

Job's Questions

Job 3:1-26

Preached at 8.15 and C@10 on 19th July 2015

Intro

Before we start, I just want to clarify something I said, or rather asked, last week when we looked at the beginning of Job.

I left a question hanging in a way that someone graciously pointed out to me was unhelpful.

When I asked whether Job will prove to be a true believer, I followed that by asking “will you... will I?”

The last thing I wanted to suggest was that you can't be certain that God will sustain you as a believer through the things he allows you to suffer.

The way I put that question to you could be misconstrued to mean that we can't be certain that God isn't trying to push us beyond our limit for some reason.

So, I want to correct any misunderstanding I might have given you, and make it very clear that God doesn't play games with us when he allows suffering into our lives.

If we continue walking closely with Christ we might go through utter devastation and still be seen to be a real believer, with a genuine hope of a better future.

But when we're suffering, that future can seem like it's never going to come.

That's where Job is at this point in the story. There's no future. There's only an unbearable present, and a past that brought him to it.

Lonely Suffering

At the end of chapter 2 Job has gone outside the city to the place where the carcasses of animals and the bodies of criminals were burned.

Jesus referred to this place to describe hell in Mark 9:44 as the place of eternal suffering, where the fire literally never goes out.

Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar come and sit with Job in the ash heap as they try to sympathise with him and comfort him.

But for seven days all they can do is sit and weep with Job.

To Job, it's as if they aren't even there... he is terribly alone.

And that feeling of loneliness is part of suffering... because no one can actually share what we're feeling.

Sometimes we'll be tempted to say to someone who's suffering "I know how you must be feeling..."

But suffering is such an intense, personal experience that no one can really share the experience with us.

The American slaves in the 1800s sang a spiritual that went:

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen

Nobody knows my sorrow

Or even a couple who lose a child will suffer that loss differently – the wife as only a mother can and the husband as only a father can.

Suffering is a lonely experience. It isolates us from others.

Hopeless Suffering

Secondly, suffering isolates us from hope.

In the beginning of chapter 3 Job breaks the unbearable silence.

In vv3-10 he cries out that he wishes the day he came into the world and the night he was conceived never happened.

The normal thing is to celebrate the day that we were born when the anniversary rolls around each year.

But in vv3-5 Job curses that day in a way that's like a reversal of creation.

In the beginning, Genesis 1:2 says, there was darkness over the surface of the deep and God said, "let there be light".

Job wants to reverse that and say, "let there be darkness."

And in vv6-9 he wants the same thing to happen to the night he was conceived.

He wishes it to be a dark night – with darkness like the plague of darkness that God inflicted on Egypt – thick, dense, frightening darkness.

And he wants that darkness to continue forever – that that night will never see the light of dawn.

And that's because that night of his conception led to the day when he was born into the world to face what he's now suffering.

If the night of his conception and the day of his birth could be destroyed, then he wouldn't have suffered like this, and he wishes they never happened.

But he knows that what's happened can't be reversed.

So he goes on in vv11-19 to question why (if he had to be born) why he had to grow up to face this suffering.

In vv13-16 he feels like he'd be better off dead – thinking that would bring him some peace, in a place where people like the Sabeans and the Chaldeans can't hurt him anymore.

Later in 17:13-14 Job shows he knows that death is no place of peace but rather the place of corruption, but at this moment, that's how he feels.

He's obsessed with death being the only way out of suffering, because there's nothing before him worth living for.

It's awful.

From where Job stands now, it all seems hopeless. He has nothing to look forward to. He feels it would have been better if he never came into existence.

He can only think about reversing the past, saying "if only..."

Job's in despair. He's literally desperate.

Hope looks forward – but there's no better future he can see to look forward to.

Despair can only look back and long for the past to be rewritten, or even erased.

That's how we can feel when we suffer.

Even as Christians who know that we have the promise of a better future, that future can seem utterly blank when we're suffering.

Last week I mentioned a young lady at our son's church who lost her husband tragically a week before their first baby was born.

She went into labour on the morning of the funeral and wasn't even able to be there.

She's a Christian and so was her husband. Through Jesus' death and resurrection she knows she'll see him again.

But at this moment I'm sure her thoughts and prayers are full of asking why has this happened?

They had hope full of the expectancy of becoming parents. Now that future hope is a blank wall. In her grief she doesn't know what the future holds for herself and her child.

All she wants is the past to be different. "If only" this hadn't happened.

Suffering brings desperation and such a sense of loneliness.

And it can even seem like God isn't there or isn't listening.

God-forsaken Suffering

C.S Lewis wrote about his grief at the loss of his wife in his book *A Grief Observed*. He says:

When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing God... if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms.

But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once.

In his suffering, Job hears nothing from God.

But he still knows that God is there, and that God is the one he needs to deal with.

In v23 he says:

“Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?” (Job 3:23 NIV)

Even though he feels hedged in – he can't go back and there's no way forward – he knows that it's God who's imprisoned him in this miserable life that he can't see a way out of.

But he knows the answer isn't to walk away from the door that seems to have been slammed in his face.

I mentioned another Christian last week who's feeling that's what she's on the brink of doing... interpreting God's silence and his seeming unwillingness to fix her situation as either he's not listening anymore, or just doesn't care.

Job is leading us here to the right approach.

That is to keep banging on the door and asking our questions.

When our suffering makes us feel that God has forsaken or abandoned us, he's still the one we need to deal with.

Godly suffering

Friends, the way we respond to even the darkest suffering is a matter of wisdom.

Job is one of the wisdom books of the Bible. The wisdom books teach us about right living in God's world.

And we saw last week that Job is presented as a wise man, who fears the Lord and shuns evil.

And we know he's suffering innocently. We know from the first chapter there's nothing he's done or failed to do to make him deserving of what's happening to him.

But he knows that walking away from God isn't the answer.

Wisdom demands that he needs to deal with God if he's ever going to know the way through his suffering.

But Job is more than just an example for us to follow when we suffer.

He's a fore-runner of Jesus Christ.

Job was blameless in maintaining his relationship with God through sacrifices for his sins and his family's.

Jesus was completely without sin.

Job felt isolated and totally alone in his suffering, as we often do.

Jesus was completely alone in his suffering. No one has experienced the depth of lonely suffering that he has.

As he prayed in tears in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he died, his three friends fell asleep.

Where Job knew the darkness of his suffering as we do, Jesus was enveloped in actual darkness as he hung on the cross.

At the sixth hour darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour. (Mark 15:33 NIV)

Where Job felt abandoned or forsaken by God, Jesus actually was.

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”(Mark 15:34 NIV)

We sing about these things in one of our songs *Behold The Lamb of God*:

He turned not his face from our pain and destruction He drank the bitter cup to the end He who knew no sin took the punishment for us <i>Deserted by God, man and friend</i>
--

Jesus suffered and died alone.

And so Jesus alone is the one we can come to when we suffer.

Jesus has been to the deepest depth of our suffering, and then some.

That means that however we might be feeling, none of us need ever feel completely alone when we suffer.

...

It's not just the comfort of knowing there's someone who truly understands our suffering.

When we come to Jesus in our suffering, we come to him as the God we need to cry out to when we suffer.

We can cry honest tears and questions for as long as we need to – even if it's for the rest of our lives here.

We can trust him as the one who has the answer to our questions.

He is the answer.

His lonely suffering and death brings believers into a relationship with himself and his Father – and ours.

So we are never alone – Christ is with us.

The darkness that came over the land as he hung on the cross means the darkness we feel when we suffer will not have the final say.

And his cry of desperation from the cross wasn't in vain.

His suffering wasn't the end of the story.

On the third day Jesus was raised from the darkness of death to the light of new life.

So, when we suffer as believers, we don't suffer without hope.

We don't need to turn back to the past, wishing it had never happened.

We can look through the tears in our eyes towards a guaranteed better future... because we will be raised like Jesus from the darkest despair of life in this world, to the light of life where suffering is no longer even a memory.