

## “What a Bunch of Miserable Comforters”

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### Pastoral Care 101

Job’s response to Eliphaz at the beginning of the second round of the dialogues with the friends sets the table for our reflections. Eugene Peterson’s translation of Job 16:1-3 captures the gist of what Job is saying:

I’ve had all I can take of your talk.  
What a bunch of miserable comforters!  
Is there no end to your windbag speeches?  
What’s your problem that you go on and  
on like this?

Job’s assessment of his friends as “miserable comforters” should give us pause for two reasons. First, they are spokespersons for the religious establishment. They represent the pastors and teachers, the educators and the pastoral counselors who know themselves called of God to comfort the Jobs of this world. As such, they invite us clergy types to look in a mirror, to see ourselves in their model for ministry. If we flinch at this proposed linkage between Job’s friends and us, then the witness of this slice of Holy Scripture is likely to do little to comfort us. More than one-third of the book, roughly 35 percent (376 verses of 1,069 total), is given to the “windbag speeches” of Job’s friends. Their words take up more space than any other character in this drama, including God! When God takes center stage in the whirlwind speeches in Job 38–41, God gets only 123 verses. The disproportionate attention given to the friends’ speeches, therefore, is a tell-

tale reminder that Job's story places their conventional theology—and ours—under close scrutiny.

Second, at the end of the book, God dismisses the sum total of what the friends say with one chilling sentence, twice repeated to drive home the point: "My wrath is kindled against you [friends]; for you have not spoken of me what is right" (42:7). Now we may be not only flinching at the thought of entering into this book, we may also be looking for the exit signs. Perhaps the book of Job should come with a warning label attached, something roughly akin to the cautionary words inscribed on a pack of cigarettes: "Warning: Reading this book may damage or alter your theology."

We may be reasonably confident that the friends did not set out either to speak wrongly about God or to hurt Job with the words they offered him. Indeed, when they first step into this story, these friends are the epitome of wise and skillful pastoral counselors. According to the Prologue, when they learned of Job's misfortunes, they came immediately from their respective homes to "console" and "comfort" him (2:11-13). Perhaps they came hoping to "console" and "comfort" with words "fitly" or "rightly spoken," as Prov 25:11 commends the truly wise to do. But when they looked at their friend, they saw, even from a distance, that "his suffering was very great," and they wisely scrapped their speeches. Instead, they adopt the traditional gestures of sympathetic mourning—they weep, tear their garments, and throw dust over their heads, then they sit with their friend in silence for seven days and seven nights. Confronted with suffering like Job's—seven sons and three daughters dead "for no reason" (2:3)—they respond by following the first lesson of Pastoral Care 101: The first and most important act of pastoral ministry is simply to be present. Words are not necessary and often do more harm than good.

When Job "[opens] his mouth and [curses]" (Job 3:1), however, the burden of being his friend—or minister—becomes greater. In the first round of speeches (Job 4–14), the friends respond to the challenge by urging Job to remember that God can be trusted to prosper the righteous and punish the wicked. When

this line of counsel fails to persuade Job, the friends cock and reload. In the second round of dialogues (Job 15–22), the friends reduced their argument to the one truth they are certain Job will not dispute: The wicked are always punished. From this point on, they will dispense with any pretense of claiming that God always prospers the righteous. The following texts exemplify their approach:

The wicked writhe in pain all their days,  
through all the years that are laid up for the ruthless  
(15:20).

Surely the light of the wicked is put out,  
and the flame of their fire does not shine.  
The light is dark in their tent,  
and the lamp above them is put out. (18:5-6)

The exulting of the wicked is short,  
and the joy of the godless is but for a moment?  
Even though they mount up high as the heavens . . .  
they will perish for ever like their own dung.  
(20:5-7)

Their tone throughout this cycle is noticeably much sharper, a signal that they have stiffened their resolve to nullify Job’s complaints. They offer no word of encouragement, hope, or promise to Job. Instead, they increase their warnings, double their rebukes, and up the ante Job must pay if he continues to challenge God. When Job counters with questions that poke holes in their certainties—“How often is the lamp of the wicked put out? How often does calamity come upon them?” (21:17)—the friends know they are in for a long day.

### **A Critique of Job’s Friends and Ministers**

To this point, Job has described his friends as treacherous (6:15), stupid (cf. 12:2-3; 13:2), whitewashers of the truth (see 13:4a), and quack doctors (13:14b). To these criticisms he now adds the charge that they are “miserable comforters” (the word for “comforters” in 16:2 is from the same root as the word “comfort” in 2:11).

## **Reflections**

### **Job’s Definition of Friendship**

Job articulates his definition of friendship most succinctly in Job 6:14. Eugene Peterson’s translation is most instructive:

When desperate people give up on  
God Almighty,  
their friends, at least, should stick  
with them.

1. Based on your own experiences, write your definition of friendship.
2. How is your definition similar to or different from Job’s?
3. Imagine yourself as one of Job’s friends—either Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar. What would you have said or done to express this friendship that they did not do?
4. Imagine yourself in Job’s position. What would you want and need from friends who come to “comfort” and “console” you?

How and why do Job’s friends—and ministers—deserve this critique? Job’s opening words in chapter 16 offer two explanations.

- Job knows, and presumably once trusted, the theology the friends offer him. He knows how to articulate the assertions they speak. Indeed, if he were in their position, if he were able to look on the suffering of someone else from a safe distance, then he too could string together conventional words of encouragement. But suffering has now wrenched from Job a new and shattering truth that changes the calculus of what he knows: “Those at ease have contempt for misfortune” (12:5).
- Even if Job were to mouth the words the friends press on him, their assertions would not assuage the grief that gnaws at his every effort to believe them. He has tried silence in the face of suffering (cf. 2:10; 9:27); and speaking “the anguish” that constricts his spirit (7:11; cf. 10:1; 13:3, 13). Neither strategy has lessened his pain or removed his doubts about the justice of the God in whom he has placed his trust. Absent friends who will speak truth to his suffering and faced with a God who seems unwilling to speak to him at all, what options remain? The plaintive last words of Job’s speech in chapters 16–17 plot the only course he believes is open to him:

My spirit is broken, my days are extinct,  
the grave is ready for me . . .  
where then is my hope? (17:1, 15a)

When reading these words, we, like Job’s erstwhile friends, may be tempted to reach into our theological grab bag for a word from God that will mitigate the anguish Job speaks. Before we do so, we should pause once more to consider the response we will likely hear from those whose lives have pressed them into Job’s world:

I’ve had all I can take of your talk.  
What a bunch of miserable comforters!

## Reflections

In Doris Betts’s short story “The Astronomer,” Eva, a down-on-her-luck single mother of two, now forced into an abortion in order to avoid a third child she could not support, rents a room in Mr. Beam’s boardinghouse. A religious man, Mr. Beam feels obligated to witness to Eva about the good news offered her in Christianity. He gives her books like *Peace in God* by Billy Graham, *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis, and then gradually tries to interest her in Sunday school lessons, paraphrased Bible stories, and finally the Bible itself. Eva reads and considers everything Mr. Beam suggests, but she balks at simply accepting the gospel at face value. “I’m not ready for Jesus yet. Not nearly ready. Don’t they write any books for people who are where I am?”

1. Imagine yourself as Mr. Beam, with a passion and conviction to bear faithful witness to those who, like Eva, have come to you for refuge. Would you recommend that they read the book of Job?
2. Imagine yourself as Eva, as one whose life is constricted by forces you did not choose and options you do not want. Would the book of Job speak to you in ways that make a difference?

## Sources

Doris Betts, “The Astronomer,” in *The Astronomer and Other Stories* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 224.