

Job's God

I don't know whether you have witnessed a tense situation being completely diffused by an out of the blue comment. The little girl being soundly told off who just smiles and says "but you do love me don't you daddy." The tense mood in a parliamentary debate broken by a well aimed joke.

I remember in my twenties a female friend of mine telling me how she was angrily telling off her boyfriend when he just said "you look beautiful when you are angry."

If you get that kind of thing wrong you just make matters worse. Because it is not dealing with the issue at hand. But if it works it can shed a whole new light on a situation.

In many ways Job 38-39 function as an out-of-the-blue comment from God. We began looking at this book some weeks ago and we saw how in the first couple of chapters of the book Job comes to suffer terribly. We were allowed into the throne-room of heaven so that we - the readers - know that Job was not suffering for any sin of his, rather the reverse. But only we know that. Job and those around him don't.

Then we saw Job embark on the most agonising set of complaints against God. He questions why he is suffering, and most importantly insists that he is suffering unjustly because he is innocent - not remember sinless, but he has confessed his sins, sought God's forgiveness, and dedicated his life to following God and that makes him innocent. So why has God allowed such terrible suffering to come upon him?

That same fundamental question has been asked millions of times since Job - in different times and situations. It is one of the defining questions for our age. "If there is a good God why does he allow innocent suffering?" And it is a personal one to many of us here. I know that as our homegroups have discussed this book all kinds of things have bubbled up. We suffer, and more often than not there seems to be no rhyme or reason about it.

Then along came Job's friends. Smugly confident that they knew the answer. Job must have committed some secret heinous sin which he needed to repent of. But Job rips apart their neat theology, he exposes their self-serving hearts, and silences them. They are peddlers of theological tat which is useless in dealing with the real world.

So what is the answer to Job's question? Why has he suffered? After dozens of chapters Job has rested his case, his friends have finally run out of breath, and an ominous storm rolls in.

In chapter 38 God speaks. But he doesn't answer Job's question. Job has challenged God to list his sins and so demonstrated why he is suffering justly. God declines to do so. We know that God could have explained the contents of his conversation with Satan recorded back in chapters 1 & 2 which would have shed a little more light on the matter. But God never tells Job about that.

Instead God enters the conversation from left field. Like that little girl with her daddy, like a joke in a tense debate, like that boyfriend's expression of delight he breaks the stalemate. Just like in those other situations if we hear him wrong then this speech of God could make things worse because there is no straight answer. But if we hear him right.... Well chapters 38 and 39 of the book of Job can do more than almost any other passage of scripture to help us come to terms with the God who allows us to suffer.

Next week we will see how Jesus is the greatest answer of all to Job's questions. But this week we must focus on another aspect of God.

When God speaks he is not sweet, he is not amusing, he is not cuddly, he is awesome.

 **Job 38:1-3**

In this chapter God's left-field comments ask Job a series of questions and in the process reveal him as the infinitely majestic creator.

➤ *God the creator*

The creator who made all things good.

 **38:4-7**

This poetic language of course but the meaning is obvious. God's original intention for his creation was so good that stars sang for joy. *All* the angels shouted for joy.

If Andy Murray wins at Wimbledon this afternoon there will be a shout such as that turf has never heard. That is since the stars and angels thundered their joy across the heavens.

God is the creator who sets limits to evil.

 **38:8-11**

In the bible the sea is the great symbol of chaos and restless evil. And God "shut it behind doors" God "set limits for it" God said "this far you can come and no farther." Every tide that stops rising is a symbol of the limits God sets on evil.

And every dawn that comes reminds us that God brings evil to an end.

 **38:12-13**

What an amazing image. Every night darkness covers the earth but every morning the dawn picks up the earth like a tablecloth and shakes the darkness – the wickedness - off.

You and I live every day with wonderful reminders that evil does not have the last word in this world. Tides don't rise forever. Night always comes to an end.

God is also the creator who knows his creation totally.

He knows the depths of the sea.

 **V16**

He knows the world beyond death.

 **V17**

He knows the whole earth.

 **V18**

To listen to the scientific propaganda we might be tempted to suggest that we can now answer a confident “yes” to those questions. After all in the week that the Higg’s boson – the God particle – was discovered we are surely close to as Stephen Hawking portentously put it “knowing the mind of God.”

But we haven’t even come close to cataloguing the species on this planet. In the last year or so we have discovered a new species of snub nosed monkey which sneezes when it rains, a parasitic wasp which lays its egg in ants with an average attack duration of 0.052 seconds. The world’s first night flowering orchid for which no pollinator is yet known.

And even if we now know more of the maths behind the universe, it only tends to reveal how much there is still to know.

But God knows, and God controls, even the weather.

 **Vv22-24**

At the cost of £100 million they have been able to control the environment of one tennis court at Wimbledon. God has the whole world to worry about... and the stars.

 **Vv31-33**

And this creator, and sustainer of the Universe cares far more than Job ever will.

He cares provider.

 **Vv39-41**

He cares as midwife

 **39:1-4**

He cares as liberator.

 **Vv5-8**

He loves to makes things wild and uncontrollable

 **Vv9-12**

And he creates weaknesses as well as strengths.

 **Vv13-18**

Here is just a flavour of the extraordinary living God. Whose joy permeates the universe. Who sets a limit on evil, who knows and sustains everything, who loves and provides for

animals that science only discovered last week, who in his wisdom builds weaknesses into his creation as well as strengths.

We need to be clear. God is not quite saying “if you only understood everything you would see that everything is good.” In 1927 Thornton Wilder wrote a novel called *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. In it he describes how a priest sets out to investigate the lives of the people who had all died tragically when a rope bridge in Lima Peru collapsed. He sets out to prove that the lives of all the victims had come to its natural conclusion, if only we understood their lives aright.

The book of Job is not saying that. There is real evil in this world and so real bad things happen.

Neither is God saying effectively that the universe is so complex he cannot control it totally. He is pointing out that it is far beyond Job’s ability to control it, as Bruce Almighty found out. But God is saying that DOES control and sustain and care for all things.

Rather he is simply saying “who are you Job to make final judgments?” The universe both reveals and conceals God’s ways. It is shot through with echoes of divine joy and goodness. You walk down a path and see a dog rose in full flower. You lie in your back on a balmy August evening and count the shooting stars from the Perseids. You wake early on a sunny morning in March to hear the blackbird tuning up for his role in the dawn chorus.

But it also reveals how mysterious the world really is. These days we know reasonably accurately what the weather will be like today, and roughly what the next week holds in store, but next month? Next year? The maths are so complex it becomes unknowable. How is lightning formed? Scientists have still not quite decided. How did the world begin? The big bang is just a convenient “black box” out of which scientists can conjure the universe. It is not an explanation it’s a recognition that we have no ultimate explanation of how the universe began. The more we learn the more we discover our ignorance.

So what is God saying to us who suffer? Let me suggest a few things.

Firstly, sufferers, learn to enjoy God’s creation.

➤ *Learn to enjoy God’s creation*

There is a time to question, and to ask theological questions, and to study the bible, and to wrestle with God in prayer, and you will find some answers there. But this side of eternity you will never find all the answers. There is also a time to tramp through the rain and reflect that though we have just had the wettest June for a long time it has made the fields and trees as green as I have ever seen them. To lie in the sun, when it comes, and contemplate how the world would die in a few days without the sun, but the sun always returns.

Jesus encouraged us to do this regularly. “Consider the flowers of the fields” or the birds of the air, or sparrows which seem to die uncared for but are loved by God, or cycle from death to life of a seed which is sown, or the seeming eternal nature of the world but Jesus said “heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away.”

In some of my lowest moments I have gone and sat by the Thames just over the way from here, and I have thought about all the fretting men and women who have sat by this river for thousands of years, and how it has just reliably flowed year after year after year, mocking my trivial turbulent thoughts. And in that time thousands have gone to meet God face to face, and they were not assessed on what troubles me, but on their having made peace with him, sought his forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and rested on his eternal promises, which are more reliable than the River Thames.

There are innumerable learned papers which have demonstrated the psychologically beneficial power of being connected to nature. How much more so for us who see behind it the wonderful hand of God.

Secondly as sufferers we must become reconciled to the mysteriousness of our lives.

➤ *Learn to be reconciled to mystery*

The whole book of Job has been suggesting to us that there are ultimate answers to why we suffer, and that God knows them, and has ordained them, but we will not fully know them until eternity.

I don't know why one person is troubled by psychological illness all their life and another is blessed with a naturally buoyant personality. I don't know why one person suffers for many years before their death whilst another lives long and happily and dies in their sleep one night. I don't know.

The atheist insists that there is no reason – everything is meaningless. The foolish proud believer boldly explains God's providence. The Biblical believer says “I don't know. But I am persuaded that God is good, that in his love he sent his Son Jesus Christ, to rescue us from this present evil age, that in the end he raise us eternally in his new creation and wipe every tear from yours and my eye, and I will wait till then for my answers.”

That requires deep humility. But that is exactly what Job discovered.

📖 **Job 40:3-5**

📖 **Job 42:1-3**

And more than anything learn to see God.

➤ *Learn to see God*

Long ago the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume argued that when you look at nature far from seeing a good God, you could as easily conclude God is a cruel despot who sets animals to kill each other, and causes casual mass extinctions, and ruins every

good thing. And it is certainly true that nature does not speak unambiguously about God.

Yet people instinctively look at mountains and oceans and stars and detect the majesty of God. They look at flowers and see his beauty. Albert Einstein once went to hear Yehudi Menuhin play the violin and at the end of the concert went up to him and said “now I know there is a God in heaven.”

The bible encourages us to cultivate that, to refine it. When we see God in that way, through his word, and through reflecting on his creation our anxiety and striving will cease.

 **Job 42:5-6**