



Closer encounters - Job 32

Melvin Tinker

This is the sixth in a series of sermons by Rev Melvin Tinker based on the book of Job. It would be helpful to read Job chapter 32 before listening to, or reading, the sermon.

To go to the next part of the series, [click here](#).

It has long been recognised that the existence of suffering in the world has posed a very serious problem for the believer in God, especially the Christian. It is sometimes put in the form of the dilemma: If God is perfectly loving; he must wish to abolish evil. If God is all powerful he must be able to abolish evil. But evil exists; therefore God cannot be *both* all good and all powerful. How do you respond to that?

Well, several attempts have been made, many in some way or other involving the denial one of those beliefs which makes up the dilemma in the first place. So, some people would deny that God is all powerful. I remember attending a clergy conference where a deaconess passionately argued for what she called 'a weak God'. She was adamant that it gave her comfort to think that God was busy struggling with life and getting it wrong just like the rest of us. On the other hand, some would deny the existence of suffering, like the sect Christian Science which puts it all down to an illusion of the mortal mind. It reminds me of the limerick:

There was a faith healer from Deal
Who said: Although pain is not real,
When I sit on a pin
And it punctures my skin,
I dislike what I fancy I feel.

Can we honestly say that suffering is not a reality? But then again, there would be others who would want to question God's goodness, especially his justice. This was the cry of the French philosopher Baudelaire who exclaimed 'If there is a God, he is the very devil.' Well, whilst not going that far, Job certainly found himself struggling with the idea that, in the face of what he was suffering, God was just. Job knew God was all powerful, Job knew evil and suffering existed, but what of God's goodness? In verse one of chapter 27 he explicitly states that God has denied him justice.

What was it that drove Job towards this conclusion? Job the philanthropist, Job the 'believer' who even in his darkest moments refused to curse God. Why this astounding claim that God denies justice? The answer would appear to be that Job too had started to buy into the theory of strict retributive justice. He also seemed to share with his friends the view that it is through suffering that God executes his judgement in the world. But where he disagreed with them was in their conclusion that *he* must be suffering because of *his* sin. Therefore, given the premise that *all* suffering is God's judgement, the only conclusion Job can come to, is that God is not exercising his judgement fairly. He knows that he is the innocent one and so it would appear that God is the guilty one.

However, there are two further encounters which correct both Job and his three friends and open up the way for a different understanding of why God allows suffering. The first encounter is with another, much younger counsellor, Elihu, who until now has remained silent. The second is an encounter with God himself.

We come across Elihu in chapter 32 and he is obviously a very angry young man. He has not spoken because he feels that as a younger person it is both wise and respectful to allow his elders to have their say first. We see that in verse six:

I am young in years and you are old, that is why I was fearful, not daring to tell you what I know.

But eventually he comes to the point where he can't hold in his anger any longer. He has listened to the three counsellors and he has listened to

Job, and he finds them all to be totally unconvincing. The three friends have simply not answered Job's objections, as Elihu points out in verse 12. Job has run rings around them until eventually they give up trying to argue, being reduced to adopting the, 'we are right and you are wrong and that's all there is to it' attitude. But Job too has incensed Elihu, not because of his protested innocence, Elihu believes him on that score, but because he is so eager to clear his own reputation at the expense of God's reputation. In Job 33:8-12, Elihu says:

But you have said in my hearing - I heard the very words - 'I am pure and without sin; Yet God has found fault with me; he considers me his enemy. He fastens my feet in shackles; he keeps close watch on all my paths.' But I tell you, in this you are not right, for God is greater than man.

Then again in 34:12 we read: *'It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice.'* 'Look', he in effect is saying to Job, 'you may well be as innocent as you say, and it will not do for your three friends to bring that into question; but by the same token it will not do for you to question God's innocence. You may not have sinned so grossly when you started but you are coming pretty close to it now. You are wrong.'

Now the first reason why Elihu rightly believes Job to be wrong is because 'God is greater than man' (33:12). Not simply that he is more powerful, but that his plans and purposes are on such a grand scale, far more complex and involved than our tiny minds can ever fully fathom. In the words of Isaiah 55:9: his ways are not our ways ... his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. 'You see, Job', says Elihu, 'your problem is that you are viewing God as if he were simply a man writ large, as if he were nothing but a capricious spiteful tyrant acting without reason. Just because we cannot immediately see what that reason is doesn't mean that there isn't one. God's timescale and concerns are much bigger than ours and we need to remember that.'

Secondly, following through this line of thought, Elihu suggests an altogether different perspective for understanding suffering. Instead of looking *back* for some sort of *cause* for suffering and asking, 'Is this suffering due to Job's sin or God's

injustice (when in fact it is neither)?' Elihu suggests that it might be more helpful to look *forward* and try and identify a *purpose* for suffering. In other words, if God is good and almighty, what we need to ask is, what possible good could there be in him allowing us to suffer like this? The answer Elihu gives is that it is part of God's way of correcting us and preventing us from going off the rails and ending up in hell, as he puts it in 33:17-18: *'to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride to preserve his soul from the pit.'* In verse 19 he speaks of a man being 'chastened on a bed of pain'. Later in 36:10 he says that God makes people '*listen to correction*' and '*speaks to them in their affliction*'. Job has already complained that God has not spoken, but Elihu suggests he is speaking 'now one way, now another' (33:14) speaking to Job *through* suffering. Job's other friends insisted that God should primarily be thought of as a judge, whereas Elihu suggests that he should be thought of as a teacher, 36:22: *'Who is a teacher like him?'* In other words, it is too narrow a view to think of all suffering as retribution, may it not be that some suffering is God's instruction?

A few years ago there was a television documentary series called 'Commando', a programme about the training which goes into making a Royal Marine. It was terrifying! These guys are mad, I'll tell you. A casual observer who knew nothing about what the instructors were trying to achieve might have come to the conclusion that they simply hated the recruits. They would have seen the instructors physically hitting and yelling at these young men as they did a twenty-mile cross-country run with seventy pounds on their backs. (The sort of thing I do each morning to develop magnificent abs!) Even if one of the recruits sprains an ankle or breaks a bone, it is nothing which a few painkillers cannot put right and on they went! It all looks very sadistic. But then the instructors explain what they were hoping to achieve, that the reason they put these men through such a grilling regime is to produce the best soldiers possible, knowing that their lives and the lives of others may well depend upon the training they have received. It was not retribution they were involved in, but instruction.

The Bible teaches that such is God's purpose for his people, people like Job, people he loves. In fact, the more favoured we are (no-one is more

righteous than Job, God tells Satan), the more he will use hardship to knock off some of our rough edges; to discipline and to humble us; making us more into the type of person he wants us to be. We are all prone to pride and self-sufficiency, aren't we? And sometimes, if the truth be known, we do not always listen to the voice of God in Scripture. As a result God will sometimes gain our attention through 'the megaphone of pain' to use the phrase of C.S. Lewis. This is how the writer to the Hebrews puts it (12:7-11):

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Now I think we have to admit that this is an idea which is uncomfortable to many modern ears, including some Christian ones. We live in a culture where pleasure is prized above all else and where pain is to be avoided at all costs. We expect that everything should come to us with the greatest of ease and the minimum of discomfort. The result is that we expect the Christian life to be easy. The idea that something, such as having a personal relationship with God, might be so valuable that it is worth undergoing some trouble to get it, grates with many in the church, young and old. Why bother coming to church every Sunday; why bother with the hard graft of Bible study or listening to a sermon; why put up with the discipline of prayer or finding ways of serving God in his church which cost in terms of time and effort? We may not always voice it that way but, as we look around many of our churches today, that is the message coming across loud and clear. In this sort of cultural climate we can expect God all the more to shake us out of our complacency and pride by putting us through the mill. We may put it like this: God doesn't want spoilt little brats who think that he owes them a favour, rather he wants loving obedient children

who will trust him come what may. Now the question is: which are we going to be?

Of course we can be like sulky children, locking ourselves away in our room, building up resentment towards God for the way he is treating us, refusing to open the door in response to his knocking. God gives us that choice. Elihu warns Job that he is in danger of letting this happen to him: *'Beware of turning to evil, which you seem to prefer to affliction'* (36:21). Or we can be like obedient children who, while expressing the hurt and the pain, nevertheless in the midst of difficulty will ask, 'Lord, what are you teaching me through this?'

But even that is not enough for Job. He wants to hear from God. And that is precisely what happens, but not in the way Job hoped for: *'Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man: I will question you, and you shall answer me'* (38:2-3). Like many people today Job was expecting God to answer a few questions about the appalling way in which he was, in his opinion, running his world. It was God who was to be put into the dock as far as Job was concerned. But the situation is rightly reversed. It is Job who is put in the dock and he is required to answer a few questions to God, questions which would make even the most adept Mastermind contestant shrivel in the big black chair (chapter 38:4 ff):

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Tell me, if you understand? Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place? Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble? Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons ...?

Job is barraged with question after question. 'What about the animals? Do you provide for them, Job? Have you got so great a mind that out of nothing you could come up with such a strange looking bird as an ostrich? You think you are so wise, Job, and I am so useless!' Job had wanted an interview with the Almighty, and that is precisely what he got.

But God's defence wasn't quite as Job expected.

At the first pause Job answers: 'I am unworthy - how can I reply to you. I put my hand over my mouth' (40:4). In those days the primary aim of someone involved in a lawsuit was not to convince the judge or jury of his innocence, but his accuser, so that he would withdraw his case and acknowledge defeat by placing his hand over his mouth. That is what happened to Job, his case against God collapsed like a stack of cards.

But God hasn't finished yet. *'Brace yourself like a man, I will question you and you shall answer me'* (40:7). Then comes the blistering questions which lie at the heart of Job's big mistake and his rebellion and, I would suggest, ours:

Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty.

In other words, 'Just who do you think you are, Job - God? To protest your innocence is one thing, but to act so high and mighty that you accuse me of injustice is another. In order to make the right judgement upon God and what he is doing you have to have a lot more wisdom, a lot more knowledge than you do have. You have not been able to answer one of my questions, Job, questions to which I know all the answers. Does it not therefore occur to you that I might, just might, have the answer to why I have permitted you to suffer? If you cannot comprehend the intricacies of the creation which you can see, then can you honestly expect to grasp all the mysteries of suffering which are hidden? Of course not, only I, God, can do that.'

What is more, why should we assume that God owes us an explanation as to why he allows suffering, any more than he owes us an explanation as to why he made the ostrich the way he did? While it may be true that whilst we can't see why he should design so peculiar a bird, no doubt God had plenty of good reasons for doing so, if only known to himself. Could not the same be said for suffering? More to the point, is it not reasonable to trust a God who has both the wisdom and the power to create so mind-boggling a universe, even if we may not be able to understand all the whys and wherefores of what happens in it?

Well, Job finally realised what he had done wrong. His mistake, and ours, is to think that we are privy to all the facts, when we are not, and so draw the wrong conclusions from an inadequate data base - that God is not good, that God does not care, that God does not speak. And our response should be that of Job's, not to rise up in arrogance and demand that God explain everything to us, but to repent of our presumption that we know better than God, and fall down in worship (42:2-3, 6). As we read in chapter 42:

Then Job replied to the LORD: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

I have a friend who teaches at a University at which I was chaplain. When he and his wife first arrived they weren't Christians. He would often come around and argue why he couldn't believe - each time we went through all the evidence, back and forth. Well, one night I went around to see them and put it to them that the time for arguing was over, they knew that Christianity was true and they knew what they had to do. I tell you, the sense of the presence of God in that room was quite unmistakable. About one o'clock in the morning, after I had left, they both committed their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. Soon after, his wife became pregnant. In June; Adam was born. A week later he was dead - he had a congenital heart defect. Now remember, this couple had been Christians only a few months when this happened. I took the funeral, which was simply heartbreaking as the little white coffin was brought in. My friends could have insisted that they had a right to know why, and, having received no answer, might have thrown in the faith. But they didn't. They knew that such an answer was not available to them. He, being a biologist, certainly knew of the grandeur of God's creation, and as he held his baby son in his arms for the last time, he knew about the miracle of birth. But as they reflected on what it was like to lose a son, it was the knowledge that God also knew what it was

like to lose a Son that made all the difference in the world to them. Now, when you think about it, from the standpoint of those around the cross on Good Friday, Calvary did not make sense, but God's plans were far greater than anyone could have imagined, as events later proved- the means of our salvation and the defeat of all sin and evil. God's ways are *not* our ways, his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. They are much bigger and better; although not always easy to see or even easy to believe at the time.

Did this young Christian couple know that God loved them and loved their baby? Yes, they did. Did they know that God had reasons for putting them through so much grief? Yes, they did. And why? Because in the Lord Jesus they had *more than sufficient reason to trust the God who knew why.*

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