

A Lesson From the Book of Job

“Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble, reap it.” Job 4:7,8

In the book of Job, chapter 4, the Bible begins the interaction of Job to the replies of his three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. These friends all proclaim the same solution to Job’s suffering, but they approach it in three distinct ways, according to their different personalities. Some commentators describe their speeches in terms that describe each different approach each one takes: Eliphaz the Elegant, Bildad the Brutal, and Zophar the Zealous. That makes it easy to remember or to mark in the white space before Job 4.

Eliphaz is the first speaker. He is probably the oldest and given deference to go first. There is a smoothness about him. In the beginning, he is courteous. It appears his age has given him the skill to say unpleasant things in gracious ways. His logic and argument is this: first, the righteous are never punished. Second, only the unrighteous suffer. He asks, “Where did you ever see an innocent man perish? Where did you ever see an unrighteous man succeed?” His conclusion is that Job's problem is caused by his own willful sin, which is compounded by Job keeping it secret.

This will be his basic argument throughout the book: There is something wrong about you, Job. If you will only admit your sin, God will befriend you again and you'll be all right. Good people have better lives than bad people.

A number of years ago, a Christian magazine was notorious for its articles that attacked specific men in public ministry. It was particularly critical of Billy Graham. The editor said that the reason that Billy Graham was having a certain illness was that God was judging him. However, in the next issue the editor announced that he had fallen and broken his leg! However, he didn’t declare that he was under God’s judgment. In fact, his explanation was that he was doing God’s work and Satan was attacking him. His suffering was evidence that Satan was working trying to stop him from doing good things. This self-righteous attitude is prevalent among people. We can deduce that the suffering of others is caused by their sin. Our suffering is more righteous than another’s.

Eliphaz's argument is often repeated. If you would cast yourself on God's mercy and confess your sin (the cause of your suffering), God will forgive and restore. Everything will be fine, then. You can be confident that you will be protected and kept, even to a ripe old age, if you get "right."

Of course, this is not the truth. Anyone who has lived a few years at all knows that you can find godly people who are suffering and have debilitating troubles. Righteous people go through times of trial, peril and suffering. Though Eliphaz's arguments may sound like good theology, Eliphaz's logic is warped and based on false beliefs. Suffering isn't only a bad person's problem. The book of Job is given so that we may learn to correct our false theology about suffering and to understand that our sin is not the only reason for suffering.