

Behind the Waterfall – And Your Problem Is??

Job 2:11-13 / Mark 14:32-38

The book of Job is one of the longest in the Bible – 42 chapters. The word “listen” comes, on average, once every two chapters and only two other books in the whole Bible contain the word “listen” more often than Job, both of them significantly longer (Isaiah and Jeremiah). The simple occurrence of that one word, therefore, tells us a lot of what this book is about.

Today we're going to “listen” to the book of Job, and we're going to ask ourselves what kind of listening (and speaking) is going on. Before we go any further, however, let me give you a brief outline of this long book.

Job in Outline

The book of Job is a lengthy conversation between Job and three of his friends. A fourth friend then has his say, and finally God himself shows up. Job has suffered greatly but no-one really knows why – except for the reader who's given a mysterious prologue in Chapter 1. This describes a strange dialogue between God and Satan, but it doesn't help a great deal in answering the questions of why suffering happens, and actually raises more problems than it solves. We're going to ignore the prologue today.

The basic structure of the book, following the prologue, is that each friend offers a view on why Job is suffering so much and what he can do both to cope, and to reverse his fortunes. Between each view offered, Job makes his response. Then they all go round again, following which the fourth friend speaks, the Lord speaks, Job responds, and we have an epilogue where Job's fortunes are restored.

Throughout the encounter, Job's friends constantly focus on guilt and sinfulness as an explanation for suffering. This is their received, but faulty teaching – their repeated dogma. At first they claim that Job's righteousness will stand him in good stead and soon bring an end to his troubles; later they claim that he must have sinned to be receiving such punishment. And of

course, as Job becomes more and more angry, it seems this erroneous claim is fully justified. The problem is that the whole basis of their approach is completely wrong, unreal, untrue, and pastorally disastrous. Yet they are wedded to it, bonded by fear, and cannot abandon it. The result is that they abandon their friend instead, and in the very last chapter, incur God's wrath.

The questions I want to have in mind as we listen to the book today are,

What's going on pastorally?

What effect are Job's comforters having?

Could they have done anything better?

What's going on pastorally in this encounter?

Text Book Pastoral Care

Well to begin with, Job's friends do everything right. In chapter 2 we read that **“When they heard about all the troubles that had come upon him they set out from their homes...** (in other words they responded) they **“met together by agreement...** (they considered a response) **“they began to weep aloud”** (they did what was expected) **“they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights”** (the important word here is “with”. **“No-one said a word to him because they saw how great his suffering was.”** (They instinctively knew that words would never help – and they wait to speak until Job himself has spoken – to which they respond.)

Re-Building Self-Esteem

In Chapter 3 Job curses the day he was born. “Why? Why? Why?” he asks. In Chapter 4, Eliphaz is the first to speak, and he continues with a good, gentle, respectful approach: **“If someone ventures a word, will you be impatient? But who can keep me from speaking?”** (4:1) He's not wading in it seems but he *has* to respond to his friend's suffering. Eliphaz goes on to encourage Job; he wants to build up his self-esteem; **“Think how you have instructed many.. Should not your piety be your confidence.. Consider now: Who being innocent has ever perished?”**

Eliphaz: When the Dogma hits the Fan

Eliphaz begins in a positive manner but the more he says, the more he gets into simply repeating the accepted dogma – and the more he does that, the more he moves away from Job's reality. The fact is that plenty of innocent people do perish – and this is the point where Eliphaz moves away from reality and retreats into dogma. This is where, having been “**with**” Job, he now creates a gulf between him and Job – he leaves the world of Job's reality, and enters the world of accepted dogma. *Pastoral comfort requires the courage to stay in the real world of those we are helping, rather than hoping that they will accompany us into the often unreal world of dogma.*

Job, in Chapters 6 and 7, tries to respond, but he simply doesn't have the strength to hope. He knows he's innocent, so why is God hurting him?

Bildad: The Folly of Defending God

Bildad can't take any more. In Chapter 8 he says, “**How long will you say such things? Your words are like a blustering wind. Does God pervert justice?**” Now, why does Bildad need to defend God? Can't the Almighty defend himself? And how does this help Job? The fact is that it doesn't. Bildad has given up. He's run out of energy to handle Job's pain. He says, “How much more are you going on for?” - but Job's only just started! *Bildad totally underestimates the amount of sustained hand-holding that is required.* He hadn't budgeted enough personal energy for this encounter and he's already impatient. *Pastoral comfort often requires more sustained faithfulness than we expected.*

As he goes on, Bildad does become more friendly, however, but repeats what Eliphaz has already said, “**Surely God does not reject a blameless man... He will yet fill your mouth with laughter.**” (8:20-21) As we'll see, however, this has the opposite effect than what was intended. He knows the teaching is true, yet it doesn't make sense of his experience. There's more truth than Bible teaching! There's the truth of this real world, and the two have to marry up!

Zophar: the Outrage of Scolding

Zophar is furious with Job's objections to the received teaching. Job's been painfully pouring out his heart yet Zophar calls it “**idle talk**” (11:3) Zophar wishes God would answer Job back and put him in his place. He feels the need to remind Job that he is actually not innocent, and that he needs to repent. Through this simple turn around everything will be all right. (11:13-14)

Maybe some of what Zophar says is true, but it completely misses the point. How does proving Job's sinfulness address the enormity of his suffering compared to all the other sinful people? Zophar wants everything to be neatly packaged into the answers of received dogma. But suffering won't be neatly packaged – it can only be addressed through personal relationship and human companionship.

Descent to Argument

From this point, however, the “comfort” of Job's friends descends into an argumentative brawl. In Chapter 15 Eliphaz attacks him, accuses him of arrogance, and warns him of destruction. In Chapter 18, Bildad's offended. He wants Job to “**be sensible**” but who defines what sensible is? Is it not “sensible” for Job to be angry? Bildad's pastoral expectations are completely misplaced. Zophar, in chapter 20, hears the rebuke against the way he's been handling the matter, but instead of admitting failure, he takes it as an affront to his honour. He's like a doctor or lawyer incensed when the patient or client questions whether their plan will work: “How dare you question my professional expertise?!” This is not a response that has the client's interests at heart! Think of the effect this is having on Job! We talk about treading carefully on the holy ground of God's presence, but each human life is holy ground as well.

Eliphaz begins round three. They're now embroiled in argumentative words. Job gives a huge response, both passionate and sarcastic. He's furious with his friends and decides that anger is where he wants to stay. Now there is a huge gulf between Job and his friends. They have completely failed him and the separation is sealed by Job's furious anger.

Enter the fourth friend: Elihu.

Emotion begets Emotion

Elihu is “**angry**” (32:1). He's angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God, and he's angry with the other three for giving up. The interesting thing here is that whereas the first three offer responses based on dogma and reason, Elihu allows his emotions to be ignited. He admits his youthful ignorance. He says, “**my words come from an upright heart**” (33:3) He identifies himself as simply human, like Job and alongside Job, “**I too, have been taken from clay.**” (33:6) Elihu then speaks at length of the sovereign righteousness of God, and we don't hear Job's response because in Chapter 38, God himself speaks from the eye of a storm, following which Job says, “Okay, these things are too great for me to understand, I'm sorry.” And his fortunes are restored.

The Rewards of Staying with Mystery

Ultimately Job has been answered by a mystery. God “spoke” to him from a storm. We don't know what that means in literal terms, except that he has an unexpected experience of God's presence which, although it conveyed a message, wasn't based on rational words or doctrinal arguments. It was Job's personal encounter with God through the Holy Spirit, that changed him. In the church we so often think we can regulate people's lives through giving them blocks of teaching to take on board, but actually real change happens when Jesus does his own teaching through the Holy Spirit – the presence of God.

So that's some of what's going on pastorally.

How is it for Job?

Blamed

You'll remember that Eliphaz, the first friend, began by affirming Job's goodness and by itself, this might have been a really good response. But he then goes on to say, “**Who being innocent has ever perished?**” (4:7) Without meaning to, Eliphaz is forcing Job to justify himself. Unintentionally he's raising the whole red herring of whether Job is an innocent man or not. The last thing Job needs is to introduce the possibility of blame because suffering people already have a predisposition to blame themselves.

Robbed

As Bildad continues, the effect on Job is even worse. In response, Job feels robbed of the ability to even speak before God. **“How can a mortal be righteous before God?”** he asks despairingly. **“Though one wished to dispute with him, he could not answer to him but one time out of a thousand.”** (9:2-3) Later in the same chapter he says, **“Even if I was innocent I couldn't answer him – I could only plead with my Judge for mercy.”** (9:15) So by accepting their strict words of dogma, Job has lost sight of the one thing he needs to see more than anything: the grace of God. Their words haven't brought God near to Job, but extended the distance between them.

Angered & Self-Reproaching

After Zophar's speech Job has had enough. By letting their pastoral support become a theological argument, and by offering to resolve Job's troubles through a simple prayer of confession and repentance, the friends have trivialised his situation. Job is angry. They force him to fight back, but of course in the end this only adds to his lack of self-worth.

Ridiculed

“Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom lies with you. But I have a mind as well as you! I am not inferior to you! Who does not know all these things? I have become a laughing stock to my friends, though I called upon God and he answered – a mere laughing stock, though righteous and blameless!” (12:2-4) So here Job feels ridiculed. The way in which they've appeared to have all the answers makes him feel belittled. He's rightly narked! He becomes combative and entrenched.

Isolated & Alone

Job's own comforters have caused him to reject them, but this leaves him even more isolated and alone. **“If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom... What miserable comforters are you all.”**(13:5, 16:2) Instead of solidarity, which true friendship

offers, Job finds himself even more set apart from them: **“I also could speak like you, if you were in my place... but my mouth would encourage you; comfort, and my lips would bring you relief. Yet if I do speak, actually my pain is not relieved and if I refrain it does not go away.”** (16:4-6)

Crushed

You'll remember that Bildad calls Job to **“be sensible”** but again he totally misjudges the effect this plea will have. Job responds, **“How long will you torment me and crush me with words?”** (19:1) It's not enough to feel crushed by God, but his friends have crushed him too. Why didn't they take the risk of standing with Job and angering God, or getting their doctrine slightly wrong? God would have been more pleased with that than their fear.

Bitter

“How you have helped the powerless! How you have saved the arm that is feeble!” he says in 26 v.1. And this is how poor and the weak feel the world over: too often alone, cast off, unhelped, judged, ridiculed, considered ignorant. Yet in the end Job does come through – almost without the help of his friends. A violent storm erupts and Job meets with God right there in the middle of it. Ultimately, his comfort comes not through words or teaching, but through a spiritual encounter.

I say it was “almost” without the help of his friends because although they were pretty useless, they did nevertheless go to him, stay with him, and persist with him. Even in this imperfect way they accompanied him until God spoke.

But what could they have done better?

There's so much they could have done better, and many practical points are listed on the sheet at the end of this sermon. But in summary, the friends could have:

First of all noticed their own issues: by being aware of their own anxieties they'd be less prone to pushing these onto Job.

Secondly, they could have listened to Job's feelings: by sensitive use of open questions they could have shared ownership of his situation.

Thirdly, they could have validated Job's experience: it was just as true as any right teaching. Validation always comes before evaluation.

Finally, they didn't need to defend God, but rather should have taken the risk of siding with Job in his protest against God. God can take care of his own defence – he would rather we side with the weak.

Afraid?

Driven then, by their own anxieties, they defended God, who needs no defence – and deserted the poor. But God's call to us is to fearlessly defend the poor. They were afraid of what others might think; they were afraid of getting it wrong; they were afraid of abandoning the dogma – the teachings blindly accepted, they were afraid of their own thoughts, they were afraid of losing their spiritual moorings perhaps, they were afraid of God. And so they deserted their friend and a poor weak man.

But Jesus teaches us not to be afraid. He touched the leper; he sat and stayed with the sinner; he put his hand on the dead body; he had tea with the tax collector; he was crucified among the outcasts. He wasn't afraid of what others thought; he didn't fear breaking with the received dogmas; he lived respectfully with his heavenly Father – without fear of judgement or worry of getting it wrong; he was there for the poor. If we truly believe in a mighty resurrection God who conquered the grave, and in so doing, vindicated Jesus, then we should live like it.

So who are you a helper to? To whom are you a friend? Let's spend a few moments in quiet before God asking for more of his wisdom in our pastoral care.

Good Listening is:

Letting the person finish without reacting

Accurately reflecting back content and feelings

Summarising what you have heard so far

Clarifying your own role – what you are able to do offer and what not

Using open questions

Using prompts to help the person continue

Watching out for non-verbal signals

Drawing out feelings – the obvious and the subtle

Offering tentative understanding

Tuning in to how the person affects you and allowing it to inform you

Tolerating silences of at least 5 seconds (!)

Controlling your anxiety and relaxing

Preventing your own internal distractions

Relating genuinely to the other person

Tolerating painful topics and pain in the other person

Remaining unshocked

Knowing when to end your listening helpfully

Don't be afraid to take their side “against God”

I know you can do all things
(Job 42:2)

Good Listening is not:

Questioning the other person to satisfy your curiosity

Automatically agreeing or disagreeing with the other person's opinions

Finding out unnecessary facts

Making assumptions eg I know how you feel

Having a surprised or irritable tone

Making accusations or interpretations that bring guilt

Having a judgemental attitude

Making prescriptions. Telling someone what to do

Having a condescending / pitying attitude

Belittling another person because of their age, gender, culture, intelligence, sexuality etc.

Intellectualising away another's feelings

Coming out with platitudes

Meeting your own needs

Looking for solutions

Comparing your own experiences

Interrupting

Rushing to God's defence

How you have helped the powerless!
How you have saved the feeble arm!
What excellent advice you give unlearned!
You are never at a loss for a helpful suggestion!
(Job 26:2-3)