

Answer to Job?

Today we conclude our three week study of the Book of Job, and if it's a simple or satisfying answer to the problem of evil and suffering that you're after then I would suggest that you are going to be very disappointed.

To recap where we have come thus far. Job, an innocent and righteous man, has been sore afflicted with all kinds of tragedies and calamities and has lost absolutely everything – livestock, livelihood, children, the lot. At the beginning of the book the reason for this catalogue of disasters has been explained – Job's faith is being tested. Will Job remain loyal to God even if his whole world collapses around him? As the book proceeds, however, it leads to a far wider exploration of the subject of suffering: why do bad things happen to good people? Indeed why do bad things happen at all? Why is the world such a fearful and tragic place, and why does history echo with the cries and the tears of God's creatures?

Well, Job's predicament is explained by some friends who reason that Job's suffering must be linked to sin. He must surely deserve what has hit him – if he's suffering then he's done wrong. But Job will not accept this. Nothing could justify the tragedy he has experienced. And so the arguing and the questioning go on, but through it all there is one voice that remains all too silent, one actor in the drama who has been disturbingly absent. There is a yawning void in the text, and I refer of course to God. And that is why we long for chapter 38 when God finally breaks the silence and speaks: 'Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind...' At last! Finally! The only figure who can provide answers clears his throat and utters. The trouble is that instead of answers all we get is more questions - only this time it is not Job who is questioning God, but God who is questioning Job. As God says in verse 3, 'I will question you and you shall declare to me.' Now God turns the tables on Job: why must I answer you? Who are you to require of me an explanation for my world and its workings? And the questions follow relentlessly: 'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?' 'Where were you when the morning stars sang together?' Who upholds the delicate balance of creation? Who sustains the deft workings of nature whereby the lions feed their young and the ravens provide for their fledglings? What do you know about such things? And who are you to question me who knows it all?

So finally, Job is silenced. 'I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know' he says.

Well, I wonder how you make of that, God's strategy that simply demonstrates how little Job knows about anything. It's not just God that is a mystery but nature, creation too. God points out how very small Job is in the great scheme of things, how dwarfed he is before the astounding workings of the universe, how insignificant he is in the complexities of the cosmos. You, Job – you who are such a tiny cog in the vast operation of creation, you who were nowhere at the dawn of time when the morning stars sang together and the heavens shouted for joy – how dare you question me whose power and grandeur lies behind all this? You who are so small between the stars, how can you begin to understand me who scattered those stars like dust? And maybe we have a word here for our contemporary context. After all, we live in a world of breath-taking scientific and technological breakthrough. We are rightly proud of scientific advance but we are sometimes in danger of imagining that we know and understand more than we do. In our recent midweek series on science and faith I was amazed to discover that 96% - yes, 96% - of the universe is still a complete mystery to us. All the stars, the planets, the galaxies that are observable and that are being investigated by science with such staggering results still only add up to about 4% of what is out there! The rest is made up of what we call dark energy and dark matter - stuff we cannot see, cannot detect, and certainly cannot comprehend. So much for all our much vaunted scientific and technological advances! We are still just wading around in the shallows of the universe – there are uncharted depths and mysteries. And if we understand so little of creation, how can we begin to understand the Creator? Is not a little humility, a little reticence called for? So the great Reformer John Calvin ended all his sermons on Job with the phrase, 'Now we shall bow in humble reverence before the face of our God.'

I wonder what you make of that – of being silenced, being put in our place, being told that the answer to the riddle of suffering is hidden in the unfathomable mystery of God before whom we can only take off our shoes and bow. Well, maybe it's some help, but surely we need to say more. We're not after simple answers, explanations, but surely as Christians there is more to be said than this. And here, I would suggest, we run into the limitations of Job as on Old Testament, Jewish Scripture for, you see, the Old Testament faith only takes us so far. For Christians the Old Testament is incomplete revelation

which leaves us hanging on the edge, reaching out for more. And there are two specific points of light that the New Testament, the Christian faith gives us, two ideas that are only present in embryo in the Old Testament, in undeveloped form, but which are given far clearer profile in the light of Christ.

The first is the idea of a suffering God. The idea of a God who suffers in and with his people begins to take shape in the Old Testament but of course only takes final form in Jesus Christ, the crucified one, in who God suffers ultimate darkness and abandonment. And it's not an answer to the problem of pain but it's something to hold onto. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, 'only a suffering God can help' and it is the task of Christian theology to work out just how a suffering God might help.

The other idea that is barely present in the Old Testament but which again requires greater development is that of a life beyond this one, a resurrection life beyond suffering where things will be put right. Think of it this way – if we had read on in chapter 42, we would have found that the book ends with Job receiving everything back. We read there that he is feasted and fêted and inundated with sheep and camels and he has seven sons and three daughters to replace the first lot who were tragically killed. We are even told that there were no women in the world as beautiful as Job's new set of daughters! But does that resolve anything? Is that an answer? Like so much else in Job, is that not deeply unsatisfying? Yes, sons and daughters are restored to Job, but they are not the same ones – and can one son, one daughter, one human being just be replaced by another like a new fridge? These are not commodities that can just be replaced. Is that any kind of answer to Job?

Well, no. But perhaps this troubling resolution to the tale points forward to something that needs to be grasped in our wrestling with the problem of suffering – though again, we must tread carefully. You see, as Christians we believe that there will be restoration for we believe in resurrection to a new world, a new order, a new creation.

It's interesting where the biblical idea of resurrection out of death came from. It emerged relatively late in Judaism, partly as a protest against an unjust world. It emerged partly out of a sense of outrage that we live in a world where the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper and a moral conviction that there must be a day of accounting, there must be a day of redress, there must be a day of reckoning when the scales of justice are balanced and the cries of the victims

are finally heard and answered. The whole idea of resurrection emerged partly out of a sense that this world leaves us with unfinished business, and that the problem of suffering can only be dealt with by the hope of a new world that arises out of the rubble of this one. As Christians we believe that all that has been lost in this life is saved and cherished and held by God in God's bloodied hands - until that day when it will all be received back, healed and restored. As we sang at the start of our service, 'come and go with me to that land, come and go with me to that land.. Be no sickness there... be no sickness in that land where I'm bound...' And the closing chapter of Job where he receives a whole lot back is clumsy and crass but it is reaching out for redress. And as Christians we might see this as pointing towards the resurrection and restoration that has come in Christ and for which we yearn, the hope that we cling to.

The American playwright Archibald MacLeish wrote a play based on Job called J.B. It tells the story of Job in a contemporary setting, and at the end of the play JB and his wife Sarah stare into the darkness of their home. Sarah smiles, 'You wanted justice', she says, 'There isn't any...' JB replies, 'It's too dark to see', a comment which seems to be a verdict on their whole God-forsaken, hopeless world. But then comes Sarah's closing reply and I have quoted it on the cover of our orders of service this morning:

Blow on the coal of the heart.
 The candles in churches are out.
 The lights have gone out in the sky.
 Blow on the coal of the heart
 And we'll see by and by . . .

It is an ambiguous ending which has been much debated, and maybe it's deliberately unclear. A world in which the candles of the church are out and the lights have gone out of the sky – this is a world in which the morning stars are silenced and extinguished. Is this a world from which God has finally been banished? But then there are those words, 'And we'll see by and by...' Is that not a pointer to some future hope, some beyond, some by and by where, as the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich put it, all will be well and all will be well? And if so, then perhaps that phrase, 'Blow on the coal of my heart' might be taken as a prayer for God to blow on every flickering ember of faith. It might be a plea to God to come to us in our doubt and bewilderment in the face of suffering and to fan the faltering flame of faith.

It might be an invitation to hold onto the hope that finally a God who enters into our suffering will lead us out of it and into something new. And so we'll see by and by. Amen.

O gracious God,
we are surrounded by mystery,
by things far beyond our human understanding,
things on earth and in heaven.
Give us we pray the humility to recognise our limitations,
our dependence upon nature and its wonders
and our dependence upon you, Creator and sustainer of all things.
We pray today for scientists who research and investigate creation,
seeking you think your thoughts after you.
Help them as they seek to eliminate disease and distress.
Help them as they seek to make the world a safer
and more habitable place.
And help us to live at peace and in harmony with

our fellow creatures and to curb our destructive ways.

And God we pray today for those, like Job, whose faith is tested;
for those who wrestle with pain and with loss
and for whom faith becomes harder and harder to hold onto.

O God draw near and sustain them and give them hope.

And we pray for those whose life is blighted by loneliness;
for those who are facing possible bad news;
for those who are anxious or hurting,
unable to sleep, and who find little comfort;
for those who are dying
and for the bereaved.

And we pray once more for peace in your world,
remembering again Syria and the conflicts there,
and we pray this morning for the so-called Holy Land,
for the peace of Jerusalem, thinking of recent conflict,
for security and safety for Israelis
and for justice and an end to oppression for Palestinians.

And God bless our world leaders as they wrestle with
intractable problems, and give them wisdom
and courage to do what is right.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.