



Innocent Suffering - Job Chapters 1 to 3

Melvin Tinker

This is the second of a series of sermons by Rev Melvin Tinker based on the book of Job. It would be helpful to read Job chapters 1 to 3 before listening to, or reading, the sermon.

Let me tell you about a missionary who had been involved in very effective Christian work in Latin America. She was a woman full of love for the Lord Jesus and animated by a tremendous zeal for him: On returning home to live in the United States her future could not have looked more promising. Marrying a graduate of a Bible college, a man she had known for some years, she was set to return to the mission field with him. But she had not been married to him for more than a few hours before she began to suspect that she had in fact married a monster. It soon transpired that he was an insecure bully who, while in public maintaining a veneer of religious respectability, at home could only live with himself by demeaning everything his wife ever said or did. It began with a most malicious form of psychological terror, later to develop into physical brutality. The mission board caught on pretty quickly and refused to send them out. As the years passed the abuse worsened. The woman tried talking to friends and counsellors; some of whom simply sided with the husband and told her to try harder. Eventually she turned to drink and a couple of years later she was a confirmed alcoholic, finding herself becoming brutal with her two children. She hated herself, she hated her husband, and she hated God. Her cry, quite understandably, was, "Why me, Lord?" After all, she had done nothing to deserve this. She knew that she was not perfect, but she had been such a devoted Christian. So

what possible reason could there be for her to be cast into such a living hell? It simply did not make sense.

We have to admit that such suffering does not make sense. We can see a connection between certain forms of behaviour and the suffering they occasion, for example, sexual promiscuity and venereal disease. But what possible connection could there be in terms of desert to account for the appalling atrocities undergone by the Jews during the Holocaust? As we contemplate the holocaust in all its naked evil, can we honestly believe that all those children tortured by the Nazis were not in a very real sense *innocent* sufferers? There is one book in the Bible which perhaps more than any other wrestles with the problem of innocent suffering and that is the book of Job. It is in these pages that with remarkable candour its writer raises the perplexing question which is on the lips of so many: If God is good why are things so bad?

If we are to allow the full emotive import of this poetic melodrama to have its effect on us, we must try putting ourselves into Job's shoes, to empathise with the very real, heartfelt cries that his unjust suffering evokes.

In the book's first two chapters we are introduced to Job. He lives at a time when a person's wealth is measured not in terms of the size of his bank balance but the size of his herds. This would place him in the period of the Hebrew patriarchs, men like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, we are told he lived in Uz, somewhere in the Arabian desert but unlike Abraham, Job is not given a family tree and so he is being put forward as a representative of humanity as a whole, and not specifically as an Israelite. Job is not only a wealthy man, indeed possibly the wealthiest man alive according to verse 3, but he is also a godly man. We are told that he feared God and shunned evil. His deep personal piety showed itself in several ways, not least in his passionate concern for the spiritual well-being of his children - the sign of any good father. In verses 4-5 we read that just in case his sons and daughters had behaved in a way that might have offended God and brought down his judgement upon them, Job went out of his way to make sacrifices for their sin on their behalf. And this was no passing fad for Job - we are told that this was his regular custom:

'His sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Today we would describe Job as a committed Christian, one whose faith penetrated every area of his life. He is a model of what the Bible calls wisdom.

Now in order to pre-empt any cynical doubt which may be in our minds that all of this wealth has been gained by shady double-dealing, it is made quite clear from the outset that Job was 'blameless and upright' (1:8); in other words, his moral character was impeccable. So, here we have a sincere worshipper of God, an honest hard-working businessman, a loving husband and thoughtful father who is second to none; in fact Job almost appears to be too good to be true. But as we shall see, Job was one of those rare individuals who exist within a class all by themselves, he was a genuinely good man. Therefore what could possibly go wrong?

Job has done nothing which would require any change in lifestyle. His relationship with God could hardly have been better. There are no obvious lessons he has to learn or sins which need correcting and it is very difficult to see how he could improve significantly. "Surely," you might argue, "being faithful to God brings with it its own rewards - a good and peaceful life, doesn't it?" That in fact is what some wisdom literature like Proverbs would seem to suggest on a superficial reading.

But life is not always that simple and there is often more going on than meets the eye and so in 1:6 the curtains of visible reality are lifted for a moment to provide the readers with a glimpse into the invisible spirit world where, behind the scenes, a wager is being made between God and the devil, Satan, whose very name means 'accuser of God's people'. Like a vindictive lawyer or a corrupt policeman with an obsession to frame the innocent, Satan is on the look-out for someone to drag before the judgement seat of God in order to condemn.

When God says to Satan, "*Where have you come*

from?" Satan answers, "*From roaming the earth and going to and fro in it.*" When God asks Satan, "*Have you thought about my servant Job? There is no one like him. He is quite blameless and morally upright*", Satan, in effect, replies: "*The only reason why Job behaves as he does is because he knows on which side his bread is buttered. He is religious and moral only because of what he can get out of it. After all, everyone knows that religion is nothing but enlightened self-interest. Believe in God, be a good boy and up you go to heaven! Be a naughty boy and a pagan and it's a deep fry and chips for you down below. It's just a matter of the right carrot and stick with Job. In fact, you can put it all down to his rather fortunate circumstances which you have provided, God. Anybody can afford to be religious when they have a lifestyle like that. Religion is nothing but a luxury for the idle rich, the icing on the cake of life for the upper middle classes. But let Job have a taste of what real need is and you will soon see where his true love lies.*"

Accordingly, Satan challenges God: "*Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face*" (verse 11). And shocking though it may seem, God takes up the challenge and actually gives Satan permission to do his worst, with one proviso - he is not to harm Job himself 'The LORD said to Satan, "*Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger*" (verses 11-12).

That is precisely what happened. In what has all the ingredients of a screaming nightmare, Job's life is totally devastated. First, he loses his wealth to marauding bandits. Gone are his oxen needed for farming, gone are his donkeys and camels needed for transport, and all his workers are massacred (verses 14-15). His financial empire lies in ruins. And just as he may have been consoling himself with the thought that bad though that is, he could just manage to scrape a living together with the few sheep he had left, news reached him that these too had been destroyed, not by an act of man this time but by an act of God: "*The fire of God fell from the sky and burned up the sheep and your servants*" (verse 16). Maybe it was a volcanic eruption we don't really know. But while still reeling from the shock waves of economic catastrophe, news of an even greater personal tragedy comes to his

ears - a storm has taken the lives of his dear children (verses 18-19).

How would we have responded to all of that? Well this is Job's response: 'At this Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head [signs of intense grief and mourning]. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: "*Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.*" Then we read: 'In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing' (verses 20-22).

We may think that that would be enough for any man to bear. But God apparently thought differently. For, as the veil is lifted once more in chapter 2, we find ourselves in the heavenly court yet again, only to discover the wager being taken one stage further. Satan, still not convinced that there is not a base ulterior motive for Job's faith, pursues his challenge in verses 4-5: "*Skin for skin! A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones and he will surely curse you to your face.*" In other words, "*Get under Job's skin, God, let him feel some physical suffering; let him think that his own life is threatened, and then watch him reveal his true colours.*"

So Job is afflicted with boils of such excruciating pain that his wife, finding it unbearable to watch, urges Job to commit voluntary euthanasia by cursing God (verse 9). Why, even Job himself wishes that he had never been born, which is the cry at the centre of 3:11 ff: "*Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed? For now I would be lying down in peace; I would be asleep and at rest with kings and counsellors of the earth, who built for themselves places now lying in ruins, with rulers who had gold, who filled their houses with silver.*"

So disfigured and ruined is Job that when his friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar arrive to console him, they hardly recognise him and break down in uncontrollable weeping, it was that bad (2:11-13). This was a man undergoing suffering alright, a suffering which was heightened, not lessened, by his faith in God. For if he had not believed in God it would have been some cold comfort to know that it was all a result of chance,

with no-one to blame. But to believe in God, and a good and all powerful God at that, seemed to fly in the face of his present experience. How could such a God allow this to happen?

Now let us pause right there and ask up to this point what lessons are we meant to draw? It seems to me that there are three lessons which the writer is insistent we learn if we are going to make any progress in coping with the problem of the suffering of the innocent.

The first lesson is that God is sovereign over suffering: that in a mysterious way which we cannot fathom, suffering does fall within his overruling power.

Now one of the ways some people try to resolve the problem of evil is to become what are called dualists. This idea suggests that there are two equal and opposite forces battling it out in the world - good and evil, God and Satan. All the good that happens is due to God and all the bad is due to Satan. The result is that God bears no responsibility when it comes to suffering because it's not really his fault. The blame belongs to Satan. In philosophical form this view is represented by the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism and in popular form by 'Star Wars'. But let me say that some Christians have imbibed it too.

Several years ago I visited a Christian fellowship which had really gone overboard with this type of thinking. One member stood up and said he had lost his car keys and that this was an attack by Satan. Another said that he had noisy next-door neighbours, and this too was an attack by Satan. Another had a verruca and this, as well, could be put down to Satan. These people couldn't have a cold without it being turned into a major spiritual battle!

Such a notion may be convenient and simple, but the theological price paid is far too high. For if you go down this road you are left with a God who is limited, a God who is absolutely dependent upon the moves of his opponent Satan. You never know, perhaps, one day, he may even be outwitted by Satan and then where would we be? The Bible, however, will not allow us to believe that sort of falsehood.

Instead, we are presented with a God who is absolutely sovereign, who is not outwitted or out of control. Although Satan *is* involved in our world, he is not presented as a second god - a dark force equal to the light force, but rather as a creature with remarkable powers, but who is able to use these powers *only* by divine permission. Certainly, Job's troubles can be attributed to the activity of Satan, as they can *also* be put down to the activity of the robbers and viruses. The fact is that often several secondary causes are at work in the world while still being overruled by God. None of these things could have happened had God not allowed them to happen. In Job 1:11 Satan challenged God to stretch out his hand against Job. But it is *God* who put the power into Satan's hands! Job too recognised the sovereignty of God, for example in 2:10, when he said to his wife: "*Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?*" We shall be looking at the role of Satan in suffering in a sermon all by itself a little later in the series for he does appear again in different guises, but for now let it be noted he is a creature not a malevolent Creator.

However, it has to be said that from one point of view, knowing this simply makes matters worse, because it presses us to plead the question "*Why should a good God allow such things if he has the power to stop them?*" But from another point of view it provides us with hope. Because if God is good (and he is) then we can believe that there is some good *reason* behind what happens, even though it may not be known to us at the time. What is more, if he is all powerful (and he is), then there is hope that he has the *power* to relieve our sufferings or at least provide us with the grace to cope in our sufferings. So the message coming over loud and clear is that it is God, and not the devil, who rules.

The second lesson we need to learn from this introduction is that God does not hold it against us if, in our suffering, we vent our feelings to him, that we cry to him, or even shout at him if necessary, so unloading the emotional pain on to him. That is what Job does in chapter 3. After the relatively passive reaction to the news of his children's death - which is often the case in bereavement, a numbness and disbelief which is part of the body's natural mechanism for coping - there follows his deep emotional outburst. While not sinning by cursing God, Job does not hesitate

to curse the day he was born. So anguished is he that he feels he must tell someone, and who better to tell than God? And you know from a pastoral point of view it is vital that people who are undergoing pain do not bottle up their feelings, for if that happens all the energy simply gets pushed down into the subconscious, only to show itself later, either in depression or in a nervous stress. Far better to let the grief come out. That is why I always stress to someone who has recently been bereaved that at the funeral service it is right to show how one feels - it is OK to cry. There is no virtue in the British stiff upper lip; it is not true to say, "*Didn't she cope well at the funeral?*" because she showed no emotion. That is not coping, it is denying. We all need to have *permission* to grieve so that we can move towards some sort of recovery. God respects that, indeed he approves of it. As we shall see in the following chapters, God did not rebuke Job for expressing his doubts or anger, but for acting as if he knew more than God.

Finally, we must realise that there is an irreducible element of mystery in all suffering. Job cried out: "*Why?*"; "*Why didn't I perish at birth?*"; "*Why was I not stillborn?*"; "*Why is light given to those in misery?*" And yet Job is never given the answers. Although we as readers are allowed to have insight into what is going on in heaven, Job is not. He is never made aware of the discussion between God and Satan. Now that is important, because one of the lessons this book is teaching is the need to trust God in situations when we do not know why certain things are happening. But let it be said that this faith is not blind faith. Job knew about God, he had reasons to believe that God is all powerful and all good, and he is reminded of these things later when he encounters God as described in chapters 38-42. Therefore, although Job did not know why these things were happening to him, he did know enough about God to know why he trusted him who did know why. The fact that Job didn't get an answer didn't stop him from asking, and neither should it stop us.

We have to admit that if we can see that there is a good outcome to suffering it helps us to endure it better - like a woman going through childbirth, for instance. In the Christian life, however, we are not always permitted to know the reason why. But we are still called to trust God who knows why. Let me give you an actual example. In a small town in

Australia, there was a Christian woman who was crippled with arthritis, her body was more or less continually racked with pain. One neighbour who lived a few houses down the street knew this, and was struck by the gracious way she coped with it, never complaining, always being positive. This impressed her so much that she decided to go to the woman's church to find out more about a belief which could make such a difference to a life. Eventually she became a Christian. She then began to take her young son along to church, and he also became a Christian. Today, that son is one of the finest New Testament scholars in the world and a model Christian man, his name is Peter O' Brien. I am sure that if we had been able to say to that woman, *"Keep on, put up with your suffering because it is going to be such a witness that a young boy is going to be converted through it, and he is going to be greatly used by God to influence thousands of ministers throughout the world,"* then that would undoubtedly have made her suffering easier to bear. But she didn't know any of that. All she could do was to trust God.

And all that Job could do, and maybe all that we can do too, in the face of the unanswerable, is to trust in the God whom we know *has* tasted suffering first-hand in the person of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

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