

INTRODUCTION

In the first article in this series I looked at the difficulty many of us have in incorporating suffering, both personal and universal, into our faith. I made two general comments about suffering. First, that suffering is an issue we Christians must take seriously and second, that the Bible does not give one simple answer to the problem of suffering.

I then contrasted the Hebraic view of life with its focus on the covenant relationship between God and His people. I said that it is this relationship that makes dialogue about life possible. Hence Rabbi Jonathan Sack's comment that in Judaism, faith lies in the question, not the answer.

I pointed out that as Western Christians we are inheritors of a particular way of thinking based on observation and logic which demands resolution and closure. However in the Bible and especially the book of Job we are 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.

I then summarized the story of Job and noted that the focus of the book of Job was not so much WHY the innocent suffer (as most Christian commentators would have it) but HOW the innocent should bear suffering.

JOB'S FRIENDS (COMFORTERS)

As Job plumbs the depths of suffering he is not alone. As is usually the case, there is no shortage of advisers and commentators whose conflicting messages that only add to Job's plight. In **Job 2:9** his own wife, broken by the loss of her children responds in hopelessness "Curse God, and die!" she pleads with Job, "just make the suffering stop. There's nothing worse that can happen to you. Please, just end it."

Of this kind of response the existentialist Albert Camus writes,

"In the face of the world's manifest evil there are only two possible responses: that of faith and that of revolt -- two views a fine line apart, and yet representing a great divorce."

Job 2:9 ⁹Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!" ¹⁰But he said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish (pagan) women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?"

In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

We live in a society where everyone has an opinion and most feel duty-bound to share their opinions. Those who are slaves of certainty and closure (as I mentioned last week) feel duty-bound to pronounce on every significant event.

"God took your child."

"His time on earth was complete"

"It was God's will."

"You have other children – pull yourself together and look after them."

Comments such as these reveal more about the speaker's discomfort with the situation than insight. Often we say things to people who are suffering because we find their suffering rocks our world.

1) Eliphaz – The Gentle but Detached Mystic

Eliphaz is the first to speak. He is the gentle and confident mystic. Claiming to speak absolute truth, he propounds the traditional theory of retribution - God punishes the sinner and rewards the righteous. In other words, "Innocent people do not suffer". His conclusion in **Job 4:7**, allows for no exceptions, including Job;

"Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished?

Where were the upright ever destroyed?" (New International Version)

His speeches to Job are marked by a simplistic theological traditionalism and a tone of moral superiority. He asserts that suffering is *inevitable* because of human

weakness and proclivity to evil.

"Human beings are born to trouble/ just as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7)

Throughout his speeches, at least till his final speech in chapter 22, he shows a broader spirit than the other comforters, at least accepting Job as a pious man gone astray. Though failing in compassion, he alone of the three showed some consideration and respect for Job's plight.

We might paraphrase Eliphaz's words to Job in **4:7** as;

'If you repent. Job, then all this will go away and God's blessing will return'.

But Job searches his own heart and realizes that there is no guilt within him, so he refuses to repent and responds in **6:10**: 'I would still have this consolation - my joy in unrelenting pain - that I had not denied the words of the Holy One'.

We have all met Christians like Eliphaz – who refuse to look at the evidence and instead replace it with some spiritual truism. An example may be the person who goes for prayer for physical healing. After the prayer is over the person still has the symptoms of the illness. The person is told to deny the symptoms because the Bible says "By His stripes we are healed" - reality for this person is based on a particular spiritual idea and not on real experience of the symptoms of illness.

Another form that this view of suffering may take is the statement that all illness is a result of the Fall and so the cause of illness must be sin.

What is wrong with this concept of suffering? Rabbi Harold Kushner, the father of a terminally ill child and a Reformed rabbi wrote in his book *"When bad things happen to good people"*;

"It is tempting at one level to believe that bad things happen to people (especially other people) because God is a righteous judge who gives them exactly what they deserve. By believing that, we keep the world orderly and understandable. We give people the best possible reason for being good and for avoiding sin. And by believing that, we can maintain an image of God as all-loving, all-powerful and totally in control....

... The idea that God gives people what they deserve, that our misdeeds cause our misfortune, is a neat and attractive solution to the problem of evil at several levels, but it has a number of serious limitations.....it teaches people to blame themselves. It creates guilt even where there is no basis for guilt. It makes people hate God, even as it makes them hate themselves. And most disturbing of all, it does not even fit the facts.

Job's reply reflects this "Miserable comforters are you all!" (**16.2**). Comforters have become accusers (**16.8**)

Eliphaz is not all bad. He has some good things to say even if his understanding of the *WHY* of suffering is inadequate.

2) Bildad – The firm Traditionalist who interprets reality

Bildad is next to speak and echoes Eliphaz, saying: sin and suffering, righteousness and prosperity, are *cause and effect*. Because of his great suffering, Job must be guilty before God, and the only hope for his restoration is to repent and beg for God's forgiveness and mercy. Speaking arrogantly, as if he knows the mind of God, he adds to Job's suffering by deciding that Job's children also must have been guilty of sin or God would not have sent them to their death.—Job 1:19

Bildad differs from Eliphaz in that he is more grounded in reality – but because of his unbending allegiance to the traditional view of "why" he ascribes the suffering he sees to some evil in Job.

God rewards the Good. **Bildad** asserts, He does not pervert justice; we are the ones who are ignorant of the real condition of things. For Bildad there is an immutable law that God

will not reject the upright and that we are punished for forgetting God. Job must therefore be evil and Godless. Bildad considers Job's struggle over the justice of God as blasphemy and uses his erudition, his knowledge of ancient wisdom tradition, to prove to Job that his family got what they deserved and warns him about a similar doom. For Bildad the fact that Job questions God's actions is evidence enough of Job's wickedness and perversion. In chapter 8:2 Bildad says, 'How long will you say such things? Your words are a blustering wind.' Job replies (9:15): 'Though I were innocent, I could not answer him; I could only plead with my Judge for mercy'. Job in effect says 'I know none of us stands a chance apart from God's mercy.' He anticipates the crucial question of the book of Romans: "How can a person be made righteous before God?" Paul answers by telling us that it is only God who can make us right before himself by imputing his own righteousness in Christ.

Application

So what do we learn from these two comforters?

They are right about the fact that God is just. They are also right about the state of human beings that we are not righteous before God and that, in some way, the suffering in this world is related to the genesis of that problem.

But one has to say that in our experience suffering tends to be indiscriminate and not related to one's goodness or otherwise.

Five thousand years ago the Psalmist (**73:3-5**) noted this contradiction;

3 *For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

4 *They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.*

5 *They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.*

Their greatest mistake was that they focused on the WHY of Jobs suffering at the expense of the HOW. At that point it was far more important to help Job to handle the suffering that he was experiencing. To find ways of HOW to cope than to formulate some abstract theological debate which culminated in only adding to his suffering with accusations of guilt.

John R. W. Stott, who acknowledged that suffering is "the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith," has reached his own conclusion about the relationship between God and suffering:

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross.... In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?

I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead 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 the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolizes divine suffering.

As P.T. Forsyth has said,

'The cross of Yeshua... is God's only self-justification in such a world' as ours.