

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Job's friends. How are we to understand and assess their response to Job's suffering? Revealed as genuine friends. Dropping everything to support Job in his time of need. Devastated when they saw Job sitting in the ashes of the local garbage dump. Am I belittling them in calling this message 'three stooges'? Yes, friends, but immobilised by their own grief. Incapable of speaking into Job's pain. Listening to the depth of Job's despair. Too ready to spring into action in the face of Job's questions to defend their acquired wisdom on the nature and character of God and his response to the world. Eliphaz begins speaking to Job in a respectful tone. But glimpses of what is to come, *'If someone ventures a word with you, will you be impatient? But who can keep from speaking?'*

4:2 Job's friends have something to say that must be said. Wary of the potential of aggressive, combative responses from Job. We know God's verdict on them from the end of the story, *After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.'* **42:7** God's anger towards Job's friends leads us to closely examine the mountain of words spoken over nine chapters. Though they have not spoken the truth about God, their words recorded in Scripture teach, correct, rebuke, train us in righteousness. They deserve the closer attention of bible study. In this message a summary of what they represent. A neat, logically packaged framework for understanding God and the world. Important to expose and recognise because such a framework still exists today. The source of their belief. The established tradition of acquired human understanding. A belief system Job's friends dare not reshape because they haven't lived long enough to do so. A safe moral, religious system of belief handed down through the generations. Standing the test of time. From the lips of Bildad, *'Ask the former generation and find out what their ancestors learned, for we were born only yesterday and know nothing, and our days on earth are but a shadow. Will they not instruct you and tell you? Will they not bring forth words from their understanding?'* **8:8-10** Note the phrase 'their understanding'. An indication their urgent words to Job may fail to truthfully speak to the circumstances of his life. The problem with tradition. It is shaped by human interpretation not *'the faith once for all entrusted to God's people'*. Tradition may not be devoid of truth but usually resistant to reshaping by the revelation of God. I was brought up in a church tradition that encouraged us not to eat before

receiving the bread and wine of Holy Communion because they were sacred. I ate breakfast this morning because that tradition doesn't stand the test of the teaching of the Bible. We gain our understanding of the acquired wisdom shaping Job's friends interpretation of his circumstances from their words. Beliefs crafted over time by human observation of what God appears to be doing and how the world works. Shaped by divine revelation but too rigid to be reshaped by further revelation. Like any sensible building four foundations. God is in control. God is just and fair. God always punishes wickedness and blesses righteousness. Suffering indicates personal sin and just divine punishment. They appear again and again in the words of Job's friends. *'Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?'* **4:7** *'Does God pervert justice? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?'* **8:3** The obvious conclusion so cruelly put to Job by Bildad. *'When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.'* **8:4** Bildad's interpretation of the terrible cyclone that wiped out Job's family; God punished your sinful children. They applied the same principle to Job. Their message. Stop proclaiming your innocence. Your suffering is a result of personal sin. If you want relief, repent. Zophar says, *'Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin....Yet if you devote your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him, if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then, free of fault, you will lift up your face; you will stand firm and without fear.'* **11:6b, 13-15** Eliphaz says, *'Is it for your piety that he rebukes you and brings charges against you? Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?...If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored: If you remove wickedness far from your tent.'* **22:4-5, 23** The unmistakable message. Job must be sinful because he is suffering the punishment of God. We might recoil at the brutal logic and have cause to ask what it says about our life story. But we can't ignore it. This belief system appears in religions believing in one sovereign, just God. Religions such as Islam and Judaism. An example from Jesus' ministry alongside his Jewish disciples. *As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."* **John 9:1-3** A fundamentally flawed belief system because it says too little about God. The speeches of Job's friends expose them as three stooges in what they

don't say. **First**, no place for Satan or spiritual battles. In their world evil is a human phenomenon arising from human decision making. No hint of spiritual forces external to humanity. **Second**, no waiting. The wicked punished, the righteous blessed now. The future dimension of judgement ignored. Contrary to Jesus parable about the wheat and the weeds growing alongside each other until the harvest; the final judgement. Years ago a former colleague told me the sudden death of an Australian bishop was God's judgement on a far reaching decision he made. The same error as the three stooges. **Third**, no place for undeserved suffering allowed by God for his purposes. The beginning of Job's story reveals his suffering is undeserved. Take away undeserved suffering and there is no place for the Cross. The innocent Jesus perishing in the place of many. Remove the Cross and the belief system is devoid of grace, mercy and redemption. Brothers and sisters, five lessons from the words of Job's friends. **First**, traditional long held belief systems need to regularly come under the scrutiny of God's word to be tested and reshaped in the light of God's revelation. **Second**, false teaching is often like a wolf in sheep's clothing because much of the teaching is true. What truth there is distorted by what is not said. An example is teaching from the Gospels that focuses on the humanity of Jesus. Jesus is fully human but if there is silence about his divinity false teaching is at work. **Third**, in God's world suffering has a purpose. Possibly related to exposing sin so people repent. But in the lives of God's people suffering primarily about redemption and the glory of God. **Fourth**, the pastoral need to expose the presence of beliefs echoing Job's friends. Beliefs summed up in, 'I am suffering because God is punishing me for being bad; I have done wrong in the past; I am not good enough for God.' **Fifth**, the loving importance of preparing brothers and sisters to face suffering even before it happens, enabling them to stand on the promises of God, strengthened by his grace and love.