



THE SORRIEST OF FRIENDS

A prize if you can complete these words: “Lean on me ...”

Yes, it’s that classic Bill Withers song, *Lean On Me* – a great picture of what true friendship looks like. And today, we’re going to think about the kind of friend a suffering person needs, by examining 3 friends in the book of Job.

Though whether *Job* would have seen them that way is kind of debatable!

Job 4:1; 6:1; 8:1; 9:1; 11:1; 12:1, etc ...

Job’s friends come from places in the ancient Middle East which were strongly associated with wisdom. And they represent different ‘approaches’ to obtaining it:

- Eliphaz of Teman, the oldest of the 3. Mr storyteller!
- Bildad, son of Shuah, a son of Abraham. Mr history!
- Zophar of Na’amah, a city in Arabia. Mr philosophy!

I.e. these are the wisest of the wise! But by the end of the book, they look like idiots. To understand why, we need to examine 1) their arguments, and 2) their motives:

1) Their arguments. Job’s friends operate like a WWF tag-team. And in 3 rounds of argument spanning 23 chapters, they illustrate 3 things we need to avoid:

Round 1: unhelpful suggestions. Eliphaz says: "Job, if you trust in God, He will deliver you from all this. Just pray." Job replies: "But I have nothing to live for, anymore! Why won't God just leave me alone?" (a negative take on Psalm 8). Bildad says: "When people die like your children did, it's because they've upset Him. But look to God, and all will be well." Job replies: "Yes, yes, I've heard it all before. But if you're right, none of us here stands a chance!" Zophar says: "You're an arrogant man, Job! But God promises to be merciful. So, turn to Him." Job replies: "You really are the beginning and end of wisdom! Listen, you quacks! If you want to prove how wise you are, try shutting up!"

Round 2: ungodly explanations. Eliphaz says: "Who are you to question God? Your words prove that you're a sinner!" Job replies: "What a lousy bunch of comforters you turned out to be! No! I am innocent! And if you were as wise as you think, you'd agree!" Bildad says: "But only evil people suffer! Ones who do not know God!" Job replies: "That's the 10th time you've attacked me now (an exaggeration: it's only been 5). But if I have made a mistake, that's between me and God – not you animals." Zophar says: "How dare you sit there and insult us! Our arguments have been around for ever!" Job replies: "And they're *still* wrong! Innocent people suffer, evil people get away with murder!"

Round 3: unloving conclusions. Eliphaz says: "Job, it's obvious you've done something terrible. But repent, be forgiven, then go and write a TED talk!" Job replies: "If only I could talk to God rather than you lot ... it's the world that's unjust, not me! But I still believe I will be vindicated, in the end ..." Bildad says: "The moon and the stars are dim in comparison to God. How can you, a mere maggot, say that you are righteous?" Job replies: "Well, thank you very much, you've been such a help today! You must tell me where you obtained such wisdom. Yes, God is great! And yes, God is wise. But I am still innocent – so is He *good*?" At which point Zophar says: absolutely nothing!

The lesson being: don't rush to fill the silence. You might regret it.

2) Their motives. Job's friends are defending a belief that is central to most of the world's religions. It's called the 'divine retribution' principle: behave yourself, God will bless you; misbehave, God will curse you. And it kicks off gently: "Nobody's perfect, Job – just admit it." But as Job starts to defend himself, they start to get nasty.

Why? There are 3 reasons hinted at in the dialogue:

Reason 1: they feel helpless. They're projecting their own frustrations (hence Eliphaz's rebuke in 15:11: "Are God's consolations not enough for you?"). How many of us here have got wound up with a sick person? It happens – hey, if man-flu can be a test of a person's patience ...

Reason 2: they feel superior. They've told themselves, "We're supposed to be the founts of all wisdom, so we better have some answers." As Christians, we might say, "I'm supposed to be a witness / godly voice / winner of every argument." When what we really are is *proud*.

Reason 3: they feel nervous. They're attempting to immunise themselves, to tell themselves, "Innocent people like us don't suffer – only guilty ones." Hence Job's words in 6:21, "You see something dreadful, and are afraid." I.e. if Job can suffer for no reason, so can *we*.

So, they end up accusing him, rather than comforting him. And they drive Job to say some pretty foolish things – "I'm sinless"; "innocent people suffer, guilty people don't"; "God is being unjust." Which means they inadvertently become Satan's instruments rather than God's.

But that could never happen to us, could it? *Could* it?

There's a church I know where a young woman was diagnosed with cancer. When she died, the leadership was accused of not having prayed enough, and then, of not challenging her to repent of whatever sin must have hindered her healing. Can you imagine what that did to her family? It devastated them. But that's the flip-side of a blab-it-and-grab-it theology.

It's selfish.

Unbiblical.

And wrong.

A Friend For All Seasons

We started this message with a classic song, and the kind of friendship everyone in this world needs. And that's the big thing Job cries out for, in the midst of his replies (19:23-27). A friend, an advocate, a redeemer, or *go'el* in Hebrew. Someone who will intervene with God, on his behalf. Someone who will stand with him, whatever he's done or not done. Someone who will pay whatever it takes to set him free. Someone who understands what it is to be *him*.

Now Job didn't know who that someone is. But we do. That someone is?

Jesus. The ultimate Bill Withers!

Jesus shows us what true friendship means. Think about the death of Lazarus (John 11). To Martha, who wants to talk, Jesus talks; to Mary, who wants to weep, Jesus weeps. And that is the example we, as Christians, must follow (the clue is in the name). Bernaud of Clairvaux put it like this: "Christ kisses us in the love of our friends."

What, then, do we do with this? Here are some suggestions:

- Be more sympathetic than Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar.
- Avoid simplistic answers. Life is complicated.
- Your presence is what matters most. Just *be* there.