

Job's patience

Just before Christmas last year Christopher Hitchens died from throat cancer. He was one of the celebrated "new atheists." An electric writer and formidable debater, he was truly gifted. But he was deeply impressive as he approached death too. He gave several interviews about his terminal illness. He faced it laconically, and with massive objectivity. His interviewers, even the relatively neutral ones, were all clearly fascinated by his poise, his unshakable convictions, and his humanity as he approached death. It revealed a certain greatness about him.

Hitchens' last interviews came to my mind as I examined again this book of Job. Compared to Christopher Hitchens, Job seems to measure very poorly. Here is a man who is all over the place. He rails against God, is vicious towards his so called friends, he weeps, wishes himself dead. In short he is a man who has completely lost his composure.

Perhaps you might argue he has suffered more than Hitchens. Job we learned in the first couple of chapters, lost his possessions, his children, his health and his reputation. Hitchens died amongst friends admired by millions receiving the best medical care in the world. However I doubt that Christopher Hitchens felt that his slow death by cancer was a lesser ordeal.

Perhaps then Job's endless complaints are recorded for us, not as something good but as a record of his failure. The Bible faithfully records the failures of many of its heroes.

However Job's speeches are specifically commended by God at the end of the story. His friends, who were actually more superficially orthodox in their statements are criticised by God who says (Job 42:7)

you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.

If you read all the things Job says about God that is more than a little surprising!

More than that in the New Testament we read this for instance in James chapter 5

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters. ... be patient and stand firm ...
As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

This is where we get the phrase "the patience of Job" from. True James himself moves from patience, to perseverance when he starts talking about Job. But that doesn't get us very far. If we met someone complaining as endlessly and violently as Job we wouldn't immediately label them as a godly perseverer.

No! We have got to dig deeper. We have got to try to understand why the Bible considers Job's approach to suffering to be greater than Christopher Hitchens'.

The first thing we need to see is that Job has massive freedom of expression but within clear limits.

➤ *Job's freedom of expression*

It is not obvious at the beginning because he begins so stoically.

📖 **Job 1:20-21**

Here is a profound truth that strengthens him. Everyone endures the stripping away of all their worldly possessions. They were held for a brief moment as gifts from God but we only ever had them on lease. The freehold is God's.

Job begins to break when he suffers in his own body.

📖 **Job 2:7-8**

But even here he keeps the expression of his misery within limits.

📖 **Job 2:9**

The two simple solutions. Reject God and hasten your death. But he will not do it.

📖 **Job 2:10**

Only later, though, do we see Job starting to crack. And it makes painful reading.

📖 **Job 3:1-12, 26**

And so begins a torrent of heart-breaking pain which continues on and off until the end of chapter 31.

But notice how he exercises great freedom of expression *within limits*. He curses the day of his birth not God as his wife had advocated.

The experience of suffering has led many to walk away from God. It is an easy solution. The philosopher Bertrand Russell said that in the face of innocent suffering either God is good but not all powerful in which case there is no point worshipping him since he does not rule, or he is all powerful but not good in which case we are morally obliged not to worship him since he is a monster. There is an elegant simplicity to it but to Job it is the foolishness of his wife. She may be satisfied with facile solutions he is not. He will not simply curse God.

Similarly he longs for death and he says so, but he will not take his life. There are few people who do not at some point in their life think "I wish I was dead." And there are some for whom it is a dominant long term thought.

But Job will not give in to his wife's siren voice – just curse God and die. That is a sub-human act. Painful as it is we express the dignity of our humanity by the long term sometimes painful process of living for as long as God has allotted us to live.

And let me say if you are troubled by suicidal thoughts then seek help. It is not your best option, even if there are times when it feels like it might be. Talk to people who have come through that dark tunnel and you will find them consistently say that it was a madness that overtook them. Job longed for death but he did not take it into his own hands.

But apart from cursing God or choosing death Job seems pretty unrestrained in his complaints. At one point for instance he parodies scripture. Psalm 8 says

what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?
You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour.

But on Job's lips this expression of wonder is twisted into a bitter complaint.

Job 7:17-19

Remember God's conclusion is going to be "Job has spoke well of me." It is not a sin to wrestle with scripture, to question it, to test it against the real world, or even say at times that it does not fit with your experience.

Indeed it is Job's friends – the ones who are strongly criticised by God – who seem to be the more theologically orthodox ones in these interactions. They can recite the creed without even thinking – indeed that is their problem. They are plastic saints, superficial believers, wearing masks of godliness but with no depth.

For thirty years now I have been rubbing shoulders with successive generations of young people from Christian homes. And there are a proportion who speak in totally orthodox language, who appear to be admirable believers, and yet finally reveal that they are not believers at all. Some of Oxford's most active campaigners against Christianity are the offspring of church leaders who were faithful attenders at evangelical churches when they arrived.

What happened? Their story is surprisingly consistent. Life happened! And for a while they kept the lid on their nagging doubts, they applied simplistic answers to their internal struggles, until finally the tissue-paper thin veneer of faith simply collapsed and there was nothing underneath.

This is not Job's way. He will not parrot scripture like some animated doll. He wrestles with it, questions it, and he will not give up on his relentless quest to match his experience with scripture. Listen, for instance to what he says in his last speech to his friends who have consistently peddled simplistic answers to his questions.

Job 27:2-6

Do not be afraid to question God. Both Job's wife who advises him to give up, and Job's friends who peddle trite truisms are wrong!

So what is Job searching for? What is it that drives him on so relentlessly?

➤ *Job is searching for justice*

This is so obvious but we must think about it for a minute. His complaint about God is that God

Has denied me justice (Job 27:2)

Or in Job 19:7

“Though I cry, ‘Violence!’ I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice.

Christopher Hitchens, for all his passionate political campaigning, actually gave up on ultimate justice many years before his death. He embraced a view of the world in which random things happen for no reason at all and which great souls must simply accept as “the way things are.”

Half a century ago a Christian philosopher called Frederick Copleston debated with the atheist Bertrand Russell in a radio programme. He asked Russell – another great political campaigner – if the world is meaningless and random where he got his idea of justice from. Russell’s answer was that he distinguished good and evil in the same way that he distinguished colours. He happened to prefer one colour to another, but there was nothing absolutely good or bad about any of them.

This is the inevitable inconsistent world of idealistic atheists. They search for justice while believing that ultimately there is no such thing. Christopher Hitchens told his interviewers that he didn’t spend his time worrying about whether his illness was fair or not, it just was. Of course it gave him a certain calm resignation but it cast a shadow of meaninglessness over his whole life.

Job is not content with that as most human beings are not. His turbulent wrestling springs precisely from a deep instinct that if there is not at root justice in this world then life, as Shakespeare put it

Is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

And more than that he is searching for a relationship with God.

➤ *Job is searching for a relationship with God*

It is striking how little he actually mentions his specific troubles. They are not the focus of his anguish. His ultimate cry is about the absence of God.

 **Job 9:14-16**

“How then can I dispute with him? How can I find words to argue with him? Though I were innocent, I could not answer him; I could only plead with my Judge for mercy. Even if I summoned him and he responded, I do not believe he would give me a hearing.

 **Job 13:20-22**

“Only grant me these two things, God, and then I will not hide from you: Withdraw your hand far from me, and stop frightening me with your terrors. Then summon me and I will answer, or let me speak, and you reply to me.

 **Job 23:1-3, 8-9**

Then Job replied: “Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling!... “But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

C.S. Lewis put it as poignantly as anyone ever has in his book *A Grief Observed*.

Meanwhile where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy you have no sense of needing him, so happy you are tempted to feel his claims upon you as an interruption, 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 vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and the 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?

Of course the atheist faces trouble with having long ago banished all such hope; with the calm of quiet despair. But not so the believer. Job’s turbulence is a mark of his faith. Faith which is stretched almost to breaking point, but a faith which will not stop beating on the door of heaven.

And Job, and C.S. Lewis, and millions upon millions of believers who have suffered and struggled and questioned and wrestled with God, have not been disappointed. As will see in a few weeks Job finally met God and said to him.

 **Job 42:5**

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

C.S. Lewis too finally found the deep contentment of knowing Jesus – the exact representation of God’s being. Since Jesus walked the earth we have been able to see God in ways which Job could not even imagine.

In particular we have seen God the Son – God made man – wrestling alongside us. Weeping for a dead friend. Confessing to his closest friends that his soul was overwhelmed to the point of death. Praying all night with such intensity and agony that sweat fell from him like a dripping wound. Dying a cruel unjust painful death. Crying out on the cross a cry which would have been on Job’s or Lewis’ or perhaps has been on your lips

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And receiving no instant voice of comfort – only darkness and the mockery or desertion of others.

But we have seen that he rose from the dead. That he returned to live in God's presence for all eternity. That he promised that his experience would one day be ours. All wrongs will be righted, and all the longings of his people will be satisfied.

I have no taste whatsoever for the superficial peace of the atheist who will end his days resigned to the ultimate meaninglessness of his existence, or for the fragile peace of the plastic saint who parrots religious clichés until the day it all falls apart. I want to be united with the ultimate human being, God made man, Jesus Christ. Who all his days wrestled with the difficult realities of this world but finished triumphantly knowing that he would meet the God of justice and his soul would be satisfied.

I want to imitate Job – and not his wife or his friends. I want to imitate Jesus. Because only there will I find deep contentment, deep satisfaction, deep hope.