

How not to be a comforter — Job 4–37
Basil Howlett — Carey Baptist Church — 18 May 2008

On Sunday mornings we are having a quick look Job. He was a prosperous man who feared God and sought to live a godly life, but one calamity after another hit him. In a short space of time he lost all his livestock, his family and health. Last Sunday we saw Job, sitting on an ash heap in the depths of misery but still his faith clung on to God.

Job had three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar who came to see him (2:11). He was so low that they treated him like a dead man, grieving over him in the eastern way by weeping aloud, tearing their clothes and sprinkling dust on their heads. Later on they were joined by a fourth friend called Elihu.

A. Chapters 4–37 record what they said to Job and his responses to them

4–5	Eliphaz's first speech	6–7	Job's response
8	Bildad's first speech	9–10	Job's response
11	Zophar's first speech	12–14	Job's response
15	Eliphaz's second speech	16–17	Job's response
18	Bildad's second speech	19	Job's response
20	Zophar's second speech	21	Job's response
22	Eliphaz's third speech	23–24	Job's response
25	Bildad's third speech	26–31	Job's response
32–37	Elihu's speech		

B. Two things in their favour

1. They were well meaning people who did take the trouble to visit him.
2. They were faced with an enormous pastoral and theological problem - the godliest man in the East suffering so badly. In a similar situation we might make the same blunders.

C. Where they went wrong

They spoke too much (13:5, 16:3). Well-chosen words can bring comfort and help (4:4) but some people, when they go to visit those in great need, feel they must keep talking endlessly. The person at 'rock bottom' cannot cope with a lot of words. Besides, the 'comforter' who keeps on and on is in danger of saying something foolish or cruel (Eliphaz 5:4, Bildad 8:2, 8:4, Zophar 11:12). When you try to help someone who is very low, be careful what you say. May they never have to respond like poor Job (19:2)!

They 'knew' too much! They had all the answers. They could explain why Job was in trouble. That, in essence is, what their speeches are all about (Eliphaz 15:17, Elihu 32:6). But when we face the question of suffering and calamity we don't have all the answers. '*God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.*' (See Isaiah 55:8-9, Romans 11:33.) We must be humble enough to admit that we don't have all the answers.

There was a touch of arrogance about these friends, especially Eliphaz who claimed to have a special word from the Lord (4:12-16). We do not deny that sometimes in special circumstances God gives one of his servants a special word of knowledge (e.g. Agabus in Acts 11:27, Alexander Peden, the 17th century Scottish covenanter) but these 'words from the Lord' never override the Bible, must always be tested and examined in the light of the Bible (Isaiah 8:20, 1 Thessalonians 5:21), and if genuine they always come true! The special 'word from the Lord' that Eliphaz boasted about wasn't in line with the Bible even though it made his 'hair stand on end' (5:15).

Thirdly they theologised too much. That is a word!

Theology is good. It's the study of almighty God and what we believe about him. It's vital that our theology should be right and biblical and sound. By and large the theology of these friends was

accurate. They said some wonderful things about God (Eliphaz 5:9, Elihu 34:10). Their great problem was that they theologised. They turned their theology into a rigid system or theory where everything was cut and dried. They reasoned like this: God is almighty and holy and just. He knows everything. He can't do anything wrong or unjust so the fact that Job is suffering so badly must mean that God is punishing him for some sin he has done. That was their rigid theory (Eliphaz 4:7, Bildad 8:2). A lot of people today take the same line. If you are ill it must be because of some sin you've done. If you don't get better, it must be because you don't have faith. But that is false. Yes, it is true that **sometimes** a person's sickness or pain is due their sin (1 Corinthians 11:30), but Job's friends turned that into an invariable law. They theologised and made a half truth the whole truth. Their rigid theory left no room for Jesus' teaching about the blind man in John 9:1–3, or Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians 12, nor did it leave any room for the suffering of a sinless Saviour.

They loved too little. That's the missing note in their speeches. There are many clever words, and fine arguments and a lot of good theology, but they are so cold, calculating and even callous at times. When a person is as low as Job (see 19:7–21) they need tender, loving care. The best friend and comforter – Jesus (Matthew 11:28, 12:20, Isaiah 40:11).