

The Folly of Platitudes

by Ray C. Stedman

Last week we left our hero, Job, surrounded by do-gooders who were intent on forcing him to confess sin he was not aware he had committed. I do not suppose anything is more difficult for the human spirit to bear than misunderstanding, and to be accused of having done something that you have no awareness of having done. So these three men who came to comfort Job prove to be the severest trial he has yet to bear. Eliphaz, the oldest, spoke first, but his eloquent and lofty arguments only leave Job angry and irritated, crying out for enlightenment from his friends, and relief from his pain.

In Chapter 8, **the second of these friends takes up the attack.** His name is Bildad the Shuhite, but we call him "Bildad the Brutal." His discourse is rather short, and he opens by attempting logic with Job:

**Then Bildad the Shuhite answered:
"How long will you say these things,
and the words of your mouth be a great
wind?
Does God pervert justice?
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?
If your children have sinned against him,
he has delivered them into the power of
their transgression." {Job 8:1-4 RSV}**

Bildad's style is to ask questions to try to focus everything onto the logic of what is being discussed. He is the cold, intellectual thinker who is debating the issue at the level of the mind. His first question, basically, is "Can God do wrong?" Now that is a good question to ask. It is the basis of much philosophy, of course, from the point of logic, the answer is "No, God cannot do wrong." After all, ideas of what is wrong and what is right

are based upon the very nature and character of God himself. Rightness is being like God; wrongness is being unlike God. So to ask this question is to ask, "Can God be unlike himself?" The answer is, "No." God cannot be unlike himself; God cannot do wrong. So Bildad moves on from that basic premise to draw a logical conclusion for Job: "If your children have sinned against him he has delivered them into the power of their transgression. When your children died, Job, on that tragic day when the tornado blew down the house and killed them all, you can only conclude it was because they did something terribly wrong." Bildad is following through the line of argument that all three of these friends pursue, that God punishes all wrong; therefore any tragedy is the result of some definite and perhaps hidden sin.

Bildad goes on, in Verses 8-9, to argue that God will respond to repentance, and he summons the past experience of the fathers to confirm this:

**"For inquire, I pray you, of bygone ages,
and consider what the fathers have found;
For we are but of yesterday, and know
nothing,
for our days on earth are a shadow."
{Job 8:8-9 RSV}**

There is much truth in what these men say to Job. In fact, it would be very difficult to find anything wrong, specifically, in what they say. Bildad is simply reminding Job that the experience of the past confirms the fact that God blesses those who turn to him, and that he rebukes and punishes those who turn away.

Then Bildad supports his argument further with various common sayings of the day, Verses 11-13:

**“Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh?
Can reeds flourish where there is no water?
While yet in flower and not cut down,
they wither before any other plant.
Such are the paths of all who forget God;
the hope of the godless man shall perish.”
{Job 8:11-13 RSV}**

His argument is clearly that man, by nature, must have God’s blessing in order to prosper. If he does not have it, if he has done something to cut himself off from the blessing of God, then he will simply wither like a reed without water. Bildad supports this by referring to these common platitudes of the day. Then he enlarges this in the verses that follow by pointing out how God always cuts off those who seem to prosper because of evil in their midst, and he closes with an exhortation to Job to repent, Verses 20-22:

**“Behold, God will not reject a blameless man,
nor take the hand of evildoers.
He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,
and your lips with shouting.
Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,
and the tent of the wicked will be no more.” {Job 8:20-22 RSV}**

This is a heartfelt and earnest exhortation to Job to own up to whatever it is he is hiding from them and from God, and perhaps from himself.

When you read the arguments of a man like this, you have to ask, “What is wrong with this? It sounds so true and right.” It is an argument you hear repeated many times today. (The book of Job is very up-to-date.) What Bildad says is true and logical, and supported by plausible argument both from the experience of the past, and from the testimony of much of Scripture, as well. What, then, is wrong?

When you get to the end of the book, God appears and says that Job has been saying the right things, and that the friends are wrong in what they say. But at this point we have to ask, “What is wrong with this?” The answer, of course, is that there is nothing wrong with what they say; it is just

that it is said in the wrong spirit, and what they leave out makes it wrong.

I see three things wrong with their approaches:

1. First, they answer Job’s words without trying to find out what produces those words. They are zeroing in on what he says, without understanding his agony. Job himself has admitted previous to this that he speaks rashly, but he said it was because of the unceasing torment he is going through. Any of us who have gone through deep, unrelenting pain knows how this can try the spirit to the utmost, and we become testy and sharp. And because Job says certain things that sound extreme, his friends leap upon his words and try to analyze them. There is no identification with the hurt of Job in their approaches to him.

I find this is a very common problem today. It is a very common problem in marriage. Husbands often try to be coldly analytical when their wives are pressured, or weary, or frightened about something. Husbands hear only the words and try to analyze them, and nothing can destroy a woman faster than that. The problem is that there is no identification with the hurt. We simply deal with what people say and take no note of what lies behind the words. There is no attempt at understanding or sympathy. We become like Bildad the Shuhite – coldly analytical about what is said, with no understanding of the hurt.

2. The second thing is that these friends’ theology was right as far as it went, but it was very incomplete. They never seemed to be aware of that. They always spoke with the utmost confidence that what they were saying was the final word on the subject. There was no apparent understanding that perhaps there were aspects of God and dimensions to his Word that they had not yet seen. (This is certainly true of Bildad at this point, and of the next speaker, Zophar.) Their narrow, limited vision said that difficulties in a person’s life were always caused by sin. Now many of the problems of life are caused by sin, therefore, it is impossible to say to these men that they are wrong. Nevertheless, they do not see that there are other reasons why God brings us into suffering. Like

many of us today, they judge only on the basis of a very rigid theology that takes note of certain aspects of truth, but ignores others.

Like the famous story of the blind men and the elephant. They gather around this huge animal and by feeling it, try to identify what an elephant is like. One, grabbing the trunk, said an elephant is like a snake. Another, feeling the leg, said an elephant is like a tree. Still another, feeling the side of the animal, said that an elephant is like a wall. A fourth, grabbing the tail, said an elephant is like a rope. Thus they argued back and forth. All of them were right, and all of them were wrong, because they did not see the whole picture.

I think one of the most helpful things about the book of Job is that it teaches us the danger of speaking from an incomplete theology, of trying to analyze God's workings with only a narrow understanding of how he works, and what are the causes behind his actions in human life. This produces many of the problems we suffer with one another. We have all suffered from Job's comforters who come around positive they know what the problem is. They have a very rigid, theological explanation of our difficulty. And it is right, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough.

3. The third thing that is wrong with these friends is that they never seem to refer to God for help for themselves in understanding Job's problem. They never pray with Job. They never ask God for help to open their minds and to illuminate their understanding so that they can help their friend. The book is filled with prayers, but they are all the prayers of Job, crying out to God in the midst of his sufferings. His friends never seem to feel the need for further illumination on the subject. Yet you cannot find much wrong with their arguments. What a testimony to us for the need to speak cautiously when we deal with the deep hurts and problems of life.

In Chapters 9 and 10 we have **Job's reply to Bildad**. In Chapter 9 he sets forth the difficulty he has with God, and he opens with *a statement of his dilemma* in Verses 1-3:

Then Job answered:

"Truly I know that it is so:

But how can a man be just before God?

If one wished to contend with him,

one could not answer him once in a thousand times." {Job 9:1-3 RSV}

We must carefully understand what Job is saying here. His problem is, basically, that he, as well as his friends, has an inadequate theology. All four of them come at life with the same basic outlook, and Job accepts the principle that these friends believe, that trouble comes only because of sin. He would have analyzed another's problems along the same line before his trials.

But his dilemma is caused by the fact that in the long dark hours of searching his own heart, he has not been able to put his finger upon any sin that he has not already dealt with. He was a righteous and a blameless man, which means that when he was aware of evil in his life, he did not try to deny it, but brought the offerings, and accepted God's forgiveness. He has done that, and still the torment goes on. So his dilemma is, "I'm not aware of sin in myself, yet the trouble is there, therefore, the problem must lie in God."

But his problem is that he has no way to examine God, and that is what he goes on to state in very eloquent terms. In Verse 4, he says that *God's wisdom is beyond man*:

**"He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength
– who has hardened himself against him,
and succeeded? –**

**he who removes mountains, and they know
it not,**

when he overturns them in his anger;

**who shakes the earth out of its place,
and its pillars tremble;**

**who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
who seals up the stars;**

**who alone stretched out the heavens,
and trampled the waves of the sea;**

**who made the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the chambers of the
south;**

**who does great things beyond understand-
ing,**

and marvelous things without number."

{Job 9:4-10 RSV}

“How can you get hold of a God like that to debate with him the issues that are causing the hurt of life?” Job asks.

In Verses 11-12 he recognizes **God’s invisibility**:

**“Lo, he passes by me, and I see him not;
he moves on, but I do not perceive him.
Behold, he snatches away; who can hinder him?
Who will say to him, ‘What doest thou’?
{Job 9:11-12 RSV}**

In Verses 13-21 you have a marvelous statement of **the sovereign movings of God in history**:

**“God will not turn back his anger [he does
not change his mind];
beneath him bowed the helpers of Rahab
[Egypt].
How then can I answer him,
choosing my words with him?
Though I am innocent, I cannot answer
him;
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.
If I summoned him and he answered me,
I would not believe that he was listening to
my voice.
For he crushes me with a tempest,
and multiplies my wounds without cause;
he will not let me get my breath,
but fills me with bitterness.
If it is a contest of strength, behold him
[obviously the winner]:
If it is a matter of justice, who can summon
him?” [Who can judge the judge?]
{Job 9:13-19 RSV}**

That is, “Do you get some kind of pleasure out of this? Is that why you put me through this? Does it give you some kind of delight?” I do not think Job is being sarcastic. I think he is really asking, “Is God that kind of a being, that this pleases him? If that is the explanation, at least I am contributing to the pleasure of God by going through something like this!” He is looking for meaning in his suffering. Then he asks, Verses 4-7:

**“Hast thou eyes of flesh?
Dost thou see as a man sees?
Are thy days as the days of man,
or thy years as man’s years,**

**that thou dost seek out my iniquity
and search for my sin,
although thou knowest that I am not guilty,
and there is none to deliver out of thy
hand?” {Job 10:4-7 RSV}**

He is asking, “Do you somehow limit yourself to man’s circumstances and capabilities? Is that why you put me through this? Somehow, despite your wisdom and knowledge and might far beyond men, do you limit yourself, put yourself where we are, and let yourself act and think like a man? Is that what is behind this?” I think here we have some implications of the incarnation, the great underlying truth of the whole New Testament, that God somehow did limit himself, and became a man, and put himself in our place. Job is asking, “Is that why we go through suffering?” In Verses 8-13, he argues, “Can it be reasonable? You made me, you formed me, and now you tear me apart. Is that a reasonable thing to do? You who put me together are now destroying me. Is that logical, is that right?” Then in Verses 14-17 he asks the question, “What can I do? What recourse do I have? How can I please you or change in such a way as to alleviate this suffering?”

**“If I sin, thou dost mark me, ... {Job 10:14a
RSV}
If I am wicked, woe to me!
If I am righteous. I cannot lift up my
head, {Job 10:15a RSV}
And if I lift myself up, thou dost hunt me
like a lion,” {Job 10:16a RSV}**

And he closes, Verse 17:

**“Thou dost renew thy witnesses against me,
and increase thy vexation toward me;
thou dost bring fresh hosts against me.”
{Job 10:17 RSV}**

“What can I do? Where can I turn?” As you go through that kind of a list you see that every argument that has ever occurred to a suffering saint is brought out here in the book of Job. Every nuance of suffering, whether mental or physical, is explored to its utmost limit throughout this book. All the tormenting questions are asked, all the haunting dilemmas are faced, so that anyone going through suffering will find that Job has felt what-

ever he has, and has articulated it eloquently. The questions are not answered at this point. They will be answered before we are through, but in a way you would never anticipate in the reading of the story.

So, because of the silence of God, Job closes this chapter by crying out in Verses 18-22, “Let me alone! Life is useless; death is but darkness. Whatever it is, anything is better than this. Let me alone.”

Now, in Chapter 11, **Zophar the Naamathite** comes onto the scene. (I call him “Zophar the Zealous.”) He moves up to bat, and he opens with *a scorching rebuke to Job’s sinful folly*, as he sees it:

**Then Zophar the Naamathite answered:
“Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
and a man full of talk be vindicated?
Should your babble silence men,
and when you mock, shall no one shame you?
For you say, ‘My doctrine is pure,
and I am clean in God’s eyes.’
But oh, that God would speak,
and open his lips to you,
and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!
For he is manifold in understanding.
Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.” {Job 11:1-6 RSV}**

You can almost see Zophar shaking his fist in righteous indignation in Job’s face. He accuses Job of wordiness, of foolishness, of mockery, of self-righteous smugness. He says that Job’s punishment is richly deserved; that he is only getting what is coming to him, and not even all of that. What a sweetheart this man is!

He goes on, in Verses 7-12, to describe *Job’s stupid ignorance*, in contrast to God’s deep wisdom and inscrutable ways:

**“Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?
It is higher than heaven – what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol – what can you know?
Its measure is longer than the earth,
and broader than the sea.**

**If he passes through, and imprisons,
and calls to judgment, who can hinder him?
For he knows worthless men [guess who Zophar has in mind!];
when he sees iniquity, will he not consider it?
But a stupid man will get understanding
when a wild ass’s colt is born a man.”
{Job 11:7-12 RSV}**

That is, it will never happen. “Anybody as stupid as you, Job, will never get any help.” He lays it on, heavy and hard. Then he closes with a vivid description of the shining possibilities that were ahead, *if Job will only repent*:

**“If you set your heart aright, {Job 11:13a RSV}
If iniquity is in your hand, {Job 11:14a RSV}
Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;
you will be secure, {Job 11:15a RSV}
You will forget your misery; {Job 11:16a RSV}
And your life will be brighter than the noonday; {Job 11:17a RSV}
And you will have confidence, {Job 11:18a RSV}
you will be protected {Job 11:18c RSV}
You will lie down, and none will make you afraid;” {Job 11:19a RSV}**

Then *a sharp word of warning* at the end,

**“But the eyes of the wicked will fall;
all ways of escape will be lost to them,
and their hope is to breathe their last.”
{Job 11:20 RSV}**

Once again there is no identifying with Job’s hurt. There is no sense of empathy, of trying to feel with him the awful torment of mind and spirit that presses him, squeezes him, and drags from him these agonizing cries into the darkness around. These men just lay it on him. They see only the cold, analytical logic of it. Zophar, of course, speaks with a great deal of passion and force, but there is no sense of offering understanding help, simply the laying on of passionate invective. Once

again these men seem to approach this whole problem from a purely theological point of view.

This is the difference between theology and the experience of a man taught by the Spirit. Theology can be very clear and right, but it is all in the head. When you are dealing with the hurting problems of life, you must add a deeper dimension – that compassion that Jesus manifested, that sympathy of touch that identified with the hurt and opened the door of the spirit to receiving what light might be given through the words.

The first round ends with **Job's sarcastic defiance**, Chapters 12-14. The first part is Job's answers to his friends; the second is his prayer before God. (We will leave that prayer for next week.)

Then Job answered:

**“No doubt you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you.”**
{Job 12:1-2 RSV}

We know exactly how he felt! These men had all the answers; they knew all the problems. Job says, “When you pass from the scene, there will be nothing left. You know it all.” From Verse 3 on to the end of the chapter, he points out that they deal with elementary truths, things that anybody could know:

**“But I have understanding as well as you;
I am not inferior to you.
Who does not know such things as these?”**
{Job 12:3 RSV}

“You haven't helped me. Anyone knows this, You haven't added anything to me.” Then he begins to detail it.

**“I am a laughingstock to my friends;
I, who called upon God and he answered
me,
a just and blameless man, am a laughing-
stock.”** {Job 12:4 RSV}

Why? Because,

**“In the thought of one who is at ease there
is contempt for misfortune;”**
{Job 12:5a RSV}

“You don't understand because you've never been here. You haven't felt what I feel.” (You know how familiar that argument is!) And then Job says, “You haven't faced all the facts,” Verse 6:

**“The tents of robbers are at peace,
and those who provoke God are secure,
who bring their god in their hand.”**
{Job 12:6 RSV}

**“Though I am innocent, my own mouth
would condemn me;
though I am blameless, he would prove me
perverse.
I am blameless; I regard not myself;
I loathe my life.”** {Job 9:20-22 RSV}

“What can I do? How can I get at this whole problem?” Job asks. In {Chapter 9,} Verses 22-24, he goes on to describe how life becomes incomprehensible where there is no understanding God. The reference point is gone, or uncertain, or vague; you cannot make sense of anything in life. And in {Chapter 9,} Verses 25-31 you get the effect this has on Job. Because of this he is filled with bewilderment, fear, and despair. But then in {Chapter 9,} Verses 32-35, out of the deep darkness that surrounds this suffering saint, a ray of light breaks through. It is the first break in Job's gloom. He says of God:

**“For he is not a man, as I am, that I might
answer him,
that we should come to trial together.”**
{Job 9:32 RSV}

Then comes the awareness of what is missing:

**“There is no umpire between us,
who might lay his hand upon us both.
Let him take his rod away from me,
and let not dread of him terrify me.
Then I would speak without fear of him,
for I am not so in myself.”**
{Job 9:33-35 RSV}

“What is needed is a mediator, an arbitrator who can come between us who understands us both, and brings us together,” Job says. For the first time in this book we begin to see what God is after with this man, why he is putting him through this protracted trial. For now Job begins to feel, deep in his bones, the nature of reality: the terrible

gulf between man and God that must be bridged by another party. We who live in the full light of the New Testament know that he is crying out, and feeling deep within, the need for just such a mediator as Jesus himself. Job is laying the foundation here in his own understanding for that tremendous revelation that comes in the New Testament that God becomes man. God takes our place, lives as we live, and feels as we feel, and solves the great problem between us and God, and brings the two – God and man – together. For the first time in Job we begin to sense what God is driving at. There is a verse in Psalm 119, Verse 71, that says: “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes.” You can learn theology out of a book, and you can study it and get it clear in your mind, but until you go through the hurts and difficulties and trials of life, you never really understand what the truth is. It takes suffering to get a clear vision of what God is saying to us, and that is what the book of Job is all about.

In Chapter 10, the darkness closes in again around Job. Once again his torment drives him to prayer, and this chapter is breathed out before God, and in the presence of his friends. There are two things Job asks in this prayer. In Verse 2, he says,

“let me know why thou dost contend against me.” {Job 10:2b RSV}

That is the heart of his cry in the first part of this chapter. “Let me know what is wrong.” Then, in Verse 20 he cries to God,

“Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort ...” {Job 10:20b RSV}

So his prayer consists of these two cries, “Let me know, or else let me alone; one or the other!” Anyone who has gone through suffering knows that this is often our feeling. “Explain this to me, Lord. Or, if you choose to let it go on, leave me alone!”

I was talking to a man this week who, in the midst of protracted suffering, said, “Does God want me to endure any more?” This is Job’s cry.

In the first seventeen verses of Chapter 10, he is searching for answers, examining all the possibilities that might explain why he is going through this torment. As you look at these, you see that they reflect the questions that every sufferer feels

when he is going through a difficult time. In {Chapter 10,} Verse 3, Job says:

**“Does it seem good to thee to oppress, to despise the work of thy hands and favor the designs of the wicked?”
{Job 10:3 RSV}**

“You tell me God always punishes unrighteousness, but look around you. There are open idolaters who bring their idols in their hands. There are robbers living at peace, who dwell secure. God is not punishing them. Life itself testifies that you are wrong.”

In {Chapter 12,} Verses 7-12, he says that nature confirms it. God deals as he pleases; there is no way of predicting his actions:

**“But ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
or the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.”
{Job 12:7-8 RSV}**

**“In his hand is the life of every living thing,
and the breath of all mankind.”
{Job 12:10 RSV}**

Finally, in a moving and beautiful passage filled with great passion and force, Job shows, in {Chapter 12,} Verses 13-25, that he understands God just as well as they do. I will not take time to read this passage, but I hope you will do so, because it is a beautiful, glowing tribute to the majesty, the might, and the wisdom of God.

In Chapter 13, *Job continues his defense before these men.* He says their words have not helped; their silence would help more:

**“Lo, my eye has seen all this,
my ear has heard and understood it.
What you know, I also know;
I am not inferior to you.
But I would speak to the Almighty,
and I desire to argue my case with God.
As for you, you whitewash with lies;
worthless physicians are you all.
Oh that you would keep silent,
and it would be your wisdom!”**

{Job 13:1-5 RSV}

In Verses 6-12, he tells them that if God judges him, he will judge them; if he overwhelms him, he will overwhelm them also. They are in exactly the same boat. So his final plea is to *let him alone*, that he might come before God himself and debate this whole matter (Verses 13-19):

**“Let me have silence, and I will speak,
and let come on me what may.
I will take my flesh in my teeth,
and put my life in my hand.
Behold, he will slay me; I have no hope;
yet I will defend my ways to his face.”**
{Job 13:13-15 RSV}

Verse 15 is translated quite differently in the Authorized Version. This is the famous passage often quoted from Job: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.” This is a great cry of hope and trust, but it is not really what Job said. What he said, I think, is best translated in the Revised Standard Version: “Behold, he will slay me; I have no hope; yet I will defend my ways to his face.” He is determined, Job says, to defend himself.

He expresses *one bit of hope* in Verse 16:

**“This will be my salvation,
that a godless man will not come before
him.”** {Job 13:16 RSV}

“If I am really godless, I will not get a chance to come before him. But if he will give me a chance, I have my case all prepared. And the very fact that he will listen to me indicates that at least I have a chance.” So he concludes, Verses 17-19:

**“Listen carefully to my words,
and let my declaration be in your ears.
Behold, I have prepared my case;**

**I know that I shall be vindicated.
Who is there that will contend with me?
For then I would be silent and die.”** {Job
13:17-19 RSV}

Beginning at Verse 20 on through the rest of the chapter and through Chapter 14, Job presents the case that he has prepared before God, and he tells us what he would say if he could talk to God. (We will leave that for our next study.) But here he simply makes a plea that they stop arguing and listen to him, and help him by their silence if not by any other way.

Surely, if nothing else, this book of Job should help us to be careful in our approach to the suffering of others, so that we do not add to it. These friends of Job are so rigid in their theology, and so blind to the great dimensions of God that neither they nor Job yet understand that they are only increasing the torment of this poor man.

This is why Scripture exhorts us to “Weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice,” {cf, Rom 12:15}.

Prayer:

Our Father, we ask you to teach us from this great book. Help us to understand more of your great nature, the majesty and glory of your Being, the compassion of your heart, and the wisdom that prompts you to put us through times of difficulty and yet offers to support us through them, without fail. Lord, help us to be understanding about the nature of life, and learn from this book, that we might better handle that which comes to us. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.