

Job meets Jesus

I wouldn't blame you if you were more than a bit disappointed when you get to the end of the book of Job. Right up to the last chapter it has been a great help to us – especially if we have suffered.

It seems designed to help us engage with the mysterious nature of suffering in which there are no clear answers. Job asks question after question and never hears a clear answer. His friends are criticised for their trite simplistic solutions. When God does finally speak, as we saw last week, he reveals his greatness, and his majesty in creation, but he doesn't directly answer a single one of Job's questions. Instead he simply call him to trust in his goodness, and faithfulness, and awesome power and accept that there are mysteries that we will never fathom this side of the grave.

And in a paradoxical yet deep way this helps us sufferers. Because this is our world. Accidents happen, illnesses strike, fortunes are lost, families are torn apart and we don't know why – as Job didn't. So like him the only final way to peace of heart is to trust in the goodness, and kindness of the invisible God.

After all that painful and yet ironically satisfying material Job seems to lurch unexpectedly towards the trite fairy tale.

Job 42:12-17

He receives twice as many possession as he previously had. He gets replacement sons and daughters. And he lives to a ripe old age, dying in the bosom of his family.

The classic fairy tales always used to end

And they all lived happily ever after

The stories of Scheherazade in One Thousand and One Nights ended slightly more realistically

they lived happily until there came to them the One who Destroys all Happiness – death

That brings us slightly closer to the real world but not much. What about all the premature deaths which destroy happiness prematurely? What about all the misery which is not reversed before death, as Job's conveniently seems to have been?

People long for happy endings - the vast majority of novels supply them, Hollywood insists on them, children's books do not sell without them – but actually there has always been a rebellious band of realists who have protested against them. The Greeks wrote tragedies, as did Shakespeare - Romeo and Juliet end up dead, as do most of the cast of Hamlet. Brave film directors try to sell unhappy endings to their test audiences – usually unsuccessfully. Because people who really reflect on this world find happy endings unsatisfying at a deep level.

So why does this most realistic of books about suffering end in this happily ever after way?

Let me suggest why. Firstly I don't think that the universal longing for happy endings is chasing a fantasy. The whole of the book of Job has been urging us to see that there is a good God behind this confusing world who will make all things well. All "happily ever after" stories, Job included, far from being complete fantasies – are building on this deep intuition.

But the book of Job is also self-consciously unsatisfying. It belongs to a kind of literature called wisdom literature, and all the Old Testament wisdom literature is unsatisfying in this way. It appears at first glance to have tidied everything up and then you realise it hasn't. Like so many films you are left wondering whether there might be a sequel.

For the book of Job there is a sequel – it's called the New Testament. This morning I want to show you why the book of Job only makes sense when we see Jesus. Once you have seen Jesus you can cut out the last few verses of Job and throw them away. Because Jesus gives us the proper happy ending.

Let me show you.

First of all do you remember what Job longed for?

➤ *What Job longed for*

He longed to meet God face to face.

 **Job 13:20-22**

 **Job 9:14-19**

He longed for a mediator.

 **Job 9:32-34**

How Job would have rejoiced to see Jesus. Jesus who is the exact representation of God's being. On one occasion when Jesus disciple Philip said to him "show us the father" Jesus replied "don't you know me Philip." In other words – you want to see God look at me.

Here is God no longer inscrutable – revealing himself in flesh and blood. Here is God no longer infinitely exalted far above this suffering world, but deeply fully bodily engaged with it.

The writer to the Hebrews wrote

In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. – Hebrews 2:10

Since Jesus, according to the Bible, is God made man – God is being made perfect through what he suffered.

That suffering began with opposition, and hardship, and loneliness, and alienation. But it continued on to arrest, false imprisonment, beatings, ritual humiliation, a kangaroo court, torture, and execution. And as he hung on the cross dying Jesus even suffered the most excruciating pain that Job felt – the absence of God.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me

Job's complaints sound very hollow from the foot of the cross.

Job 23:3-4

If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.

You have found him Job. There he is homeless praying in agony in an olive grove. There he is defenceless receiving the most unjust sentence that was ever passed. The only totally innocent man in history condemned to death. There he is powerless nailed to a cross and lifted up to die. There he is friendless and even feeling abandoned by God. Job, what arguments were you going to fill your mouth with?

Job 9:32

He is not a mere mortal like me

Oh but Job – he became that for you. Literally mortal – he died.

When Job saw the glory of God in creation he clapped his hands over his mouth and repented in dust and ashes. How he would have fallen in wordless worship at the foot of the cross.

John Stott wrote in his superb book *The Cross of Christ*

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as "God on 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 the 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 Godforsaken 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 the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross that symbolizes divine suffering.

The poet Edward Shillito endured the first world war and afterwards wrote his classic poem *Jesus of the scars*. It ends like this

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.

What Job longed for, and what we long for – is the God on the cross.

And then we must consider what Job was promised.

➤ *What Job glimpsed*

Throughout Job's speeches there are occasional glimpses of hope which again go far beyond what we see at the end of the book.

He glimpses the promise of full forgiveness

Job 14:16-17

Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin.

Perhaps he does receive that at the end.

Then he glimpses a heavenly intercessor.

Job 16:19-20

Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend.

Someone other than God in heaven pleading for his friend Job. Who is that? The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8:34

Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Further on he glimpses a living redeemer – Job 19:25

I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth.

By the way just in case we both get killed simultaneously in a car crash – Judy wants Handel's version of this from his Messiah sung at her funeral. It is one of the few moments in the Old Testament when the resurrection of Jesus seems to momentarily come into view.

And not just the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Job too.

And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

This is why the end of Job is so unsatisfactory. Because it ends in Job's death. This is why the agony of life is never resolved in this life. As American doctors like to coyly say all their patient care ultimately ends in a "negative patient outcome." As late twentieth century cynics loved to say

Life's a bitch...and then you DIE

What did Scheherazade say?

they lived happily until there came to them the One who Destroys all Happiness – death

But Job glimpsed more. After his skin was destroyed he would be enfleshed again, and then he – he himself - would see God with his own eyes.

I have said before that one of my favourite verses in the bible is in Luke 24 when the disciples meet the risen Jesus and we are told that they “could not believe for joy.” They are full of joy because they are slowly realising that they are not just seeing a ghost but the real living flesh and blood Jesus in his flesh. And they are slowly realising that what has happened to him will happen to them. They too will be “in their flesh” beyond death. They will see God in their flesh. They will live in a solid new creation. And it is almost too good to be true – if solid fleshly Jesus was not standing there before them asking for some fish.

What Job glimpsed has come true. Here is the proper ending of Job – the New Testament, Jesus, his death and his resurrection. Because what Job longed for and what Job glimpsed became reality in Jesus. So that now we live with a sure and clear hope such that Job longed to see. The hope of our new creation.

Revelation 21:3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

After all is said and done, we, far more than Job have every reason to clap our hands over our mouths, to fall before God and say

Job 42:5-6

My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Let me finish by reading you a story

At the end of time, billions of people were seated on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly, not cringing with cringing shame - but with belligerence. "Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering?", snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror ... beatings ... torture ... death!" In another group a Negro boy lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched, for no crime but being black !" In another crowd there was a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes: "Why should I suffer?" she murmured. "It wasn't my fault." Far out across the plain were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He had permitted in His world.

How lucky God was to live in Heaven, where all was sweetness and light. Where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a negro, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the vast plain, they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth as a man. Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind.

Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.

At the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die so there can be no doubt he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled. When the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No one uttered a word. No one moved.

For suddenly, all knew that God had already served His sentence.