

1-1-1996

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Recommended Citation

Frost, Mark (2012) "With Friends Like These ...," *Leaven*: Vol. 4: Iss. 4, Article 10.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol4/iss4/10>

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With Friends Like These

BY MARK FROST

Eliphaz the Temanite. Bildad the Shuhite. Zophar the Naamathite. Let's spend a few moments learning to see the world from their perspective. We often miss important applications of biblical truth by approaching the text from the wrong perspective. For instance, we tend to identify ourselves with the Good Samaritan, confident that we would stop to help a wounded enemy if we ever saw one. Yet we are oblivious to the people we routinely pass by, who see in us an uncanny likeness of the Priest or the Levite. In the gospels, we too easily place ourselves in Jesus' sandals, when the writers were more interested in having us identify with the cluelessness of the disciples. The situation is no different when we turn to the book of Job. We wake up late for work one morning with a splitting headache, have a flat tire on the way to the office, and suddenly we're Job, crying out in agony over the unfairness of it all! For most of us, it might be more instructive to identify with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar: folks who've had a pretty easy life who are called upon to comfort a friend in distress.

Job's friends play crucial roles in the drama, as evidenced by the narrative structure. They are introduced immediately after Job's wife counsels him to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9). This placement makes it clear that their task is to offer Job a fresh alternative. If we can adopt their perspective, we will find that this is our task as well. We are

called to present an alternative—God's alternative—to sufferers in a world that scarcely knows what to do with suffering. The conventional wisdom for handling pain is to drug it, drown it, abort it, or deny it. All pain, we are told, should be rationalized, anaesthetized, or psychoanalyzed. Then, if all else fails, we're told to consider the siren call of Dr. Kevorkian: "Curse God and die—and I'll help!" Surely our faith equips us to present a more hopeful alternative! Along with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, then, we ask, "How do we bring God's comfort to people in pain?"

The Solace of Religion

Most of us would begin by telling sufferers to draw strength from their religion. And that's exactly what Job's friends do: "Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope?" (4:6). The friends tell Job to trust in his religion (piety) and make his appeal to God (5:8). Their theology at this point is not amiss. It echoes biblical themes all the way from Deuteronomy 28 to Revelation 20–21. Both Job and his friends accept its basic premise: in the end, God will reward the righteous and punish the wicked. Eliphaz puts it this way: "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" (4:7–8).

Since only the *wicked* are destroyed by God, the friends reassure Job that his present distress will not end in destruction, because he is innocent. They speak of God's ability to reward the righteous, thus encouraging Job to view his present suffering as no more than a prelude to his ultimate vindication. In the interim, he should view his circumstances as the Lord's discipline (5:17–18). The message of the friends forms a close parallel to Psalm 37, where righteous sufferers are told to commit their ways to the Lord and wait patiently for him to redress their grievances. We too have comforted grieving people with similar religious reassurances: "God knows best," "Rely on your faith," "There's a reason for all of this," "We'll understand it all by and by."

When Religion Doesn't Comfort

Why, then, does the dialogue turn out so badly? As I read it, I picture a television talk show. The participants begin with respect for each other, taking turns speaking as they honestly attempt to answer each others' statements. As the discussion progresses, however, positions become increasingly rigid and the participants begin talking past each other, interested only in promoting their particular viewpoints. Finally, the affair becomes a chaotic and accusatory shouting match in which Zophar walks off the stage as Job launches into a nonstop tirade. Near the end of the show, a member of the audience named Elihu casts aspersions on the intelligence of everyone on stage.

How did this happen? The dialogue becomes nasty because of a simple fact: Job's religion is not working. His piety should bring him solace, but it doesn't. The root of the conflict can be seen in the radically different answers Job and his friends offer to the question of why Job's religion is not working.

For Job, the reason is clear: something is wrong with God! His religion holds that God must reward the righteous and punish evildoers. Yet he, being righteous, suffers punishment instead. Something must be wrong with God! "God has turned me over to evil men and thrown me into the clutches of the wicked. All was well with me, but he shattered me; he seized me by the neck and crushed me. . . . Again and again he bursts upon me; he rushes at me like a warrior. . . . Yet my hands have been free of violence and my prayer is pure" (16:11–12, 14, 17).

The language is crystal-clear and unmistakable. It slaps us in the face and insults our sensibilities. We're extremely uncomfortable when talk like this is aimed at God. To us, it is the language of unbelief. A couple of years ago, Tori

Amos, a Methodist minister's daughter, hit the charts with a song entitled "God." It is a plaintive cry about a religion that does not work:

God, sometimes you just don't come through;
 God, sometimes you just don't come through;
 Do you need a woman to look after you?
 God, sometimes you just don't come through.

As believers, we recoil from these words. We don't like hearing them on rock radio stations, and we certainly don't like them on Job's lips! And neither do Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. The friends vehemently reply, "No! There is nothing wrong with God. If Job's religion brings no comfort, there must be something wrong with Job!" They convince themselves that Job, while outwardly appearing righteous, must be suffering because of some heinous, secret sin. To drive home the point, the friends' second speeches contain long diatribes on the horrible fate of the wicked. These descriptions are clearly designed so that Job will see himself in them and thus be led to come clean. Typical of this tactic is Eliphaz' speech at 15:20–25:

All his days the wicked man suffers torment, the ruthless through all the years stored up for him. Terrifying sounds fill his ears; when all seems well, marauders attack him. He despairs of escaping the darkness; he is marked for the sword. He wanders about—food for vultures; he knows the day of darkness is at hand. Distress and anguish fill him with terror; they overwhelm him, like a king poised to attack, because he shakes his fist at God and vaunts himself against the Almighty.

By the third cycle of speeches, Eliphaz has concocted a bill of particulars against Job accusing him of extortion, cheating, and robbing the poor (22:5–10). The conclusion is inescapable; the logic is airtight. Job suffers because he deserves to suffer. Thus, Zophar concludes the first cycle of speeches by offering the invitation to Job: "Yet if you devote your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him, if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear. . . . You will be secure, because there is hope; you will look about you and take your rest in safety" (11:13–15, 18).

You can imagine the congregation singing all six verses of "Just As I Am" eight times during Zophar's appeal. At the end, there are thirteen teenagers on the front row, along with three folks who always come forward at gospel meetings, but Job sits resolutely in the pew, arms folded, jaw

set, and feet firmly planted: “I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it; my conscience will not reproach me as long as I live” (27:5–6).

Job pleads for a friendship that is both radical and redemptive

Why Job’s Religion Doesn’t Work

Who is right? Is something wrong with God, as Job claims? Or is something wrong with Job, as the friends claim? Neither. The truth is, *there is something wrong with their religion!* As we observe this, we begin to see flaws in our own religious understandings—flaws that can lead us to become modern-day Eliphazs, Bildads, and Zophars, the Bible’s infamous “miserable comforters.”

There is something wrong with a religion that has no comprehension of an unseen world in which dramas beyond man’s knowledge are played out.

There is something wrong with a religion of simple cause and effect, where God is duty-bound to react in predictable ways to human initiative. Such a god is bereft of divine sovereignty, a god subject to human control and manipulation.

There is something wrong with a religion that presumes to speak a word from God when none has been given. Zophar pays lip service to the notion that humans cannot know God’s ways: “Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you prove the limits of the Almighty?” (11:7). Zophar then claims that he knows the secrets of God’s wisdom: “Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin” (11:6). Zophar is not alone in this. Bildad likewise identifies his words as “God’s consolations, words spoken gently to you” (15:11).

There is something wrong with a religion that equates the wisdom of the fathers with the mind of God. Bildad and Eliphaz chide Job, “The gray-haired and the aged are on our side, men even older than your father” (15:10, cf. 8:8). Churches of Christ have consistently taught people from other traditions not to blindly follow the religion of their parents. Yet now among us, we hear brethren shouting down genuine seekers of truth with the justification, “If you are right, that means that Alexander Campbell, Thomas Campbell, Thomas Warren, Warren Harding, James A. Harding, David Lipscomb, and the young Rubel Shelly were all wrong!”

There is something wrong with a religion that takes an ultimate truth and applies it to a specific situation in a way that intensifies the sufferer’s pain. In the end God will reward the righteous and punish the wicked, but to suggest this truth as the only explanation for Job’s plight is not only false, it compounds Job’s pain. Yet how many times have we applied a passage like Proverbs 22:6, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it,” in a way that heaps even more misery on parents already devastated by a child’s rebellion?

There is something wrong with a religion whose God is so puny that he needs mortals to defend his honor against the cries of people in pain. We have forgotten the consistent witness of the Old Testament prophets: If you must nail your god down for fear he will blow away in a storm; if you must put him under lock and key when dinner guests come for fear he will be stolen; if you must take up arms to protect him when enemies attack, then your god is an idol! The true, omnipotent God does not need us to rescue him from any danger.

There is something wrong with a religion that sacrifices compassion on the altar of dogmatic fault-finding. How often religious people have refused comfort to the afflicted, justifying their neglect by blaming the victim! “Men at ease have contempt for misfortune as the fate of those whose feet are slipping” (Job 12:4). There can be little doubt that the same principle was at work in Jesus’ disciples as they questioned him about a man born blind: “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” (John 9:2). While many of humankind’s ills are self-inflicted, many others are not. Using a sufferer’s real or imagined culpability to determine to whom we will show compassion dishonors God.

How Do We Comfort Sufferers?

How, then, do we provide comfort to people in pain? For the answer we must listen to Job, who, through his ordeal, learned the difference between true and false comfort. The key to his advice on consolation is found at 6:14: “A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty.” What Job pleads for is a friendship that is both radical and redemptive: radical, because it calls persons of faith to commit themselves to a sufferer who can no longer find a place for belief in God in the midst of pain; redemptive, because it lovingly embraces one whose relationship with God has been demolished, refusing to let go until a new relationship with God has been secured. How do we demonstrate this kind of radical, redemptive friendship?

First, we must learn the power of silence. After the friends' first barrage, Job replies, "If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom" (13:5). Indeed it would. In fact, silence—seven straight days of it—was their first response to Job's plight. Though no words were spoken, comfort was communicated powerfully during that week. Their mere presence indicated that caring for a hurt friend was a top priority. Through shared tears and shredded robes, they sent a clear message to Job: "When you grieve, we grieve." If only they could have known that this was their finest hour! If only we were aware of how often we have imparted a beautiful message of love, consolation, and healing—until we opened our mouths and wrecked it. If only we could learn simply to be present, resisting the anxious urge to say something—anything—regardless of how inane or insensitive!

Second, showing radical, redemptive friendship means risking our theological understandings for the sake of helping those who hurt. We cannot minister very long to divorcees before our doctrinal boxes, with labels like "guilty party" and "right to remarry," become stretched to the breaking point. We cannot work with cancer-stricken children without wrestling with our understanding of God's justice. We cannot hear the sobbing of a thirty-two-year-old mother of four, instantly widowed by a drunk driver, without being unnerved by the terrifying silence of God. Such are the risks we take upon ourselves when we dare to enter redemptively into another's pain. Such risks are frightening. Job was right when he observed, "You see something dreadful and are afraid" (6:21). Usually, rather than run the risk of having our theology shaken—maybe even shattered—we instead mumble pious-sounding platitudes intended more to reduce our anxiety level than to comfort the afflicted.

Third, when we show friendship that is radical and redemptive, we accept outcries against God nondefensively. We have so thoroughly identified complaints against God as a sign of unbelief, we are instantly defensive when even a believer calls God's love, wisdom, or justice into question. Redemptive friendship demands that when a tortured soul cries, "Why, God, why?" we have enough insight to see it as a cry of pain, not a request for information. Rather than offering a driveling apology for the Almighty, a more authentic response might be to echo back, "Yes, God, why?" Radical friendship realizes that the words "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" came, not from the lips of an atheist, but from a man after God's own heart, as well as from his own Son. A friend holds a loved one close as he

rages against God, confident that the sufferer has not rejected God and that God has not abandoned him.

Finally, radical, redemptive friendship calls us to take the side of a friend in his complaint against God. Initially, the friends determine to defend God against the attacks of Job, who they assume has become God's enemy. With supreme irony, at the end of the story God tells them, "Take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (42:7–8). They thought they were helping God; God says they were condemning an innocent man. They thought they were upholding God's righteousness; God calls their efforts folly. They thought they were doing God's work; in fact, they were doing Satan's bidding. David Noel Freedman suggests that Satan actually mounted three attacks against Job. In the first, Job lost his possessions and children; in the second, he lost his health. But the third and most devastating attack of Satan came through the withering accusations of the friends. Perhaps Job would agree with this assessment, for at the height of his complaint, he laments, "God has turned me over to evil men and thrown me into the clutches of the wicked" (16:11).

By understanding this irony in regard to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, we can begin to apply it to ourselves. As we go through life, we will someday happen upon a brother or sister locked in a life-or-death wrestling match with the Almighty. We will hear his piercing scream, "I will not let go until you bless me." When we come upon such a scene, let us resist the urge to jump into the fray on God's side. God does not need our help, and the odds are we'll wind up opposing rather than supporting him. No, let us join the fight on the side of our beleaguered brother. Let us struggle by his side until we are covered with sweat and blood—both his and our own. Let us cry out, "We will not let go until you bless us!" Let us join the struggle, knowing that we may forever afterward walk with a limp. But let us not be afraid to wrestle with God on behalf of another, knowing that when the dust settles, we will be able to say, "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you" (42:5).

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