

SERMON: The suffering of Job and Jesus

Job 38.1-7; Hebrews 5.1-10; Mark 10.32-45

Dear Father, may we accept the unknowable and rest in your just and loving arms. Amen

Last week Helen reminded us that two related and burning questions for many of us believers in God are: “Why is there pain and suffering in the world?”, and “Why do bad things happen to good people?” In a world where there is so much injustice and heartache this should come as no surprise. Why some individuals and some nations endure so much more than others is a seemingly unfathomable dilemma. I don’t pretend to have the answer but I have felt drawn to continue our reflection on this deep topic. I want to start this by considering what the Book of Job as a whole, seeks to teach us about suffering. Then I will move to the importance of Jesus in this complex issue. First off though I want to stress that suffering is not caused by God. Satan’s evil influence on this world continues until Christ returns. However Job’s experience does show that sometimes God can permit it to happen in order to test us.

The Suffering of Job

Charles Swindoll has written an inciteful book entitled: Job – A Man of Heroic Endurance. In it he suggests that there are several key lessons that Job teaches us about ourselves and about God.

The first of these lessons worth remembering is: *“We never know ahead of time the plans God has for us.”* Job and his family were living a prosperous, faith-filled life when suddenly everything turned sour. Unbeknownst to them God has given Satan permission to test the strength of that faith. In the blink of an eye, not only were Job’s wealth and possessions were taken from him, but also his seven sons and three daughters.

While I pray that none of you have or ever will experience this much personal tragedy, the chances are that some sort of sudden change of fortune has either happened to yourself or to someone you know. Many times we are told in the bible that God’s ultimate plans for us are good and just, filled with hope for the future. But that doesn’t mean that they will be easy and comfortable. Apostle James speaks of this in chapter 1 verses 2 to 4: *“² My brothers and sisters, whenever you face various trials, consider it all joy, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance complete its work, so that you may be complete and whole, lacking in nothing.”*

These words are of course much easier to say than to put in practice. Job is testament to that. We tend to jump ahead to the final blessed outcome for him, but there is so much to learn from Job's struggle to get there. In Chapter 2 we are told that Satan was given permission by God to torment Job physically, inflicting him with huge boils all over his body. The pain was excruciating and humiliating. From Chapter 3, which opens with Job cursing the day he was born, right through to today's reading from Chapter 38, Job holds nothing back.

He tells God exactly how he felt. He voices his anger, his hurt, his deep loss. He complains bitterly to God and raises just about every question that humanity has ever thought of when faced with such agony. He seeks to argue his innocence before God's court and vindicate his righteousness. Indeed, he would dearly love to get an apology from God for his mistreatment. Does any of that sound familiar to your own experiences?

In chapter 7 verses 20 and 21 Job challenges God:

If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?

In Chapter 13 Job is prepared to risk his life in speaking honestly with God:

Why do you hide your face, and count me as an enemy? Will you frighten a windblown leaf and pursue dry chaff?

In Chapter 21 Job bemoans that the innocent are inflicted but the wicked escape unscathed:

Why do the wicked live on, reach old age and grow mighty in power?

As Job made these challenges his three friends became increasingly angry with what they perceived as attacks on Jewish theology. They particularly sought to argue that God is just and that therefore Job and his children must have done some terrible sin to provoke His wrath. It's a common reaction isn't. All too often you hear people say that God has let something bad happen to them because of what they have done or failed to do. But what did God make of their arguments?

God's Response

That brings us to our reading today from Chapter 38. Here we have the beginning of God's response to all of Job's questions and the harsh counter claims from his friends, which God rejects completely. Verses 1 to 3 set the tone for the next 4 chapters. ***God doesn't even attempt to answer any of the***

issues raised. Instead, He challenges them and us, with a series of His own questions:

In Chapter 38 verse 4-7:

⁴ *‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵ *Who determined its measurements—surely you know!*

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ *On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone*

⁷ *when the morning stars sang together*

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

This is but the beginning of a barrage of questions. Some of the ones that particularly strike me are:

²⁸ *“Has the rain a father, or who has fathered the drops of dew?*

³⁶ *Who has put wisdom in the inward parts or given understanding to the mind?*

In Chapter 39:

¹⁹ *“Do you give the horse its might? Do you clothe its neck with mane?*

In Chapter 40:

² *“Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.”*

⁸ *Will you even put me in the wrong?*

Will you condemn me that you may be justified?

I wonder, how would we have felt had we received this chastisement from God? Has anyone had anything like this sort of experience with God?

The closest I have come to it was early on in my faith journey. The concept of the virgin birth was a real stumbling block for me. I remember reading that part of scripture and demanding to know from God: “How was it possible that He could overturn the process of human creation that he himself had set up?” To my utter surprise I heard in my mind His indignant reply: “Peter, Do you not think that I, the God who created the entire universe, who made the highest mountains, the deepest seas and all the creatures upon the earth and the tiniest of atoms; do you not think that I, could not plant one tiny seed within a woman?”

This chastening encounter made me realise that I was trying to understand God through the narrow, limited perspective of my own mortality. It brought me to immediate repentance. And so when I read Job’s response to His so much greater berating by God it makes perfect sense to me.

In Chapter 42 Job answers the Lord:

² “I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ³ ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me that I did not know.

⁴ ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.’

⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;

⁶ therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Job was moved to deep repentance without any of his questions actually being answered. He was still in deep emotional distress and physical pain and yet he didn't seek to justify himself any further before the Almighty God that has been presented to him. Charles Swindoll suggests that he could do this because God's response taught him and us the core message of the entire Book of Job:

“Job's story is about coming to an understanding that God's plans are beyond our understanding and too deep to explain.”

Like Job it is vital that we are honest with God and sometimes that means voicing our confusion, disappointment and anger at the terrible state of the world and the injustice that is rife. But what we mustn't do is box God into our human limitations. He is an Almighty God, whose purpose will be fulfilled even if we can't understand exactly how that will happen. And that brings us to the final point I wish to make.

The suffering of Jesus

Our gospel reading has Jesus telling his disciples that the chief priests and the scribes will condemn to death him, the Son of Man, *and that they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again.*” Nothing in that suffering made sense to the disciples at that moment and for many people hearing it today it invokes a Job-like challenge: How could a loving Father possibly do that to His own Son? Why would God allow such suffering to occur to someone He cared about so deeply? The disciples had to be shown through the power of the Holy Spirit that God's plan for salvation of all humanity could not be understood from an earthy rational perspective. That same Spirit, by God's grace, continues to convict us through each generation.

Jesus suffered a humiliating, excruciating death for my sake, for your sake: for the sake of the whole world. As our High Priest he was prepared to offer himself as the eternal sacrifice, once and for all so that our relationship with our Father could be restored. We may never fully comprehend it but, like Job, we are richly blessed when we stop justifying ourselves and instead, humbly bow before Jesus in repentance, thanking Him for his loving gift to us.

Let me finish in prayer: Beloved Father, we are sorry for all the times we confine you to our narrow earthly ways. May we turn our eyes upon our Lord Jesus and strive to grow in our gratitude for the abundant blessings he has bestowed upon all who follow Him.