

Preached at 8.15, C@10 & CC on 2nd August 2015

Intro

So far in Job, we've seen that Job is a man with a clear conscience – he's a man who fears the Lord and shuns evil.

But he's a man who's faced almost unbearable suffering – losing his wealth, his family and his health in a rapid series of events that left him sitting on the ash heap crying out “why?”

He won't turn away from God – convinced that God is the one who can give him an answer to the question of his suffering.

His friends came with the intention of comforting him, but all they've managed to do is add to his suffering – pushing him to agree with their mechanical view of the universe where you get what you deserve, and telling him to own up to the sin that he must have committed to lead to this suffering.

They can't answer Job's question.

In this final sermon, we're going to cover the last 5 chapters of Job.

What will God's answer to Job teach us about innocent suffering in the world we live in?

Let's pray for God to speak his words deep into our hearts...

Only God is God

John Dickson titled his little book on suffering 'If I Were God I'd End All The Pain'.

“If I were God...”

How often do we say to someone else “if I were you...”

I was saying it to my brother-in-law last week when we were talking about teaching his teenage daughter to drive.

Often we're trying to be helpful... maybe giving a bit of the benefit of our own experience.

Really what we're saying is that we'd do things differently if we were in their shoes.

And that's been the thread through Job's words throughout the last 34 chapters.

Job has been questioning God.

But in Job 38 the tables are turned, as God speaks to Job.

God's answer to Job is a series of questions that extend to the end of chapter 39.

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" (Job 38:4 NIV)

"Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water?" (Job 38:34 NIV)

"Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane?" (Job 39:19 NIV)

And then in 40:2 he asks Job

"Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" (Job 40:2 NIV)

Look at the world! Did you make all this?

If you're not the creator of this vast world, you can't presume to know how it all fits together and operates.

When we suffer like Job, we long like him to understand where this fits into a world under the control of a good God.

We might not realise it, but what we're trying to do is put ourselves in God's place so we can make sure what he's doing is acceptable.

Chapters 39-40 help us put ourselves in perspective. We can't do the "if I were God" thing, because we're not God.

Only God is God. Only God has his full perspective on the world that he made and rules.

In 40:3 Job realises that he can't expect to look over God's shoulder and give his approval to how God does things. He's totally out of his depth. And so are we.

So Job says:

“I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer— twice, but I will say no more.” (Job 40:4–5 NIV)

He’s realised that he can leave his questions about his suffering in the hands of the Almighty creator and sustainer of the universe.

That’s faith.

When I had surgery earlier this year I didn’t ask the surgeon to put all the details of what he was going to do in a report so I could audit it. I’m not a surgeon.

We are not God. But the fact that God has created this world in all its magnificence and detail gives us all the evidence we need to leave our questions at his feet, and to trust that he knows what he’s doing.

God and Evil

But is that all we get? Sit back and be quiet! God’s got it all under control...

Even though there’s so much we don’t understand, God doesn’t hide from us the things that he wants us to know and understand.

There is an answer for Job and for us to take comfort in.

Come to 42:7 as God continues to speak to Job.

In an episode of Mr Bean, Mr Bean supercharges a boring 3D ride where the chairs go up and down and backwards and forwards, and before the ride starts he says to the kid next to him “brace yourself!” – and then people start flying out of their seats as the ride goes berserk.

In 42:7 God says to Job “brace yourself”... hang on while I really ask you some solid questions.

Now when we read the Bible, we have to pay attention to the context...

Firstly most of Job is poetry except the beginning and the very end. This gives us the literary context. We’re reading poetry.

And poetry uses imagery.

In 38:8-11 God says of the sea:

“Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt’?” (Job 38:8–11 NIV)

The Israelites used the imagery of the sea in their stories and literature to represent the domain of evil, chaos and disorder.

So, when we read in Revelation 21:1 that there’s no longer any sea in the new heavens and new earth, it’s not telling us that the ocean’s a bad thing... it’s telling us that the domain of evil is no longer there.

But in Job 38, it says that God has set limits on the extent of the domain of evil. This is where your dominion ends!

God has set limits on the extent of evil in this world.

Now that literary context helps us understand what the two fearsome sounding monsters are in 40:15 and 41:1 are.

If you look in your footnotes in your Bible you’ll see there are some suggestions that the behemoth in 40:15 is possibly a hippo or an elephant, and that leviathan is possibly a crocodile.

And from the descriptions you could make those conclusions fit.

But we also need to look at these in the context of the book of Job. I won’t talk about the behemoth, but the leviathan we already came across in Job 3:8, where Job’s cursing the day he was born.

Leviathan there is a mythical sea monster who can be summoned to destroy the creative work of God – in that case the day that Job was born.

It’s not likely Job was calling for a crocodile to eat the day he was born.

Finally we need to look to the context of the rest of the Bible and we see this in Isaiah 27:1.

“In that day, the LORD will punish with his sword, his fierce, great and powerful sword, Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent; he will slay the monster of the sea.” (Isaiah 27:1 NIV)

This monster that lives in the domain of evil (the sea) is the serpent who is the arch enemy of God.

This is Satan.

And that makes sense of God’s questions to Job in 41:1, and begins to answer the question about evil and suffering.

In 41:1 God asks Job:

“Can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope? Can you put a cord through his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook? Will he keep begging you for mercy?” (Job 41:1–3 NIV)

Can Job tame and restrain the monster that is behind all the evil and suffering in the world?

Of course not!

In v10 God says:

“No one is fierce enough to rouse him.

And then he asks”

Who then is able to stand against me?” (Job 41:10 NIV)

And in v11

“Everything under heaven belongs to me.” (Job 41:11 NIV)

This is the monster who’s been savaging Job throughout the story.

Job can’t defeat him or tame him. Job can’t take on the problem of evil.

But God can!

Satan is a creature. He’s not God’s opposite number on the bad guys’ team.

He’s not equal with God in any way. God sets limits on him and on his domain of evil and he cannot go one millimetre further.

The man who has our street on his route for parcel deliveries hates delivering to our place.

When he arrives he rings the doorbell and runs back to jump in his van because he knows our dogs come running up the hall barking at him as soon as they hear the doorbell.

His greatest fear is that they'll fly through the door and rip him to pieces!

Our fear (and Job's) is that evil is off the leash... that it's unrestrained... and that it will go on forever.

But God's answer in these questions is that it's not.

The suffering that can be inflicted by God's arch enemy on those who belong to God is restrained and finite.

It will not destroy us. And it won't last forever.

In 42:2, Job understands this when he says:

"I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted."
(Job 42:2 NIV)

It doesn't give us a neat explanation of evil and suffering.

But what God shows Job – and us – here is much more comforting.

And that is that he is the God who is without rival in this world.

And so Job – still suffering – recognises the God he belongs to. And in v5-6 says

"My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5–6 NIV)

He bows before the God who has the evil ruler of this world on a leash.

Jesus uses another image to teach us the same thing

"In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house." (Mark 3:27 NIV)

The strong man is Satan. We are his possessions because of our sin until a stronger man comes and steals us out of his house. Jesus is that stronger man.

He is the God who has restrained Satan's power and influence over those he has rescued. And it cost God Jesus' life to achieve it.

The End of Suffering

So, what comfort does this book give us as Christians who suffer through this life?

Firstly, that this is the normal Christian life.

We'll suffer the attacks of Satan because we're believers.

The more we just live by faith in God's grace to us in Christ, the more he'll try to undermine that faith, and the more we can expect to suffer.

I've seen it happen to friends who are living whole-heartedly for Jesus. I've seen it happen in churches where the gospel is bearing fruit and people are coming to Christ and growing in Christ.

Satan has little interest in causing suffering for people who are no threat to him.

But if we're following Jesus we're resting in the assurance that he has defeated Satan, evil and suffering through his death on the cross. And he'll do everything within his limited power to undermine that assurance.

So expect to suffer as a believer. This is the normal Christian life for now.

If someone tries to tell you that the normal Christian life should be health, wealth and happiness now, they've fallen for Satan's lie.

But secondly, remember that our suffering is limited and finite.

Jesus suffered and died, but he was raised again to new life where all the suffering of this life is over and done with.

And we who trust in his powerful victory over evil will be raised with him to share in that new life.

We begin to experience that new life from the moment we put our faith in Christ... as we see God as Job came to see God.

God's no longer 'the big man upstairs' or the god of fate that Job's friends thought he was. He's the God who loves us and who will not allow his enemy to go 1mm beyond what he allows.

We know this God. He is Jesus, our gracious saviour and loving Lord.

Yet we'll continue to suffer until he returns.

And that will call for perseverance – perseverance in warfare and perseverance in waiting.

Satan declared war on Job. He was a battleground. So was Jesus.

Satan attacked him throughout his life – from Herod's attempts on his life as a baby to the temptation in the desert to the cross.

Satan lost the battle for Job, and he will lose the battle for us because he lost the war at the cross.

But the mopping up operation goes on until he's finally overthrown.

Be prepared for the battle every day when you get out of bed, by remembering who's you are, and trusting in his victory. Persevere in faith through the warfare.

And finally, persevere in prayer-filled, patient waiting.

Job longed for God to put things right. That's why God declares in 42:7 that Job is the only one who has spoken rightly of him. His friends believe there's a 'god-system' that must be followed.

But Job laments the world of suffering and he cries out to the personal God he knows to put it right.

The Bible ends with the cry of God's people "Come Lord Jesus, come!"

So we can pray with confidence in those very words, as we lament the suffering we and others experience, knowing that the answer is the return of Jesus.

Our normal Christian life will be one of patient, unresolved waiting for God, until Jesus comes.

Come, Lord Jesus, come!