

## More than Miserable Comforters (Part 2)

Last week, we began to look at Job's miserable comforters. They did some things right, but they did a lot of things wrong—kind of like we do. But whether it is their successes or failures, we can learn a great deal from them about moving past being miserable comforters. Last week we noted six lessons to help us. Let's see what else we can learn.

**Lesson #7:** *Don't assume suffering is caused by the sufferer's sin.* Job's friends assumed Job was suffering because of his own great sin. Certainly, a great deal of suffering comes directly because of sin. If a person needs to be rebuked for sin, we must not be afraid to do so. However, often, when the connection is that direct, the sufferer knows the connection and the suffering itself is enough rebuke. Someone once said, "Nothing is so sweet as the fall of an enemy, except perhaps the fall of a friend." This statement highlights the underlying current of competition we often have with our friends. Sadly, when they start suffering, we can easily see their suffering and our ease as vindication over them. We must be doing something right, while they are doing something wrong. Sometimes, we even use the Bible to help justify us in this assumption. But that wasn't Job's issue. And let's not throw out the platitude that everyone sins. If that was the basis for the suffering, then why aren't you suffering just like them? But even if their suffering is caused by their sin, does that change the fact that they need comforting? Instead of writing them off because of their sin, perhaps this is a great opportunity to show them the love of God, enfolding them, calling them to repentance, and showing them the great relief of forgiveness that comes from God.

**Lesson #8:** *Sometimes we don't know why.* The most interesting aspect of Job's story to me is that neither Job nor his friends ever find out why he was actually suffering. None of them ever know of the wager between God and Satan. They never know why. Often, when we are trying to comfort, we want to make sense of the suffering. Both sufferers and comforters seem to think that if we can understand the why behind the suffering, it will make it easier to deal with the suffering. In some cases that may be true, but not in most. Does knowing how you got a splinter make it hurt any less? Rather than spending time trying to figure out why, a better use of our time is figuring out how to respond. That is something Job had mostly correct when in **Job 13:15** he said, "Though he slay me, I will hope in him..." (ESV). Whether Job ever understood why or not, he was going to maintain faith in God. When we are comforting others, it's usually not too profitable trying to figure out why or lay blame somewhere.

**Lesson #9:** *People in extreme situations often say extreme things.* Certainly, we will all be judged for every careless word that comes out of our mouths. But, perhaps we should let God be that judge. Job's friends were actually doing an excellent job of comforting Job until **Job 4**. What happened? In **Job 3**, Job started speaking, and he said some pretty extreme things. Instead of allowing Job to vent his feelings and fears, Eliphaz felt it necessary to correct any straying thought or expression Job had. Certainly, we don't want to overlook error and falsehood that will ensnare someone in more sin. However, sometimes we would do well to remember that everything a person in extreme situations says doesn't represent what they truly believe when they think it through. Job explains this in **Job 6:2-3** saying, "Oh that my vexation were weighed, and all my calamity laid in the balances! For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea; therefore my words have been rash" (ESV). Certainly, we shouldn't excuse blasphemy, but neither should we put too much weight on extreme statements made in extreme circumstances. That will certainly get in the way of comfort.

**Lesson #10:** *Just because someone is upset doesn't mean they've given up on God.* Corresponding with our last lesson, we need to understand that just because extreme things get said, doesn't mean faith is absent. Certainly Job says a lot of rash things and even gets rebuked by God for overstepping his bounds in places. But he is still the guy who said, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth" (**Job 19:26**, ESV). Obviously, if folks are losing faith, encourage their faith. But don't assume extreme statements in extreme situations mean they are losing faith.

**Lesson #11:** *Listen to the sufferers, they may be telling the truth.* Throughout the book, Job maintains he is not guilty of sin worthy of this amount of suffering. The three friends dismiss everything Job says. The problem is Job is right. God even points out that the three friends were mistaken and in their attack on Job lied about God. Sadly, many comforters have their minds made up about what has happened and what should happen next and they don't listen to the one suffering. This is especially true if the sufferer has some kind of chronic issue. I know this is often a complaint from some who have chronic issues that are not physically obvious. Many people look at someone with these chronic issues and claim it is all in the sufferer's head. They refuse to listen when the sufferer explains the suffering they are dealing with. This is also true if the suffering is emotional, psychological, or spiritual. Obviously,

if someone has been in a car wreck or is having weekly chemo treatments, we can see the suffering. But when the suffering is internal, we have a hard time believing. We sometimes think the sufferer is simply taking advantage of folks. I'm not sure I always know exactly how to tell the difference between a faker and genuine sufferer. However, I am convinced no one goes to hell for being taken advantage of. Perhaps we should listen to the one suffering, they may actually be telling the truth.

**Lesson #12:** *Only God can truly fix things.* Perhaps the worst approach to comforting is jumping to fixing. There is a time for advice. There is a time for guidance. But these are not comfort. And as we piece together everything else we've learned about humility, wisdom, and listening, the best way to comfort is to remember that only God can actually fix things. None of Job's friends renewed his family or restored his wealth. Only God did that (**Job 42**). If we want to be good comforters, we must let God be the fixer.

Job's three friends were miserable comforters. Too often, I am also. May we learn these lessons from Job and his friends so we can be something more than miserable comforters.

—Edwin L. Crozier