



A Voice in the Storm - the story of Job

Melvin Tinker

This is the first of a series of sermons by Rev Melvin Tinker based on the book of Job. It would be helpful to read Job chapter 1 before listening to, or reading, the sermon.

Let me ask: would you buy a house if you were only allowed to see one of its rooms? Would you purchase a car if you were permitted to see only its tires and a bonnet? Would you pass judgement on a book after reading only one paragraph? No? Neither would I. When you think about it, to make a good judgement requires a broad picture. Not only is that true in buying houses, cars, and books, it's true in evaluating life. One failure doesn't make a person a failure; and neither does one achievement make a person a success. And the broader picture is especially crucial when trying to make sense out of suffering. Is it right to see misfortune as a curse from God or as a blessing? Are we ever in a position whereby we can bring God to account for the way he seems to be running the world - which is not very well in our opinion? Or are there times when it is best to keep quiet and suspend judgement? What does it mean to trust in a good God when everything that seems to be happening around us is so bad? So let me tell you a story.

Once there was an old man who lived in a tiny village. Although poor, he was envied by all, for he owned a beautiful white horse. Even the king coveted his treasure. A horse like this had never been seen before - such was its splendour, its majesty, its strength. People offered fabulous prices for the steed, but the old man always refused. "This horse is not a horse to

me," he would tell them. "It is a person. How could you sell a person? He is a friend, not a possession. How could you sell a friend?" The man was poor and the temptation was great. But he never sold the horse. One morning he found that the horse was not in the stable. All the village came to see him. "You old fool," they scoffed, "we told you that someone would steal your horse. We warned you that you would be robbed. You are so poor. How could you ever hope to protect such a valuable animal? It would have been better to have sold him. You could have asked whatever price you wanted. Now the horse is gone, and you've been cursed with misfortune." The old man responded, "Don't speak too quickly. Say only that the horse is not in the stable. That is all we know; the rest is judgment. If I've been cursed or not, how can you know? How can you judge?" The people contested, "Don't make us out to be fools! We may not be philosophers, but great philosophy is not needed. The simple fact that your horse is gone is a curse." The old man spoke again. "All I know is that the stable is empty, and the horse is gone. The rest I don't know. Whether it is a curse or a blessing, I can't say. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?" The people of the village laughed. They thought that the man was mad. They had always thought he was fool; if he wasn't, he would have sold the horse and lived off the money. But instead, he was a poor woodcutter, an old man still cutting firewood and dragging it out of the forest and selling it. He lived hand to mouth in the misery of poverty. Now he had proven that he was, indeed, a fool.

After fifteen days, the horse returned. He hadn't been stolen; he had run away into the forest. Not only had he returned but he had brought a dozen wild horses with him. Once again the village people gathered around the woodcutter and spoke. "Old man, you were right and we were wrong. What we thought was a curse was a blessing. Please forgive us." The man responded, "Once again, you go too far. Say only that the horse is back. State only that a dozen horses returned with him, but don't judge. How do you know if this is a blessing or not? You see only a fragment. Unless you know the whole story, how can you judge? You read only one page of a book. Can you judge the whole book? You read only one word of a phrase. Can you understand the entire phrase? Life is so vast, yet you judge all of life with one page or one word. All

you have is a fragment! Don't say that this is a blessing. No one knows. I am content with what I know. I am not perturbed by what I don't."

"Maybe the old man is right," they said to one another. So they said little. But down deep, they knew he was wrong. They knew it was a blessing. Twelve wild horses had returned with one horse. With a little bit of work, the animals could be broken and trained and sold for much money. The old man had a son, an only son. The young man began to break the wild horses. After a few days, he fell from one of the horses and broke both legs. Once again the villagers gathered around the old man and cast their judgements. "You were right," they said. "You proved you were right. The dozen horses were not a blessing. They were a curse. Your only son has broken his legs, and now in your old age you have no one to help you. Now you are poorer than ever."

The old man spoke again. "You people are obsessed with judging. Don't go so far. Say only that my son broke his legs. Who knows if it is a blessing or a curse? No one knows. We only have a fragment. Life comes in fragments."

Now it so happened that a few weeks later the country engaged in war against a neighbouring country. All the young men of the village were required to join the army. Only the son of the old man was excluded, because he was injured. Once again the people gathered around the old man, crying and screaming because their sons had been taken. There was little chance that they would return. The enemy was strong, and the war would be a losing struggle. They would never see their sons again. "You were right, old man," they wept. "God knows you were right. This proves it. Your son's accident was a blessing. His legs may be broken, but at least he is with you. Our sons are gone forever." The old man spoke again. "It is impossible to talk with you. You always draw conclusions. No one knows. Say only this: Your sons had to go to war, and mine did not. No one knows if it is a blessing or a curse. No one is wise enough to know. Only God knows."

I am sure that you get the point. We only have a fragment. Life's mishaps and horrors are only a

page out of a grand book. And so we must be cautious about drawing conclusions. We must reserve judgement on life's storms until we know the whole story or at least place such storms within the wider setting of God's story as we have it in the Bible, viewing such things in the light of his character, his purposes and his plans. And there is one book, which, perhaps more than any other, illustrates this truth and that is the book of Job.

One of the arguments Christians sometimes use for the existence of God is to point to the order in the world as evidence of a divine mind and divine hand. It is so intricate and even the presence of a flagellum - a little tail in a single cell bacterium - is so complex that it speaks of purpose, so it is claimed. This has come to be known as the argument from intelligent design. And it does have some scriptural warrant. The book of proverbs is full of observations about the order of the world and what we can learn from it. But on the other hand one of the main arguments against belief in a good, all powerful God is the presence of disorder, of pain and what appears, to be frank, is lack of purpose in the world. And the book of Job, which like proverbs is a book of wisdom, acknowledges this and wrestles with it. It is brutally honest that life is often messy and answers are not clear cut. Like the woodcutter, Job rebukes his friends who feel they can have a neat theology which admits of no loose ends. And like the woodcutter it is only as we work through to the end of the story that we see its point.

Job is a big book - 42 chapters - and is steeped in poetry - which can sometimes make tedious reading. And as such it is easy to lose sight of the wood amongst the trees. But do not despair, for the basic story is straightforward as are the central themes and especially where the answer to the question lies which enables people to continue to trust in a God who is good when everything seems so bad.

So by way of introduction to the series tonight I want to summarise what is happening from Job's point of view. One moment all is calm, the next moment everything is chaos.

The first thing to go is Job's economic empire. The market crashes; his assets tumble. What has been up goes down. Stocks go flat, and Job goes broke. 'The Sabeans had attacked and carried off his

oxen and servants. Then the fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and the servants' (Job 1:14-16). Economic disaster then.

But even that catastrophe is nothing compared to the devastating news that was to come hard in its heels - the children were at a resort for the holidays when a storm blew in and took them with it (1:19).

Shell-shocked and dumbfounded, Job looks out the window into the sky that seems to be getting darker by the minute. He starts praying, thinking that things can't get any worse ... and that's exactly what happens. He feels that pain in his chest and his skin can't bear to be touched. Of course when you are ill you can always count on visitors, can't you? Well Job was no different. Except that his visitors weren't simply the type to eat your grapes, they brought sour ones.

First there is the wife in chapter 2. Who could blame her for being upset at the week's calamities? Who could blame her for telling Job to curse God? But to curse God and die? If Job doesn't already feel abandoned, you know he does the minute his wife tells him to pull the plug on the life support machine and be done with it.

Then there are his 'friends.' They have the bedside manner of a drill sergeant. A translation of their theology might read like this: "Boy, you must have done something really bad! We know that God is good, good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people so what is there to argue about? Sinner repent!"

But Job says to them (13:4-5): 'You, however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! If only you would be altogether silent!' Translation? "Why don't you take your philosophy back to the agony aunt column from which you learned it?"

"I'm not a bad man," Job argues. Job is, in his eyes, a good man and he is - honest! A good man, he reasons, deserves a good answer. But that is not what he gets from his mates.

"Your suffering is for your own good," says Elihu, a young minister fresh out of theological college who hasn't lived long enough to be cynical and hasn't hurt enough to be quiet. He paces back and

forth with his Bible under his arm and his finger punching the air. 'God does all these things to a man - twice, even three times - to turn back his soul from the pit, that the light of life may shine on him' (33:29). In other words, pain is a warning shot from God.

What the young man says might be decent theology in so far as it goes, but it isn't much comfort. And chapter after chapter on and on this goes. His friends go on the offence and Job goes on the defence. They thrust and Job parries. Has that every happened to you? There you are, burdened with the loss of bereavement; shattered by the brokenness of a marriage; aching with the recurrence of an illness and yet somehow you are made to feel totally responsible for it all?

But what hurt Job the most is not so much the 34 chapters of the voices of his supposed 'friends' but the absence of the one voice he wants to hear most of all: the voice of God. He feels that a separation has taken place, a gulf is fixed which can't be bridged, a wall of silence which can't be penetrated and yet he cannot believe that God has totally abandoned him: 'When a land falls into the hands of the wicked, he blindfolds its judges. If it is not he (God) then who is it?' (33:29).

You see, he still clings to the belief that what is happening which is so painful and perplexing is not without purpose and does not lie outside the sovereign control of the God he has known and loved for so long. But eventually God does speak. He speaks out of the storm and into the storm, for that is where Job is. And in some ways that is where God is best heard.

"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?" (38:2). Job doesn't respond.

"Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (38:3). Job keeps quiet. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much" (38:4).

One question would have been enough for Job, but it isn't enough for God.

"Do you know how its dimensions were determined and who did the surveying? What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone, as the morning stars sang together

and all the angels shouted for joy?" (38:5-7).

The questions simply keep on coming. They pour like sheets of rain out of the clouds as he watches the Master redefine who is who in the universe.

You see, God's questions aren't intended so much to teach; they are intended to stun. They aren't aimed so much to enlighten; as to awaken.

Finally Job's feeble hand lifts, and God stops long enough for him to respond. "I am nothing - how could I ever find the answers? I lay my hand upon my mouth in silence. I have said too much already" (40:4).

God's message eventually connects: Job is a peasant, telling the King how to run the kingdom. Job is an illiterate, telling J.K. Rowling how to write a book. Job is the clay, telling the Potter not to press so hard. "I owe no one anything," God declares in the crescendo of the wind. "Everything under the heaven is mine" (41:11).

And Job couldn't argue. God owes no one anything. No explanations. No excuses. No help. God actually owes no man a thing. Which makes the fact that he gave us so much even more astounding.

How we interpret this Holy presentation is key. You can interpret God's hammering speech as a divine "in-your-face" tirade if you want. You can use the list of unanswerable questions to prove that God is harsh, cruel, and distant. You can use the Book of Job as evidence that God gives us questions and no answers. But that is not how Job heard it. All his life, Job had been a good man. All his life, he had believed in God. All his life, he had discussed God, had notions about him, and had prayed to him. But in the storm Job sees him! That is the difference. He has a personal encounter. No longer does Job want a straight answer from God. Neither can he be like God - knowing all things - a point God has so powerfully made. Rather, he has come to cast himself as a trusting creature upon the care of the Creator. He now knows God in a way he never did before - he has seen him.

Where do we see God? Well, in Jesus of course. Here we come to the One who is the self-proclaimed light of the world, so we can walk with

him when all around is dark. Here we see One who is not capricious in his dealing with his disciples, but who tests their faith in the storm, so that when he speaks the storm is stilled and his disciples exclaim 'Who is this that the wind and waves obey him?' Here we see the One who promises not to leave us as bereaved orphans but will come himself to take up his place beside us and within us by his Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Here is the One who is the True Vine who prunes us not to destroy us, but to purify us so more fruit can be borne. What we see in the fullness of the face of Jesus, Job but glimpsed - for we have One who has been tested in every way as we are and yet has triumphed without sin. And one day in the light of glory we shall look back on the story he has written in our lives and the lives of all his people and we shall declare 'He has done all things well.'

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