

## **INTRODUCTION**

No matter who you are, or where you live, suffering is a reality of life that is undeniable. We spend our lives hoping that we will be able to avoid the clutches of suffering but aware that this journey of life guarantees no-one immunity.

As I begin this series I am aware that I have suffered remarkably little in my life. I have however been in the unique position, as a pastor, to have observed and empathised with the suffering of many others. My comments about suffering are based on two major sources therefore, theological reflection on the Scriptures and my own observations of suffering – both of which I want to offer to God so that He may transform the paucity of my own efforts with the riches of His grace by the Holy Spirit.

By way of introduction allow me to make two general comments about suffering.

### **1. As Christians we must take the reality of suffering seriously.**

In his book *The Cross of Christ* **John Stott** states,

*The fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian Faith and has been in every generation. It's distribution and degree appear to be entirely random and therefore, unfair. Sensitive spirits ask if it can possibly be reconciled with God's justice and love." (1998:311)*

Those of you who read the letters pages of the local newspapers after the Tsunami on Dec 26 2004 will have seen efforts by

Christians and non-Christians alike to explain the event in theological terms – usually to prove the existence and involvement of God or not. For the most part the debate was depressingly simplistic which probably did more harm than good to the gospel. So vexing is the problem of suffering that some Christian leaders have lost the faith over the issue. A sad example of this was Charles Templeton, a noted evangelist who co-founded Youth for Christ International with Billy Graham, and near the end of his life in 1996 published a book *Farewell to God*.

*"A loving God' could not possibly be the author of the horrors we have been describing - horrors that continue every day, have continued since time began, and will continue as long as life exists. It is an inconceivable tale of suffering and death, and because the tale is fact - is, in truth, the history of the world - it is obvious that there cannot be a loving God."*

**Charles Templeton 1915 -2001** (Alzheimer's disease)

Suffering, both personal and universal, is a serious issue. It is not surprising that when most Christians and non-Christians contemplate the great tragedies of the world such as the Holocaust, war, famine and natural disasters that they are left with more questions than answers. The suffering we experience and the distress we sense in others indicate that suffering does not discriminate on the basis of race, social status, religion, or even

morality. It can seem cruel, random, purposeless, grotesque, and wildly out of control.

*Studdert Kennedy*, chaplain to the men in the trenches in the First World War, said that if a person was undisturbed by the problem of pain, they were suffering either from a hardening of the heart, or a softening of the brain.

## **2. The Bible does not give one simple answer to the problem of suffering.**

One of the larger books of the Bible, the book of Job, is given solely to this question. The books of Jeremiah and Habakkuk have much to say about it. About one third of the Psalms, the prayers of the Old Testament, are cries that arise out of doubt, disappointment, or the pain of suffering.

The complexity of suffering is acknowledged by the writers of the Bible. If you have read the book of Job, you will know that while the main subject is the suffering of Job, the reader is left perplexed and no fully-satisfying explanation is given for the purpose of innocent suffering. This is not to say that the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) does not provide valuable insight into suffering and its meaning. But if you are looking for that proof text to quote next time someone asks you, “How can there be a loving God when there is so much suffering in the World?” take it from me you are not going to find it.

## **SUFFERING AND THE HEBRAIC APPROACH TO LIFE**

In the midst of all the letters defending or decrying God for the Tsunami there was one article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks that stood head and shoulders above the rest. This Rabbi with his Hebraic approach to life focused not on the desire to understand and explain (neither of which make a difference to the situation) but rather on our response to it.

**Jonathan Sacks** describes this approach as follows;

*Jews read the Bible differently. One of its striking features is that the most challenging questions about fate come not from unbelievers but from the heroes of faith.*

*Abraham asked: "Shall not the judge of all the Earth do justice?"*

*Moses asked: "Why have you done evil to this people?"*

*The book of Job is dedicated to this question, and it is not Job's comforters, who blamed his misfortunes on his sins, who were vindicated by heaven, but Job, who consistently challenged God.*

*In Judaism, faith lies in the question, not the answer.*

The Hebraic approach focuses on the covenant relationship between God and His people. It is this relationship that makes dialogue about life possible. Hence Jonathan Sack's comment that in Judaism, faith lies in the question, not the answer.

As Western Christians, inheritors of a particular way of thinking based on **observation** and **logic** which demands **resolution** and **closure**, we are now being addressed by the Holy Spirit through a Jewish sage for whom observation is an ongoing process, logic is at best an inadequate tool to knowing, and resolution and closure are stifling to the human-divine relationship.

The Jewishness of the text contrasted with a Western Christian approach.

The propensity for openness in the text shows itself in a variety of ways:

1. Many texts, in and of themselves, are enigmatic, whether by design or not – a great deal of work is left to the hearer to complete the text.
2. This discourse refuses to systematise or generalise.
3. It characteristically presents one text at a time, and is not at all vexed about juxtaposing texts that explicitly contradict one another so that truths are held in a creative tension.
4. At a cognitive or ideational level, the text, taken as a whole, seems to have no sustained interest in sorting matters out or bring to resolution many of the seeming contradictions that mark both Israel's faith and Yahweh's character.

The matter becomes clearer when contrasted with the methods of classical Western theological discourse, which wants to overcome all ambiguity and give closure in the interest of certitude

This may be due to the fact that Western Christianity has been committed since early on, to **Aristotelian logic** that could not countenance the existence of opposites at the same time.

The endless openness of Christianity to **engagement with culture**, an openness which Judaism was not obligated to share, has required Christianity to give closure on many matters as a means of ensuring survival and identity as a particular community.

As Dwight Pryor reminded us – theology must be done with two hands! On the one hand... and on the other hand..... This allows us to hold things in tension.

## **THE BOOK OF JOB**

Job is the first and longest of five books commonly referred to as "The Books Of Poetry". These include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Called such because they are written in poetic style in contrast to the narrative style of most other books, they are also often referred to as "Wisdom Literature" (especially Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes)

## **THE STORY OF JOB**

Job was righteous, prosperous and had a large family.

Unbeknown to Job a conversation takes place in heaven between God and Satan. HaShem says to the Satan (Job 1:8), "Have you seen my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, ..., who fears G-d and shuns evil." Satan protests that the righteousness of Job is due entirely to his happy and successful life, and that if his riches, family and health are withdrawn, he would

surely abandon his faith.

The Lord permits the Satan to reduce Job to a mourning shell of his former self, but not to take his life. Of this opening scene it must be said that it is reminder to the reader that there is an aspect to human experience that is heavenly and unseen which makes our earthly view of suffering limited and incomplete.

Job begins to experience all kinds of loss.

*He curses* the day he was born (Job 3:1), "Let the day perish wherein I was born,..." but not his Maker.

*He complains* (Job 16:12-14,17), " I was at ease and He broke me apart, He took me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; ..." "His archers surround me, ...;" "He breaks me again and again, He runs upon me like a giant." "Although there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure."

And yet we hear (Job 19:25-27), "But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And that He will witness at the last upon the dust;" "And when after my skin is destroyed, then from my underlying flesh shall I see God;" "And my eyes shall behold, and not another's..."

Job's three friends—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite (all from east of the Jordan River) — travel to be with Job and express their sympathy by remaining silent and by clothing themselves in sackcloth and sitting in ashes. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar supposed that Job was ill because of his evil deeds. But Job was innocent.

The three friends give different explanations for Job's suffering – each representing a different approach to understanding suffering.

**Eliphaz** sees secret meanings in things. He talks about his own **experiences** (4:12-27).

**Bildad** always thinks about the past (**8:8-10**). **Tradition** is the most important thing to him.

**Zophar** thinks that he has full **authority**. He seems to say, 'I am right; so you must be wrong.' He is probably the least attractive of the three friends. He has his own beliefs. He closes his mind to anything else. So his words to Job are cruel. 'Job, listen to me', he says. 'God is not punishing you as much as he should' (**Job 11:6**).

Later in the book **a fourth comforter Elihu** makes his contribution to the discussion. The speeches of Elihu represent a further attempt to find justification for Job's affliction. Elihu admits that the arguments of the three friends have been adequately refuted by Job, but he believes he can present other ones that will show how Job has been in the wrong. He suggests that Job's suffering may be a warning so that he won't sin, and then he repeats the same arguments that the three friends made.

Beginning in **Job 38**, we find the Lord's response to his loyal servant, who had not deserted him, where the Lord tells him that He is the Creator and Supreme Judge of the World, to Whom many options, beyond the understanding of mortal man, are available, to redress any injustice. Then Job says to the Lord (**Job 42:2,5-6**), *"I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can*

*be thwarted.* <sup>5</sup> *“I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You;*

<sup>6</sup> *Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes.”*

At the end (**Job 42:12-13, 16-17**), we find, <sup>12</sup>*The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning;* <sup>13</sup>*He had seven sons and three daughters* <sup>16</sup>*After this, Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons and his grandsons, four generations.* <sup>17</sup>*And Job died, an old man and full of days.*

## **Conclusion**

As I researched this sermon series I discovered a fascinating fact. All the Christian commentaries describe the focus of the book of Job as “WHY innocent people suffer.” The Jewish commentaries believe that the Book focuses on a different question, namely, HOW an innocent person should bear suffering. The difference of WHY and HOW is at the root of our problem with understanding suffering and by using the different approaches of Job’s friends and comforters I will explore the Biblical approach to suffering so that we have a Christian response to cope with our own suffering and the suffering of others.