



Vindication and restoration - Job 42

Melvin Tinker

This is the eighth and final sermon in a series by Rev Melvin Tinker based on the book of Job. It would be helpful to read Job chapter 42 before listening to, or reading, the sermon.

Here is part of a parable told by Professor Basil Mitchell:

*<blockquote style="margin-right: 0px;" dir="ltr">
In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance one night meets a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night in conversation together. The stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance – indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no matter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.*

They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, 'He is on our side'. Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him: but the partisan still says, 'He is on our side'. He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the stranger for help and receives it. He is thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, 'The stranger knows best'.

As we come to the final chapter of Job, the meaning of that parable should be obvious, for in essence that is the lesson that Job had to learn, and, according to the New Testament, it is the lesson we too are to learn, namely, that in spite of appearances to the contrary, 'The Stranger' – God – knows best and we are called to trust him.

You might remember that Job's own attitude began with a mixture of *self pity* and *self-assertion*. As his life was devastated by one calamity after another, not surprisingly Job sank into himself in grief. Then, in spite of his wife's advice to curse God and die, he insisted on defending his own innocence. By contrast the attitude recommended by Job's three friends was *self-accusation*. 'Come on, Job,' they said, 'admit that you are suffering because of your sin. This is God's judgement upon you, repent and it will soon turn out alright.' But Job refused to be bullied into signing such a false confession and denying his integrity – he *was* innocent. Then the fourth friend, Elihu, appears on the scene and he urges upon Job yet another attitude to adopt, that of *self-discipline*. He pleads with Job to see that there is some purpose in his pain, not retribution but instruction, to recognise that in some measure this is God's way of disciplining and correcting us. Then finally it is God who speaks and the only attitude which is left open to Job is *self surrender*, falling before God in reverence, awe and humility. That, of course, is the attitude which God lovingly commends.

Many people feel that the story should have ended in 42:6 with Job falling on his knees and saying, 'Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.' It seems almost incredible to some that, after such a robust wrestling with the problem of suffering in which the most forthright candour has been expressed in challenging traditionally cherished beliefs, the writer should throw it all away by rounding the story off with what amounts to a fairy tale ending of the 'they all lived happily ever after' variety. Fairy stories may have happy endings, but real life very often does not. To tell us that Job ends up with more than he had originally undermines the main argument of the book, because it gives the impression that the retributive theory is correct after all: be naughty and you get punished, be good and you get rewarded. As if God were trying to fob Job off by placating him with a few goodies and say, 'I am

not so nasty after all, I am really kind, you know.' On a superficial reading of the text some may well think that. But I would suggest that no other ending would have been possible. For if we had simply finished with God's encounter with Job, God's wisdom and power may have been vindicated, but not his justice which, after all, was Job's main concern.

In this epilogue we see both the justice of God and the grace of God meeting each other perfectly.

To begin with we see God's justice in the way he deals with Job's three friends look at verse 7:

*<blockquote style="margin-right: 0px;" dir="ltr">
After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.' So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the LORD told them, and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.*

Do you remember how Job had to put up with so much slander? How he was vilified over and over again and his character brought into question by these people? Do you recall how he was accused of being a hypocrite, of harbouring wicked thoughts, of gaining his wealth through sharp practice? That had been so painful. It had simply been tearing him apart. But the more he protested, the more convinced his accusers became that he was hiding something. He desperately needed someone to come to his defence; someone who knew the truth and who would testify to his innocence. But there was only one who could do that, and that was God – that was the heartfelt plea of chapter 9.

And that is precisely what we see God doing here – answering Job's prayer. He rounds on Job's three counsellors in anger because of what they have said. They may have been sincere in their beliefs, but sincerity is no defence, they were plain wrong. They were wrong in what they had claimed about

Job and, more to the point, by implication they were wrong in what they had said about God. It is ironic that these three thought they were representing God, when in fact all the time they were misrepresenting him. At the end of the day their theology reduces God to an inconsistent tyrant. They claim that he works out everything in terms of just retribution, but it is obvious that the theory does not fit with the facts, so the result is that God appears to be an arbitrary monster, punishing some but not others. And that view of God is simply not right. And it is those Christians who are zealous for the truth, dare I say people like us who need to be very careful that we do not find ourselves misrepresenting God, perhaps by focusing on his justice to the exclusion of his grace or, as is more likely today, focusing on his love to the exclusion of his justice. Such an appalling false image will not go unnoticed by God himself. It was Jesus who said that we will all have to give an account for every idle word we have uttered. So we are to go with the flow of God's self-revelation and not our neat, tidy and often inadequate thoughts about him.

Here we see that Job was vindicated in time, but that is not always the way it works out for Christians is it? We may well be misunderstood and misrepresented, even by some of our so-called Christian friends and we will have to live with that pain. But there will come a day when everything will be out in the open, when there will be a clearing of the books – that will be judgement day. Then the record will be put straight. Those lies and half truths, those sneers that we may have had to endure, (not only because we have owned the name of Jesus Christ but because we had the guts to put our faith into practice when other Christians faded away), will be put right. It is not for us to be preoccupied with trying to clear our name and justify ourselves. Instead we are to get on with what God has called us to do and leave the judging up to him. He will see to it that if we are in the right it will be made known, so let's not worry about it unduly.

Here are the wise words of the apostle Paul on this point (a man who like Job knew what it was to be misrepresented and slandered by his friends): 'Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will

receive his praise from God' (1 Cor. 4:5). In other words we are to be content to leave the judgement in God's capable hands.

However, not only do we see God's justice at work but also his grace – God's undeserved mercy. Far from God exacting his pound of flesh, as Job's friends deserved, God, by his very action of providing a way for their sin to be dealt with, reveals his kindness. You see, if God had treated them according to strict justice, as they had been arguing God must treat everyone, then they would have been snuffed out in an instant. But he didn't. Sin had to be covered over, and that involves a sacrifice. What is more, someone is needed to intercede for sinners, someone of good standing, someone whom God will hear, and the only one who filled all the requirements was the one they had been slandering as a liar and a cheat – Job. There's the irony!

To Job's credit, he did pray for them and God accepted his prayer. For Job there was no malice, no resentment against these men who, with their searing accusations, had heaped upon him more agonies than he could bear. Instead, there was nothing but kindness. How many of us would have had the grace to behave in that way? Job is most impressive? Often, when someone says a bad word against us we don't forget it, and we make sure they don't forget it either. But not Job, he prays for them. Immediately we are reminded of another innocent sufferer who prayed for those who laughed at him and taunted him and spat at him in his greatest hour of need. Jesus prayed, 'Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing.' Indeed, is there not in Job's response at the very least a distant echo of the way God was to demonstrate beyond any reasonable doubt that he is both just and merciful by providing the supreme sacrifice for our sins, in the body of his own Son at Calvary. God is not inconsistent you see, as Job's comforters' logic implied. God does not ignore sin. He deals with it by absorbing it to himself in his dear Son, so that we might go free.

What is more, we also see God's grace shown to Job in the way his former life is not simply restored but surpassed: *'After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as before'* (Job 42:10).

Now it is very important that we get this right and that we don't see it as a form of 'compensation' for all that Job has suffered. Remember how right at the beginning it was Satan's taunt that the only reason why Job was so religious was because of what he could get out of it, that there was some ulterior motive; that he was in it for what he could get? By taking everything away from Job, God demonstrated that the taunt was in fact a lie and had no foundation whatsoever. Even when he had nothing to entice him to believe in God, Job still trusted him. It wasn't a matter of Job thinking, 'Well, if I just hang on to the end there might be some goodies in store.' Job didn't know what the outcome was going to be; in fact it was more than likely he thought he was going to die. But nevertheless he still trusted God. Why? – the Stranger knows best.

Is not what we have here in fact a pointer to heaven? You have to remember that this book of Job appeared early on in the history of Israel, before any clear ideas about heaven and the after life had been revealed, although there is an inkling of the possibility of a future life as we see in 19:25–27:

*<blockquote style="margin-right: 0px;" dir="ltr">
I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth (literally dust). And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes – I, and not another.*

So, just as it was only by God vindicating Job in time rather than at the end of time that justice was seen to be done, so it is only by God blessing Job in this world as well as in the next that it can be shown that the righteous life is worth it after all.

Although we are not to follow God simply because of what we can get out of it, nevertheless it does make very good sense to follow God because it is the most rewarding life. It is rewarding in this life because we have a personal relationship with God and are given direction in living – 'life in its fulness' as Jesus said. Even though materially we might not have much to show for it, spiritually you cannot beat it.

But it is also rewarding in the next life because we shall then experience the complete joy of being a

Christian rather than the eternal torment of not being one. Do you think of that? One man who did was the great American preacher Jonathan Edwards and this is what he wrote:

<blockquote style="margin-right: 0px;" dir="ltr">
Heaven – the glorified spirits will grow in holiness and happiness in eternity. Heaven – what beautiful and fragrant flowers will there be reflecting all the sweetness of the Son of God. Heaven – Christians' love for one another will be such that it will thrill them that Jesus Christ loves other Christians and will fill them with joy to see him showing his love to them. Heaven – is the direct reverse of what it is on earth, for there by length of time things become more and more youthful, more vigorous, active, tender and beautiful.

So here we see Job in his own way, discovering that truth for himself. God does honour those who honour him. He does not come to us empty handed for having suffered for him and remaining faithful to him when the going was tough. It is right for a believer who is going through the flames of suffering to have his sight on the consolation of heaven. Just listen to these words from the writer to the Hebrews, writing to young believers who were being put through the mill because they stood out as Christians: 'let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, *who for the joy set before him* endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God' (Hebrews 12:2). Even Jesus was given the courage and the strength to endure the most appalling suffering and cruelty by setting his heart on the joys that were to come. The joy not only of returning to his heavenly Father and to that wonderful relationship of love and glory he had cherished from all eternity; the joy not simply of ruling with his Father over the universe they had created; but the surpassing joy of seeing many spiritual children come to glory through faith in him. Job had his offspring out of adversity; well, Jesus has his – Christian believers. Isn't it moving to know that he thought we were worth it? As the eternal *Son of God* looked down the *long* corridors of time from heaven and saw each one of his chosen children's faces, he said, 'For them I will go to the cross; for them I will treat with contempt all the hurt and ridicule that people will throw at me, why I will even bear their guilt if it is the only way they can be set free. Yes, for that joy of seeing them in heaven, I willingly suffer.'

But it may be that you still remain unconvinced. Like the writer Philip Yancey, you say, 'If God is truly in charge, somehow connected to all the world's suffering, why is he so capricious, unfair? Is he the cosmic sadist who delights in watching us squirm?' Well, is he?

Surely the Christian must reply that God knows far more than any of us. In many ways Job is a type, a pointer to one who was yet to come, someone else who was also known as God's servant, someone else whom Satan wanted to test. But whereas with Job, God did not allow Satan to test him to the point of death, with this other servant Satan was allowed to go all the way. No suffering was considered to be too great to be inflicted upon this innocent man. If Job was reduced to living on the local ash heap, Jesus was stripped naked, and nailed up like a scarecrow on the local rubbish heap.

You find it difficult to believe in God because of suffering, let me be honest with you and say I find I *have* to believe in God because of suffering – the suffering of Jesus. It is in him that we see a God who really does care, who cares enough to spare us from the eternal suffering our sins demand, that he suffers them in our place. Do you really want to begin to plumb the mystery of suffering? Then you need to look to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross; nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is where you look. And if you want to see how such unbelievable suffering can be transformed into infinite good, then look on to an empty tomb and to a garden in which stands the crucified Conqueror, with the palms of his hands outstretched, offering the gift of eternal life, and saying to you as he says to me, 'Believe and trust' – the Stranger knows best.

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