



Counselling which Crushes - Job Chapter 4

Melvin Tinker

This is the third in a series of sermons by Rev Melvin Tinker based on the book of Job. It would be helpful to read Job chapter 4 before listening to, or reading, the sermon.

Joseph Parker was the minister of the City Temple in London, from 1874 until his death in 1902. He said that up to the age of 68 he had never had a religious doubt, but then his wife died and his faith all but collapsed. He wrote: 'In that dark hour, I became almost an atheist. For God had set his foot upon my prayers and treated my petitions with contempt. If I had seen a dog in such agony as mine, I would have pitied and helped the dumb beast; yet God spat upon me and cast me out as an offence - out into the waste wilderness and the night black and starless.'

Just where is God when your world is falling apart? Why doesn't he say something? Why doesn't he *do* something, even if it is simply putting an end to the misery by taking away our life? Those are the cries of men like Joseph Parker, and they may have been your cries too. They were certainly the heartfelt yearnings of Job. Job, as we have seen is the model of godliness, the paradigm of virtue, kindness itself, now reduced to a pitiful, whimpering wreck. His livelihood is in ruins; his family is dead and his health all but broken. In fact, he has very little left save two things: his faith – just, and his integrity. Now in the central sections of the book which we are looking at tonight, both of these come under a blistering attack from, would you believe, three of his closest friends. And we may well think that with friends like these who needs enemies!

However, it has to be said that no matter how crass, misleading and insensitive Job's three counsellors - Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar - proved to be, their intentions were nonetheless sincere. In their own way they represent a certain type of Christian which is to be found today. If we wanted to summarise their position it would be: "*My mind is made up - don't confuse me with the facts.*" Even before Job opens his mouth they have already decided what the real problem is and where the problem lies. The problem is sin and it lies with Job. It can't be God's fault, they think - he wouldn't do such a thing without a reason, and the *only* reason they could see for God inflicting such suffering is in judgement. Judgement upon what? Well, upon Job's sin, of course!

On the other hand, we have Job who also in his own way represents a certain group of Christians; and if we were to sum up his position it could be in the words of a John Lennon song: 'Gimme some truth.' In effect Job is saying to his friends: "*I don't want your theories, however logical and convincing they may be to you. I want to get to the bottom of what is really going on. I want the truth. More than that I want to meet the truth - God himself, so that he can vindicate me and declare me innocent before the world. To suffer physical pain and loss is one thing, but to suffer false accusations of being a liar, a cheat and deserving what is happening, as my friends are saying, is one pain too many, and only God can put it right.*" That is the burden of these chapters.

The way the drama is set out is as follows. Each of Job's friends in turn attack him verbally. After each assault Job defends himself. This cycle of attack, defence and counter attack is repeated three times, until eventually Job explodes in one long outburst reducing his friends to silence. Even so, he still does not succeed in convincing them that he is innocent. Their minds were made up and they didn't want to be confused by the facts.

Their reasoning was quite simple and went something like this: all suffering is due to wickedness. Job is suffering, therefore he is wicked. QED. What could be simpler? We see this in Eliphaz's speech in 4:7-9: "*Consider now: Who being innocent has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plough evil and those who*

sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed.”

Eliphaz prides himself in being an astute observer of human affairs, a proper little sociologist cum theologian is Eliphaz. *“Everyone knows, Job, that God has ordered the world in terms of moral cause and effect. If you are good you prosper, if you are bad, then eventually your sins will find you out. You can't escape it, any more than you can escape the law of gravity; it's immutable.”*

What is more, Eliphaz claims that he has had a special revelation confirming this - a vision, what some today would claim to be 'a word from the Lord'. And who can argue against that? *“A word was secretly brought to me, my ears caught a whisper of it. Amid disquieting dreams in the night, when deep sleep falls on men, fear and trembling seized me and made all my bones shake. A spirit glided past my face, and the hair on my body stood on end. It stopped, but I could not tell what it was. A form stood before my eyes, and I heard a hushed voice: ‘Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more pure than his maker?’”* (4:12-1).

The implication is obvious, *“You suffer, Job, because you have sinned.”*

But, not only do these friends have sociology and the new superspirituality on their side, they have the whole weight of church tradition too, so says Bildad in chapter 8:2-3, 8-10. *“How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind. Does God pervert justice? Ask the former generations and find out what their fathers learned, for we were born only yesterday and know nothing, and our days on earth are but a shadow. Will they not instruct you and tell you? Will they not bring forth words from their understanding? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?”*

That is, *“This is no novel idea, Job, that God operates according to strict justice. As you well know, it is the received wisdom of our elders, men far wiser than you have come to this conclusion. So why don't you stop being so obstinate? Admit your sin and repent. Nothing could be simpler.”*

Job, however, remains unmoved. No matter how sound, no matter how orthodox their ideas are,

and Job admits they are (9:1), the theory does not do justice to the facts. Certainly, it is a rule of thumb that what a man sows, so shall he reap - live loose life and end up a drug addict or an alcoholic. That at least makes some sense. But that is not Job's situation and it is wrong to pretend otherwise.

Well, eventually, after listening to Job's special pleading, which in itself may have confirmed his guilt in his friends' eyes - he protests too much - the third of his friends, Zophar, can't stomach any more. He knows what he believes and he is sticking with it and, no matter how cutting and unkind his words may be, he is going to give Job a piece of his mind, 11:2ff: *“Are all these words to go unanswered? Is this talker to be vindicated? Will your idle talk reduce men to silence? Will no-one rebuke you when you mock? You say to God, ‘My beliefs are flawless and I am pure in your sight.’ Oh, how I wish God would speak, that he would open his lips against you and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom, for true wisdom has two sides. Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sins.”*

In a torrent of rage, Zophar and his two colleagues are practically bullying Job into signing a false confession. This is the Inquisition at work. *“Look,”* he is saying, *“you may be able to fool some people with this ‘Butter wouldn't melt in my mouth’ story. But you don't fool God. If he were here he would soon put you in your place. Why, so great is your sin, so long is the list of them that even God couldn't keep a complete record, that's why he's forgotten some of them.”*

Later, in 22:4-8 Eliphaz is even more mercilessly brutal in coming to the point: *“Is it for your piety that he rebukes you and brings charges against you? Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? You demanded security from your brothers for no reason; you stripped men of their clothing, leaving them naked. That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you, why it is so dark you cannot see, and why a flood of water covers you.”*

In other words, *“Everyone knows how certain rich men get their wealth - double dealing on the side, fiddling the books, exploiting the poor. So that's how you must have come upon your wealth, Job, and God has found you out and is giving you your*

just deserts." The solution each of them gives to Job is the same: repent, come clean and turn to God and you will soon be restored to your former prosperity. For example in 22:21: "*Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you.*"

You see, their theology was all very neat and tidy, admitting of no loose ends. It explained things remarkably well, so well in fact they didn't ever have to bother thinking for themselves, it was all done for them in their theory of retribution. So what if some of the facts didn't seem to fit? They could either be conveniently ignored or forced to fit. But it is just a little *too* convenient isn't it? To the question: "*If God is so good then why are things so bad?*"; "*Well,*" they would say "*it must be because you are so bad.*"

Now let us be clear the Bible does teach that *some* suffering is punishment for sin - read Romans chapter 1 - but not *all* suffering is to be viewed in this way. What Job's friends were doing was mistaking *part* of the truth for the *whole* truth and the result was appalling. They add more suffering to one who is already at breaking point by trying to get him to abandon one of the few things left which is precious to him, his integrity. By this verbal arm twisting they aim to get him to say that which he does not believe to be true. But they also blind themselves, foreclosing on any possibility that their understanding might be broadened. Because everything is cut and dried they do not consider any other possibility, in particular that it might be they rather than Job who are wrong. That possibility never crosses their minds.

Here then, is a warning for us all, namely, however sincere, we must be careful not to become a Job's comforter. To begin with, it is obvious that they really didn't hear what Job was saying. Oh, they let him speak, they heard out his objections, but they gave them no real consideration whatsoever. And that hurts. When you are going through a crisis, deep emotional pain, then the last thing you want is for your own integrity to be violated, for someone to treat you as if you are less than a human being, without thoughts, without feelings -but just an object to be assailed with 'the right answers'. It seems that whatever concerns these friends had for Job, those concerns were overridden by a greater

concern, namely, the concern to keep their own watertight beliefs intact. It was far more important to them that they should not allow their ideas to be brought into question than for truth to be pursued however uncomfortable that might be. It is sad that Christians are not immune to this rather unfortunate habit of burying their heads in the sand instead of rigorously thinking something through.

What is perhaps worse is the cruelty of adding to a person's pain guilt which doesn't really belong to him. A modern day example of this is the increasingly popular 'healing prosperity' or 'name it and claim it' teaching. The teaching goes something like this: if you have an illness, have faith and you will be healed. If you are not healed it is because you haven't got enough faith, or because your wife doesn't have enough faith, or because your great-uncle was a Freemason! Is this an exaggeration? Here is an account written by the late notable Christian medical man, Professor Verna Wright, of a healing crusade at Horsforth in Leeds several years ago:

'One night a friend of mine who is deaf in one ear thought he would have a go at being healed. Hands were laid upon him and he was told that he was healed, but he said, "*I am not.*" The healer said, "*Yes, you are.*" "*No, I am not,*" my friend insisted, only to be told, "*Well, it must be that you have not got sufficient faith.*" After a brief altercation the healer went on down the line of deaf people. When the healing activities had finished my friend turned to the lady next to him and said, "*What did he do for you, love?*" and she replied with her hand cupped to her ear, "*What did you say?*"

That would be almost comical if it were not so tragic! Just think of the effects that had on those people.

You see, this is a theology with no loose ends, which does not admit *innocent* suffering, and so adds pain upon pain.

But Job will have none of it. Whatever the majority might say, however impeccable the orthodoxy of his friends or whatever alleged special revelations they have received, he knows the truth and will not sacrifice his integrity on the altar of neat popular thinking. Although, like an innocent man after prolonged interrogation by his captors, it must have been so tempting to give up and take

the easy way out, and say, "OK, I'm guilty, just let me out of this hell," Job at least has the courage to say, "No. Whatever is going on, it is not my fault and I will not be brutalised into false humility by taking the rap for something I did not do." He says "As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, as long as I have life within me, the breath of God in my nostrils, my lips will not speak wickedness, and my tongue will utter no deceit. I will never admit you are in the right; till I die, I will not deny my integrity" (27:2-5).

In vain Job tries to demonstrate to his friends that it is they who have got it wrong. They held two beliefs which were set in stone. The first was that all wicked suffer. The second was that all who suffer are wicked. And both of these propositions are patently false, says Job. In chapter 21 he points out that many a tyrant has lived the life of Riley only to die peacefully in his bed. It is simply not true to say that the wicked don't get away with it, for it is patently obvious they do. This has always been the case, with a few notable exceptions. Ask the pimps and the drug pushers whether crime does not pay, and they will look at you as if you are mad. Of course it pays, and they will point to the Daimlers and plush homes to prove the point. What is more, says Job, it is not true to say that all who suffer are wicked, look at me!

In chapters 29-31 Job gives a most moving recital of all the godly things he did before his world fell apart. He had been honest, disciplined, rescued the poor, helped the blind, comforted those who mourned, and made a promise not to look lustfully at a girl. He opened his home to countless strangers, he never rejoiced over their misfortune saying "Serves them right", and he never trusted in his own wealth. All very reminiscent of someone else isn't it, who was falsely accused? "He must be wicked," cried the crowd on Good Friday, "for only the wicked get crucified. The Bible says so in Deuteronomy 21:22-23. He saved others, let him save himself." Those were the cold words of Jesus' comforters. Although he didn't know it, Job was in very good company indeed, the company of the Son of God himself.

You see, what Job wanted was not some theoretical problem-solving of the "Why does God allow evil?" variety, which philosophers and sceptics are so adept at asking. He wanted to

meet with God. He wanted to hear God's voice, to hear God's reason for allowing this appalling act of human misery: "I loathe my very life; therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God: Do not condemn me, but tell me what charges you have against me. Does it please you to oppress me, to spurn the work of your hands, while you smile on the schemes of the wicked?" (10:1-3).

Job turns to God to plead with him to show himself just for once and explain this injustice, for that is what Job is convinced it is and that is the thing that hurts most of all. In a fit of deep depression he longs for the days when he knew God's kindness: "How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone upon my head and by his light I walked through darkness! Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's intimate friendship blessed my house, when the Almighty was still with me and my children were around me, when my path was drenched with cream and the rock poured out for me streams of olive oil" (29:1-5).

Isn't that so moving? He wants to be with God. Now the amazing thing is this: although Job sails very close to the wind, and borders on blasphemy, he never ceases to believe. Not once does he slip over into atheism - he simply can't: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face. Indeed, this will turn out for a deliverance, for no godless man would dare come before him!" (13:15-16).

He is so convinced of his innocence that he is willing to die if that is the only way he can come before God to vindicate himself, for he is sure God will clear his name. But it is God he wants. Yes, he wants an explanation. Yes, he wants his name cleared. But most of all he wants God. And, as we shall see in a few weeks' time, his heart's desire was eventually granted, but not until many more tears were shed.

Now let me say, that like Job, we too are to be content with none other than a true personal knowledge of God. Don't be content with theories about him, or clever ideas about the problem of evil, or highfaluting doctrines - settle for nothing less than God himself, however many tears have to be cried in the process.

But where is God to be found? A God who is merciful who does understand? The answer: he is found, of all places, on a cross. If we really want to know what God is like and to have that intimacy of fellowship with him, then that is where we begin to look, at the God-man Jesus, who also knew the dark cloud of suffering, the rejection and misunderstanding, and who, having gone through it all, now rules this broken world of ours. In the words of the writer to the Hebrews who sought to encourage young believers whose faith was being sorely tested like Job's: 'We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone' (2:9).

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