying more Scripture, spending more hours in prayer, and learning more about God will for my life!

You see, there are some truths that you DO need to "stand like a rock" upon, like Luther did when he stood trial before some of the most powerful men in Europe at the Diet of Worms, and said:

"Unless I am convicted by the testimony of Scripture, or by evident reason (for I trust neither in popes nor in councils alone, since it is obvious that they have often erred and contradicted themselves) I cannot and will not recant. My conscience is captive to the Word of God, and I will not recant since it is difficult, unprofitable and dangerous to do anything against one's conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other.

God help me. Amen."

He stood like a rock, and we must also, when it comes to things like the Authority of Scripture / the Indivisible Oneness, and yet Triune Nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit / the fact that salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (as Paul spends so much time driving home to the believers in Galatia who had been led astray and added circumcision to grace and faith in Jesus) / or the truth that in order to be “saved” regeneration is absolutely imperative — that unless you are born again you will NEVER see, nor enter, the KOG (as Jesus declared). Those are non-negotiable truths! They are truths to stand upon, and even die for!

But there are also many other things — like styles of dress and hair and music / the design or even the use or of church buildings / translations or versions of the Bible / the methods used in outreach and evangelism due to changes in society / and many other things—on those you need to be more flexible, accommodating, and wise — like Paul, who was willing “to become all things, to all men, that by all possible means he might save some.”

And then LAST, I merely want to point out what our passage from II Corinthians 1:8-11 shows us — that there is never IN THIS LIFE a time when we are fixed, completed, or can stop learning new things — not even for people like the Apostle Paul.

In that passage (written more than 20 years after his conversion, and only two years at most before his execution at the hands of Nero) Paul can say that he and his missionary helpers went through a very severe time of trial and testing. One so bad that he “despaired of life,” and “felt the sentence of death written on his heart.”

It was obviously an excruciatingly painful experience (as I’ve mentioned of before). But that’s NOT what I want to focus your attention on today. What I want to focus on today is the fact that here is Paul — a well-seasoned saint of many years / an aged man with grey hairs (though balding if we believe the accounts of tradition!) / a man of immense passion, zeal and godly character.

Yet God apparently felt that Paul still had one major sin-issue that was hindering his usefulness as an Apostle, preacher and church planter. What was it? Simply this: Even after all those years, he still depended too heavily on his own strengths and abilities. That is, he was still too SELF-reliant.

And when one is too SELF-reliant they rarely feel the need to cast themselves in total, utter reliance on God! They tend to run on their own strength, depend on their own abilities, and trust in their own competence. They just get up and do things, without seeing any need to rely on God!

And according to the text, that appears to have been true of Paul and the others to some degree. And in the physical realms that may be ok. But in the spiritual realms it leads to disaster! Because God's work, when done apart from a prayerful, even desperate dependence on God's Spirit and power, won't last!

So what does God do? He sends Paul through a trial so severe that it saps him of all his zeal, and all his passion, and drives him to despair, and makes him feel utterly dead inside spiritually. And only then did Paul get it — "All this happened," says Paul, "that we might not rely upon ourselves, but upon God who raises the dead."

Paul was a seasoned believer in the twilight of his life, but he still struggled with being overly self-reliant! Something God needed to break him of, and did break him of by the trial he sent his way — a trial that so depleted ALL his fleshly resources that it forced him to see his need to rely totally on God. Which means that even in Paul's old age he was still having to rethink and adjust his beliefs — **AGAIN!**

He was still needing to be taught new principles and truths; was willing to integrate them into his thinking, and then apply them to his life. And THAT IS a Christian virtue!