



# First Do No Harm: Pastoral Care Informed by Job

JANET L. RAMSEY

Your maxims are proverbs of ashes, your defenses are defenses of clay.

—Job 13:12

**I**n the continuing journey of a pastoral caregiver, a developmental goal is certainly *not* to offer “proverbs of ashes” or to build up “defenses of clay.” Rather, we intend to communicate wisdom and serenity; we want to be resources for resisting despair. Yet who among us cannot remember pastoral conversations when we said exactly the wrong thing at the wrong time? Who among us has not, in the face of human anguish, constructed psychological defenses built with the clay of her own anxiety?

Every profession must forgive its practitioners for errors of judgment, for steps mis-taken. But how we wish these missteps would not so often occur at the time of someone’s greatest vulnerability! When a person has just received a terminal diagnosis, been unexpectedly separated from a spouse, discovered he no longer has a job, or watched a beloved partner die, there is a situation of raw need. Sadly, many people who have suffered severe losses have horror stories that tell of how pastors and/or well-meaning friends and relatives made untimely and untactful remarks that exacerbated their pain, isolated them still more, and produced anger rather than solace. Just as physicians of the body, physicians of the soul must first do no harm.

*Their seven days of silence may have been the best moments for Job’s counselors. Today’s counselors can be helped by both the wisdom of Scripture and the insights of psychology to discern what to say (if anything) and what not to say in times of suffering and tragedy.*

After being on both ends of this—as a fallible pastoral counselor and as a grieving relative—I elected to include an exercise called “What not to say” in a seminary course on grief ministry. The students and I have decided this is a valid place to begin as we learn together the fine art of accompanying grieving people. I include this exercise, too, because in these days of congregational care, ministry is no longer understood as the vocation of ordained leaders alone. Rather than simply learning *ourselves* what not to say (and, at times, what *to* say), clergy are also responsible for the care-giving offered by others on our ministry teams. Admittedly, many Stephen Ministers and other lay care providers have sensitivity and wisdom we pastors can only long for—but not always. Congregational leadership means that if we have not offered the education lay counselors need and deserve, and if hurtful crisis counseling happens on our watch, we cannot deny responsibility for the harm that is done.

### LEARNING FROM JOB

So where do we turn? To both word and world, to the wisdom of Scripture and to the insights of psychology, particularly as they come together in biblical characters and their dilemmas. Although the story of Job, the righteous man, was not written to serve as a text on pastoral care (nor even to explain the mystery of human suffering), this ancient story looks deeply at a vital intersection: faith and human pain. Because Christian caregivers have a resource not often utilized by secular counselors—namely, faith in a loving, saving God—we can be grateful for a story that raises difficult questions, resists facile answers, and concludes with visions of a better tomorrow. These three movements are precisely the dynamics we wish to see in the lives of sufferers. They need the courage to lament, the integrity to speak honestly with God, and active participation in their eventual healing. Along the way, we can also turn to Job for insights on how to make this process more likely, lest our proverbs of ashes and our anxious defenses set up unnecessary barriers in an already difficult journey.

Job is a particularly helpful book because Job was righteous. We must accept the narrator at his word: Job is upright; that is, he is not suffering because he is a sinner. On the contrary, he is suffering precisely because he is good. This increases the story’s usefulness, because no one hearing about Job’s plight can say, “Well, yes, Job did suffer, but I am a better person than he.” Also, the simple fact that Job suffered on all human levels, not in one area of his life alone, makes the tale more beneficial. He lost wealth, children, reputation, and health; that is, he lost every reason to hope. Despite the seemingly limitless list of human agonies in the world today, few of us can put God on trial and claim that, compared to Job, we have it worse.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>One modern example of suffering that does equal that of Job was endured by Jews in Germany during World War II. Elie Wiesel is said to have witnessed Jewish prisoners try God in absentia for abandoning the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Based on this experience, Wiesel wrote the play and novel *The Trial of God* (New York: Random House, 1979).

## A CAVEAT: THE IMPORTANCE OF TIMING AND TACT

Recommending what not to say to sufferers (and their grieving caregivers) is a complex process because timing and tact can be even more important than avoiding certain language. There are things that can be said *by* someone in pain that cannot be said *to* that person. There are things that are helpful to say before or after the acute phases of suffering that ought not be said in the midst of it. There are comments we might wisely make to a dying person but not to his wife, and things we would say to a spouse but not to the dying person. Attending to timing and tact means that there can be no hard and fast rules for pastoral counselors as we minister to those in crisis.

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One of the places the need for timing and tact becomes public, and very delicate, is when writing a funeral sermon. If the narrator of Job had continued until the hero's death, what words might the mourners have offered at his burial? By that time, many years later, Job's fortune had been restored (42:10). Yet no one could bring back his first children; no one could offer adequate reparations for the agony he experienced. And what of today? Should a homilician, preparing to preach after someone has suffered and died, describe the pain that has been endured and list each agony with specificity? Each year in my grief course, some students write their imaginary funeral sermon in just that style, beginning with lengthy descriptions of the recent ordeal. I protest, and our disagreement results in an interesting dialogue in which they argue for "truth telling" and I make my case for "timing and tact." Clearly, the balance between speaking with integrity and showing adequate sensitivity to those who mourn is a moving target. We can only pray that the Holy Spirit will grant us wisdom for the task.

## WHAT NOT TO SAY

*The Time-Machine Escapist: "Soon you'll remember the good times. This too shall pass."*

It is hardly surprising that in the presence of great suffering we would prefer to be anywhere but in the present moment. Our "defenses of clay" include a strong impulse to retreat either into a highly romanticized past or into a better future. Most of us recall friends and family members who made comments such as those above—those playing the role of "Time-Machine Escapist"—and we may remember, too, our resistance to their suggestions, smacking as they did of minimizing our experience. An impulse to escape present realities was strong in Zophar: "You

will forget your misery; you will remember it as waters that have passed away. And your life will be brighter than the noonday; its darkness will be like the morning” (11:16–17).

What would-be comforters do not always understand is that intense pain problematizes *all* time: past, present and future. The present seems endless and unendurable, but neither the past nor the future offer any real escape. Rather than being able to remember former days fondly during a time of acute loss, it is typical to resist the pull of memory. Newly divorced persons destroy their scrapbooks; the terminally ill dread Christmas nostalgia. Wrote C. S. Lewis after the death of his beloved wife, “I know that the thing I want is exactly the thing I can never get. The old life, the jokes, the drinks, the arguments, the lovemaking, the tiny, heartbreaking commonplace.”<sup>2</sup> While it is true that a bereaved spouse may eventually be able to smile at old memories, our task is not to point that out at the time of death. Rather, our desire to do so is a sign of our own discomfort.

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Thoughts of the future also become painful. Tomorrow is unknown, and may well bring more distressing losses quite beyond our control. A sense of the passing of time does not, in and of itself, heal. Rather, it may lead a sufferer to mourn that so many days have been wasted in pain and sorrow. Said Job, “My days are swifter than a runner; they flee away, they see no good. They go by like skiffs of reed, like an eagle swooping on the prey” (9:25–26).

But how do we manage our own anxiety and stay fully present? I believe it is, psychologically speaking, by recognizing our own unhealthy defenses at work and, spiritually speaking, by believing that our times—present, past, and future—are in God’s hands. This is not because we understand the *whys*: why someone is so hurt by past memories, why the present is so filled with pain, or why the future remains so threatening. It is simply trusting that all the times of our lives are mysteriously wrapped up in the trustworthy promises of God.

*The Orthodox Judge: “We all know why this is happening.”*

Most of the bad counsel in the book of Job has one repetitive theme: “This suffering is your own fault!” Against all evidence to the contrary, against Job’s elegant self-defense (“Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone wrong”—6:24), and against God’s own affirmations, Job’s friends insist that he is a great sinner and tell him his misdeeds are the cause of his pain. There is a causal relationship, they argue, between his piteous condition and his lack of righ-

<sup>2</sup>C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1961) 27–28.

teousness. Eliphaz asks, “Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?” (4:7), and Bildad confirms, “Does God pervert justice?” (8:3). Job’s friends rely on popular (orthodox) interpretations of what constitutes divine justice. This is how they deal with their own fears—by implication, if Job is a terrible sinner, and they are righteous, then they will not also suffer.

Thankfully, I haven’t heard a funeral sermon or read a student verbatim with this outrageous theme for some time, perhaps because “sin” is out of vogue and because history soon shakes us free of simplistic theodicy. But I have heard comments that reveal a new, secular orthodoxy; namely, that poor health habits are the cause of physical suffering and untimely death. The new “sin” is eating chocolate! As medical science continues to show us the importance of exercise, not smoking, maintaining a low-fat diet, and wearing our seat belts, we rightly encourage wellness in our congregations. But one simply does not say to the new widow, “If only he had not eaten all those Big Macs!” Nor does not one preach (I would hope) a funeral sermon that mentions the deceased’s smoking habits or the suicide victim’s untreated depression. The last thing the family in the front row needs is our facile judgments on the behavior of their loved one.

Perhaps a contemporary version of Eliphaz’s comment would read, “Think now, who in good shape ever died young?” As we anxiously protect ourselves from identifying with serious sickness and as medical technology continues to advance, we can easily buy into the illusion that our health is now completely under our control. But death comes, too, to those who avoid desserts and run five miles a day. The basic vulnerability of the human condition is larger and more complex than our best laid plans, and, like Job’s friends, we err if we begin with a theory and then go looking for the sin.<sup>3</sup>

There is also, once again, the matter of timing and tact. In a youth group meeting, it might well be helpful to talk about sexual behaviors and their relationship to illness, but when visiting a man dying with HIV-AIDS, there are better topics to initiate. This may sound self-evident, but we’ve all heard horror stories (at least in times past or among some Christian groups) of pastors who hinted about sinful sexual practices during a funeral sermon, or bluntly accused a smoker, near death, of killing himself. Cruel as these caregivers appear, I wonder if anxiety is not their motivation.

Job scholar Daniel Simundson has written that anxiety in Job’s friends has two root causes. First, these men are trying to avoid the big questions, the hard questions that no one can really answer. But secondly, they are looking for protection against identifying with Job and his suffering. They are trying to comfort themselves that they are more righteous and thus more safe.<sup>4</sup> Those of us who do try to live a healthy lifestyle need to be aware how easily we can become judgmental

<sup>3</sup>Daniel J. Simundson, *Faith Under Fire: Biblical Interpretations of Suffering* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) 100.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 100–101.

and insensitive. How dreadful it would be to echo Zophar: “They knew no quiet in their bellies; in their greed they let nothing escape. There was nothing left after they had eaten; therefore their prosperity will not endure....all the force of misery will come upon them. To fill their belly to the full God will send his fierce anger into them, and rain it upon them as their food” (20:20–23). This too-tidy belief in cause and effect and the conviction that human behavior directly determines human prosperity is then powerfully disputed by Job: “Will any teach God knowledge, seeing that he judges those that are on high? One dies in full prosperity, being wholly at ease and secure, his loins full of milk and the marrow of his bones moist. Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having tasted of good” (21:22–25).

*The Zealous Preacher: “Your faith is strong enough to get you through this.”*

When Eliphaz first counsels Job, he reminds him of his faith, his care for others: “Your words have supported those who were stumbling, and you have made firm the feeble knees. But now it has come to you, and you are impatient; it touches you, and you are dismayed. Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope?” (4:4–6) Having his faith hurled back at him like a stone is no help to Job. Aggression such as this may be cloaked within a compliment, but it ends up conveying the sentiment, “Don’t come whining to me! You are supposed to be a person of faith!” Once again, the needs of the counselor preempt those of the sufferer.

I am a great proponent of helping people recognize and build on their strengths, but that is not best accomplished by accusing someone who isn’t living up to our naïve expectations. Rather, recovery is a *slow movement* best initiated by the sufferer herself with only gentle and timely encouragement. Our counsel is most helpful when we do not demand strength but instead give (implicitly or explicitly) permission to be weak. As a pastoral counselor, I frequently drew a jagged line for grieving clients, hoping that they would recognize the positive slope hidden within the high and low points on the graph.

Job takes a very different stance from his aggressively religious friends. He is at his most faithful when he repents “in dust and ashes” (42:6). His journey reminds us that our task is not to critique the weakness of hurting persons. Rather, it is to accompany them to the cross, where together we meet a God whose greatest moment was one of public defeat and personal vulnerability. Pastoral care at the foot of the cross is not about demanding strength but about guiding those in pain toward a new location.

#### WHAT DO WE SAY? THE SPIRIT AS GUIDE

Of course, the list of hurtful comments above is far from exhaustive. Beyond what we learn from Job, there are other things not to say, such as, “I know how you feel” (You don’t!), and, “This is just nature’s way” (So what? It still hurts!). But more important than memorizing what not to say is learning to listen—listen to

those who are suffering and listen to the Holy Spirit. It's hard to talk and listen at the same time and, many times, words are simply not necessary. When Job's friends first showed up, they practiced good pastoral care by simply sitting down and weeping with their friend (2:11–13). Would that they had stopped there!

But often we can also speak—with compassion and with timing and tact. It is almost always okay to speak quiet words of empathy—such as, “This couldn't be easy for you”—and well-timed reminders of God's presence, God's abiding love, and God's gracious forgiveness. While visiting very frail, dying elderly for many years as their chaplain, I found myself whispering simple words of God's love and forgiveness whether the dying one appeared conscious or not. With pastoral experience comes the realization that we need not be so clever, we need not fix or cure. But we do need to show up. An old man in my research project spoke many years later of the pain he still felt because his pastor did not stop by when his daughter was getting a divorce. Just showing up is, of course, the most important thing of all, for it provides a way to bring into the room the community of faith and the love of God.

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Although it is sometimes difficult not to run away from people in pain, we find a kind of terrible joy if we stay put, even in the worst of times. Any hospice chaplain can speak to this. But Job's friends missed out—they missed the privilege of being truly present when it mattered. The spiritual intimacy that results when two people share such an experience is a precious fruit of Christian ministry. God fills these times with God's own strange beauty, and such times provide all the meaning and calm we need to do the work of pastoral care and to do it well.

Finally, even if our anxiety (performance, existential, whatever) is out of control and words fail us, we Christian caregivers have marvelous resources not available to others: word and sacrament and the prayers of the people. As we read Ps 23 to a dying person, carry Holy Communion to a homebound man and his loyal caregiver, or turn to the beautiful occasional prayers for the dying, we feel gratitude for language created by the community of faith in calmer times. Thank God for the many and various ways the Spirit speaks and for pulling us off center stage as we give care. It is God, I am convinced, who helps us stay in the moment, in spite of ourselves. Sometimes, to my ears, God's guidance sounds quite mundane: “Calm down. Get over yourself. Let a precious moment alone.” ☩

JANET L. RAMSEY, a frequent contributor to *Word & World*, is professor emeritus of congregation and community care leadership at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.