

Job's innocence

Just over a year ago five year old Thusha Kamaleswaran was dancing for her own entertainment in her local corner shop in Brixton, when a group of armed teenagers arrived looking for another gang. They opened fire randomly and Thusha was left paralysed. Television news programmes showed CCTV of her dancing what would be her last dance in the aisle of the shop. She will never dance again.

If those gang members had taken their guns to a piece of waste ground and injured and killed each other it would still have been a tragedy. There would still have been wider questions to ask about their parenting, and schooling and the society they grew up in which led to such catastrophic violence. But their suffering wouldn't have been entirely innocent. Those young men made choices - albeit with some factors beyond their control – but Thusha Kamaleswaran - she was entirely innocent.

It is innocent suffering which touches our hearts deeply. And when we turn to God it is the question of why he allows specifically innocent suffering which is on our minds. And it is that question which the book of Job sets out to address.

Last week we saw, by way of introduction, that Job is specifically identified as entirely innocent.

Job 1:1

We are allowed a glimpse into the courtroom of heaven to see why he then endures terrible suffering – the loss of his wealth, his children and his health – and it is specifically not at all to do with any sin. Indeed paradoxically it is in part prompted by his virtuousness.

And from then on in the book of Job the question which Job asks and which his so called friends try to answer is the question which that little paralysed girl raises in our minds – why do the innocent suffer?

The first couple of chapters begin to give us some sort of answer to that question – we looked at those last week. And the last few chapters will take us further. But actually for the next three weeks are not going to try to answer that question. Instead we are going to try to see from Job how we should behave when suffering comes. In two weeks' time we will look at the behaviour of Job's friends, next week we will consider how Job addresses God, but this week we will see Job examining himself.

One thing that all parties are agreed on in Job, and which almost everyone in our world agrees about is that if our suffering is the result of our sinful choices then we have no reason to complain.

As Job puts

Job 31:2-4

But that raises a big question in my mind at least, as I examine myself. I fear that a rather large proportion of my suffering is because I do wrong. I suffer from various stress related conditions. But most of the stress I suffer arises from my bad choices about work patterns, and my lack of faith in God.

When Judy and I are arguing, or a bit fed up with each other it is my sin which so often has caused it. After nearly sixteen years pastoring Magdalen Road I look at our weaknesses as a church and again and again I realise that I am looking at my failures writ large.

There is a lot of innocent suffering in this world and that is the main thing that this book of Job addresses. But there is a lot of guilty suffering too.

The apostle Peter in 1 Peter 4:15 – after establishing that all Christians will suffer, says this.

If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.

In other words make sure you are an innocent sufferer.

That is what I want to say to you today. There are people in this world who, when some trouble comes, always assume that they are guilty. They must have done something wrong. God must be punishing them for some sin or other. The book of Job says “No! It doesn’t work like that.” That is the whole point of Job’s story.

But there are also too many who always assume they are innocent.

“My marital problems are all my partner’s fault. I have been a perfect spouse.”

“My difficulties at work are due to the failures of others. I am a model employee.”

“My health problems are nothing to do with my alcohol abuse, or my poor choice of diet, or my failure to exercise. God has unfairly visited this problem on me.”

Now don’t get me wrong, there are plenty of trials that will come our way that are not due to our sins. Job is the proof of that. But the first thing we do when trouble comes is not to assume our innocence but to ask what responsibility we might have for it.

Job rightly proclaims his innocence. But he does that because he has examined himself carefully before God. We are going to focus mainly on Job 31 because this brings Job’s declaration of his innocence to its great conclusion. And I want us to use it as an opportunity for our own self examination before God.

➤ ***Innocence is about avoiding sin***

The first thing that is obvious in this chapter is his avoidance of sin.

He avoids sexual sin.

 **Job 31:1**

 **Job 31:9-11**

Strong words. He disciplines his eyes – he will not look at pornography, or salacious films, or anything else which arouses lust. And he disciplines his behaviour – he will not “lurk at his neighbour’s door” – he will not flirt, he will not cross the room to talk to that woman who caught his eye, he will not send flirty texts.

If my marriage is broken because of my unfaithfulness, he says, then I do not have anything to complain about.

By the way men, every survey suggests that a frightening proportion of men these days – Christian men included – look at internet pornography. You are not alone but it is not trivial. It ruins marriages.

Some of you know that for some years now I have subscribed to an internet service called Covenant Eyes, for my own protection against such temptation. It takes its name from Job 31:1. I want to urge you to do that yourself. Don’t conclude you can’t afford it. For many of us we can’t afford not to have it. In my pastoral experience I am shocked by how many times internet pornography is a significant element of a person’s problems.

But Job also avoids lies

 **Job 31:5**

He avoids sin in the workplace.

 **Job 31:13**

How we treat those under us. And also of course how we treat our boss, our customers or clients, the authorities, everyone at work, is important.

He avoids breaking the law

 **Job 31:21**

Notice that his position potentially enabled him to manipulate the law of the land. Job however believes in the rule of law, and his duty to obey it, even if the judge is his mate.

He also avoids the more directly spiritual sin of idolatry.

 **Job 31:24-28**

Notice he talks about putting his trust in gold, and then moves on to talk about being enticed by the sun or the moon. In other words what does he think makes him safe? Is it gold? Then gold is his god. Is it the sun or the moon? Popular idolatry of his day worshipped the sun and moon. Will the gods of sun and moon keep him safe if he gives them a kiss of homage?

For us it is more likely to be gold than other false gods. But Jesus was quite clear that trusting in Money is false worship.

You cannot worship both God and Money

He said

But innocence in Job's eyes is about more than avoiding sin, it is also about showing mercy.

➤ *Innocence is showing mercy*

Earlier on in this last great speech of Job he begins to mention it.

 **Job 29:12-17**

Notice that he calls his care for the vulnerable "righteousness and justice" in verse 14. Tim Keller has described it as "generous justice". Justice is not just about avoiding sin, it is also about showing mercy.

To the poor.

V12 – I rescued the poor

To orphans

V12 - and the fatherless who had none to assist them

There is a big push amongst Christians in this country at the moment to consider fostering or adopting children. The government has said that they will make it easier and there are thousands of children who need loving homes. It is being led by Krish Kandiah who will be with us in the evening in a few weeks. To be innocent is to care for the fatherless.

And the terminally ill

V13 – the one who was dying blessed me.

Hospices where people can die with dignity are so close to God's heart.

And widows

V13 – I made the widow's heart sing

We might add caring for single mums. Who are so hard pressed.

And caring for the sick

V15 – I was eyes to the blind, feet to the lame

How wonderful to support Anna Vines who is involved in helping children with club feet in Africa. Jon Pedley and all optometrists you can rejoice that you are involved in a godly pursuit. It is not just a job it is a calling.

And what about asylum seekers?

V16 – I took up the case of the stranger

We might add the specific needs of international students. We don't give them hospitality only because we want to share the gospel with them. They are often lonely, a little vulnerable, friendless – mercy to strangers is part of Christian righteousness.

And fighting for the victims of injustice.

 **Job 29:17**

Joining Amnesty International is a righteous activity. Going with a vulnerable person to represent them to before the authorities is a righteous activity.

Innocence is not just about avoiding sin. It is about living lives of generosity and mercy. I have met people who are scrupulous in avoiding sin and have hearts as hard as nails towards the vulnerable. They are not innocent.

But then there is another dimension of Job's innocence which is very important for us to see. Job is not sinless.

We could easily miss that. He was introduced to us as blameless, upright, fearing God and shunning evil. And his list virtues is astonishing. But his protestations of innocence are not protestations of perfection. Yes he must avoid evil. Yes he must show mercy. If they are not characteristics of his life then he has no claim to be declared innocent before God. And neither do we!

But he never claims perfection. In Job 4:17 for instance he says

'Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can even a strong man be more pure than his Maker?

Answer – No!

Indeed a vital dimension of his innocence is that he deals with his sin appropriately.

➤ *Innocence is dealing with sin appropriately*

Acknowledging and confessing his sin is an important element of his claim to be blameless.

 **Job 31:33-34**

It is shaming to confess our sins. And we are not called to confess all of them to all people. But as Christians we must publicly acknowledge that we are sinners – even if the crowd mocks us. But we cannot afford to be self-righteous. Our denial of our sins condemns. And paradoxically our acknowledgement of our sin is vital for our innocence.

If you have significant sins particularly if else knows about them, confess them to someone. Your innocence before God depends on it.

But there is another vital aspect of dealing with sin appropriately. It is sacrifice.

Back in Job 1:5 we learned how he cared for his sons

When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for his sons to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, "Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts."
This was Job's regular custom.

At the end of this book we will see Job offering sacrifices for his friends too. And since he was in the habit of acknowledging his own sins we must assume he offered sacrifices for himself too.

Why a sacrifice? Because in the economy of God all sin demands a payment – that is part of God's justice. Confessing our sins is a good thing but it does not pay for our sins.

You might protest why does a bull or a goat have to pay the ultimate price for sins? The bible's answer is that that was only a picture, put in place until the real sacrifice could be made. In the end God was going to pay for it, in the person of his son, Jesus, dying on the cross for all our sins and declaring us INNOCENT.

So let me say to you. In this life you will suffer. But don't be a guilty sufferer.

Avoid sin! Heaven only knows how much of your suffering is the result of your own sinful behaviour, but if you have lived for a while it is not likely to be a trivial amount.

Show mercy!

But more than anything deal with the sin that you do have appropriately. Confess it. And trust in the sacrificial death of Jesus who died for all your sins.

In this world now there is an awful lot of inappropriate innocent suffering. Little Thusha Kamaleswaran is sadly only one example of the dreadful chaos of this world. But one day at the end of time God will sort all this mess out. And he will make a final and perfect division. Not between the sinless and the sinful. Nor even between the relatively sinless, and the relatively sinful.

His final division will be between those who dealt with their sin appropriately and those who didn't. Between those who confessed their sin, and fled to Jesus for their forgiveness. And those who concealed their sin and sought no remedy.

The one group he will declare INNOCENT because of the death of Jesus – and welcomed into God's new creation.

And the other group? The bible doesn't dwell on the final consequences for them save to warn us that they are very terrible. It simply warns us that all those who have not sought the forgiveness of God through the sacrificial death of Jesus will, in the end, hear the verdict GUILTY.

For now everyone suffers. But don't be a guilty sufferer.