

Loneliness. The mere word taps into our emotions. The aching pain of feeling alone. The experience of loneliness common to us all. Prolonged loneliness is damaging. A quote from the Boston Globe, *'loneliness has been linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke and the progression of Alzheimer's...In fact, isolation and loneliness increase the risk of premature death by 26 to 32 percent.'* Our fellow believer Job surely at risk. Alone beyond words sitting amongst the ashes of the local garbage dump trying to ease the unbearable pain of the sores covering his body. Struggling with the implications of his future. Everything and everyone precious to him gone. Except his less than helpful wife, no longer by his side. A ray of light in the dark loneliness. Job has friends. *'When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.'* **2:11** An answer to Job's loneliness. Press the pause button with me for a moment. How soon do you think Job's friends arrive? How long was Job alone in the ashes? We read this passage through a 21st century filter. The mindset of instant ask and receive. The age of instant communication: the email received seconds after we press the send button. This is no friends to the rescue hours after the tragedy. Each of the four men are separated by some distance. None of Job's friends saw an ABC 24 newsflash about the devastating cyclone that took the lives of Job's family. The passage of time before they heard the news longer than we imagine. They couldn't simply text each other to arrange to meet together. Brothers and sisters don't be blind to this. Job sat alone amongst the ashes for long, lonely days on end, completely unaware his friends were coming. Imagine the impact on Job's soul. We are invited by God into the circumstances of Job's life with information and understanding Job doesn't always have. So we are encouraged by what is revealed in **v11** about Job's friends. True friends. Not Facebook friends. Friendship deeper than family ties as described in **Proverbs 18:24**, *'One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.'* Friends desiring to bring sympathy and comfort. Wanting to enter Job's grief and ease his pain. Reading this passage I couldn't get out of my head the chorus of a 1979 Little River Band hit, *'Hang on. Help is on its way. I'll be there as fast as I can. Hang on,'* Job's friends want to be there for Job. They want to bring comfort and hope. Sadly this is not what happens. *'When*

they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.’ **v12** A superficial reading paints a picture of profound empathy. Dig a little deeper and the reality is different. Job’s loneliness reinforced not relieved. His friends arrive but Job is barely recognisable. They see a stranger. Responding to him as such. Weeping at him not weeping with him. Their vibrant, wise, wealthy friend lost in the dust of the ashes. Tears flowing from their pain, agony and loss. Not because they enter into Job’s grief. Sprinkling their heads with dust; an act of mourning. The sprinkled dust a symbol of death. In **Genesis 3:19** God said to Adam, *‘for dust you are and to dust you will return.’* Job is as good as dead to his friends. They treat him as such. No engagement with him but responses about him. Like relatives around the bed of a dying man discussing his funeral plans as they talk amongst themselves about how much they will miss him. Finally, Job’s friends seem to identify with, and acknowledge the depth of his pain. Sitting in the dust with their friend. No free flowing insensitive words compounding his pain. *‘Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.’* **v13** In appearance a loving act of identification. But seven days of silence. Meaningful comfort involves words that speak to the heart and mind of the sufferer. This is not compassionate silence but bankrupt silence. They have nothing of comfort to say. No life giving words that point Job beyond himself to the God who trusts Job with his glory. Seven days of silence is a refusal to speak to Job. To engage. To acknowledge suffering. To speak with him as a person not a living corpse. Job was lonely before his friends arrive. Now lonelier because his genuine friends are effectively saying, *‘your loneliness is beyond our reach.’* Truth is they are right. The depth of Job’s suffering is extreme. It is beyond human reach. I can think of no story of deeper suffering in the Bible bar one. Job’s story is a revelation from God preserved for a profound reason. Not a lesson in pastoral care. Not to awaken hidden emotions. Job’s suffering here points us to another believer. A man who also experienced profound suffering and loneliness in the company of three close friends. Their friend’s suffering is also beyond their reach and understanding. Job’s suffering points us to a garden called Gethsemane. To Jesus, Peter, James and John. To the anguish in Jesus soul as he contemplates the impending horror of separation from his Father. To the climax of his lonely suffering captured in the

spine chilling cry from the Cross. *“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”* (which means *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*) **Mark 15:34** Sisters and brothers, the God forsakenness of Job’s suffering is a shadow, a pointing forward to the depth of suffering Jesus experienced. Alone. Abandoned by those closest to him. Experiencing separation from his Father as he bore the sin of the world. A loneliness beyond words willingly endured for me and for you. The good news. This side of the Cross no Christian is called to enter Job’s loneliness to its full depth because Jesus entered it in our place. Brothers and sisters, as Christians we may feel alone but we are never truly alone. The one who died and rose again promises, *‘And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’* **Matthew 28:20b** Sisters and brothers, as we reflect on this initial encounter between Job and his friends we witness three things to shape our care and compassion for others. **First**, the emptiness of superficial comfort offered through the filter of our own pain. Such pain can offer insights and understanding but is an enemy of genuine compassion if it dominates our emotional and verbal response. **Second**, the importance of life giving words in providing meaningful comfort. Life giving words from the Bible, shaped by Bible truth. **Third**, a recognition we cannot fully understand the loneliness others suffer. **Fourth**, there is a loneliness outside the touch of human response. A loneliness only overcome by the living presence of Jesus Christ, through his Spirit. Brothers and sisters remember this personally and in your desire to comfort others. Jesus speaks to us today, *‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’* **Matthew 11:28-30**