

TITLE:

Prepare a lecture to a conference of Christian general practitioners and psychologists on the value of the Book of Job in counselling both Christian and non-Christian victims of severe trauma.

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- ❖ **Welcome, ladies & gentlemen!**
 - ❖ **Who is Job for?**
 - ❖ **The place of sin in suffering**
 - ❖ **The place of Satan in suffering**
 - ❖ **The role of counsellors in suffering**
 - ❖ **The place of God in suffering**
 - ❖ **The place of the sufferer in suffering**
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❖ ***Welcome, ladies & gentlemen!***

If I know my audience, you are probably more familiar with counselling than with the *Book of Job*. This is perhaps inevitable for busy clinicians, so I will not quote academic theology much – though for those interested I have provided references and a reading list.

Unfamiliarity with *Job* is a shame because it has much to say to us and our clients. As Christians, we ought to approach our work *theologically* as well as *professionally* if we are going to represent God in a situation. Otherwise we are in danger of the same censure that Job gave his comforters:

You are worthless physicians, all of you! If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom. (Job 13.4-5)

It has been said that the most useful thing Job's friends did was to sit in silence with him for seven days. Then their advice went downhill. That lesson in empathy is salutary, and in fact underlies much counselling practice, and even Christian response to suffering. We are encouraged to say, 'I have no answers for your suffering, but I want to share it with you.'

But helpful though empathy is *Job's* forty-two chapters show this is only the first step. God himself speaks into Job's suffering, and the book was written to give us better insight, not just greater empathy.

❖ ***Who is Job for?***

The Bible was written for everybody. *Job* has something to say particularly to the sufferer. But there is one group for whom it may be *least* useful, and one for whom it may be *most* useful.

As in all counselling, we should be careful to exclude severe depression and psychosis in our clients. Such people suffer, but lack insight and cognition for analysis of their problems. The twenty chapters of Job's very rational complaint show that he was deeply despondent, but not pathologically depressed: *Prozac* would not have helped him.

Apart from that medical proviso, Job's problem was understanding why he had received such a surfeit of suffering. Many of our non-Christian, as well as Christian, clients feel this keenly, whether their trauma is physical, emotional or social.

But Job's biggest dilemma was the apparent failure of his God. Above all Job was a believer, and the absence both of God's justice and his mercy cut away at the root of his very existence. Disillusioned believers are the group who are above all others in need of the message of the book. We see Job's internal conflict in the contradiction between his attributions of injustice to God, and his affirmations of faith, even within the same speech. So 19.6 says:

...then know that God has wronged me and drawn his net
around me.

Whilst v.25 of the same chapter says:

I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will
stand upon the earth.¹

To our Christian clients this is the biggest problem: their sufferings have made them feel alienated from God, yet they cannot escape to frank unbelief. Many therefore feel they have lost their faith, but it can help to suggest that they may only have lost their relationship – loss of faith would be less painful².

❖ *The place of sin in suffering*

Does suffering arise from God's judgement on sin? It is axiomatic in modern counselling that we are non-judgemental, and so the question may not occur to us except to dismiss it. But it is central to the book of *Job*. The comforters' approaches vary, but one thing they all agree on is that you get what you deserve in this life. Job doesn't disagree with this in principle, but insists it's not true in his case. We may feel that few people now, in the light of Jesus's teaching on the man born blind, believe that all suffering is punishment for sins. In fact Christians today seem to have rejected the idea of God's retribution altogether, making a passage like the death of Herod in Acts 12 meaningless.

But in practice most believe the converse, at least. We feel that if we live right, then God will bless us. If problems come, we feel the same sense of injustice as Job. 'What have I done to deserve this' is still a common *cri de cœur*. The fact that *Job* treats it seriously forbids us from dismissing this aspect of suffering. But if there is evidently no extraordinary sin to deal with, and yet the sufferer believes or fears himself under judgement, the book gives a clear message that this is not so³.

The prologue makes it clear that Job was 'blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil' (1.1). God himself declares it against Satan in v.8, and sets out to prove it. Job maintains his innocence throughout. Only the friends accuse him of sin, but God retorts in the last chapter, 'You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has' (42.7,8). It is never

pretended that Job is sinless, but that his human excellence excludes sin as the reason for his troubles⁴.

❖ *The place of Satan in suffering*

Demonic involvement in suffering holds few terrors for the non-religious. But many Christians may be deeply disturbed to think that Satan has caused their trouble. This is firstly because of the teaching that Satan cannot influence our lives unless we sin. But even more seriously, the thought that Satan can cause suffering against God's will leads to a dualism which is destructive to faith. It leads to 'praying against Satan' (usually meaning a monologue of rebuke) rather than praying *to* the Lord for help.

But though Satan (or rather *the satan*, or *accuser*, since the doctrine of Satan is not fully developed in Job) is the immediate instigator of Job's sufferings, it is only by direct permission of God. Job never knows of his involvement, and God does not see fit to tell him. The meaning of his pain is to be sought in God, not in Satan. So Job's complaint, even his anger, is directed towards God, who is pleased to answer him on this basis.

The description of the satan's activity is not given to develop our demonology, but to show that when we suffer innocently, we are somehow participating on God's side in a spiritual conflict far above our understanding. This alone may reassure the believer that his 'meaningless' suffering means more than he knows⁵.

But *Job* goes even further. We see, although Job doesn't, that God's purpose in his affliction is the *vindication* both of Job, and of God himself⁶. The satan, representing all that doubts and opposes God, is publicly shown

that Job does not simply love God for the blessings he gives, but for his own sake. As God allows him to be taken to the limit of his endurance, but no further, the heavenly powers themselves see the victory of Job's faith (though he himself sees only his weakness), and hear the vindication of God's faithfulness (though Job hears only his silence).

This is an insight which our believing clients need to hear, because it shows the breaking of the laws of justice to be a work of grace, not of caprice⁷.

❖ ***The role of counsellors in suffering***

One memorable summary of *Job* is that it does not so much answer a question as question an answer. Job's friends were 'worthless physicians' because they offered explanations that didn't work, even though they might contain truth⁸. We must avoid doing the same. We must also, in many cases, undo the harm resulting from the answers of other Christians or the sufferer's own theology. Job's four friends illustrate these, even sometimes echoing common contemporary views.

The emphasis of *Eliphaz* on God's holiness makes God aloof and quick to punish, critical of man's slightest imperfection. If he is merciful it is sheer condescension. Because man is so culpably corrupt and 'born to trouble' (5.7), God trusts him with nothing. No wonder Eliphaz's opinion of Job changes from accepting his piety (4.6) to calling his sins 'endless' (22.5) as Job refuses to accept guilt.

Some Christianity so emphasises the universality of sin that it loses the biblical distinction between 'the righteous' and 'the wicked'. It says we must

expect suffering because we're sinners, forgetting that we are also saved.

Somebody summed it up in this parody of a Brethren hymn:

We can't be more than guilty worms

So grit your teeth till Christ returns.⁹

A person under this influence may develop a kind of sanctified pathological guilt. He cannot expect his troubles to improve because he cannot ever purge his guilt in this world. He needs reminding that God condemned Eliphaz's opinion and justified Job.

Bildad's emphasis is on the certainty and proportionality of God's justice. Job's sons died, so they were very guilty. Job is alive so he is not¹⁰. If he is innocent, all will be well soon. But as he continues to suffer, and especially as he doesn't express assurance of imminent healing, his stubbornness shows him both foolish and arrogant (8.20-22, 18.1-4).

Zophar so stresses that God's wisdom and inscrutability, and man's impotence and foolishness, that the only safe course is mindless devotion. Because Job questions, he is a mocking babbler, proud and sin-loving and headed for a fall. 'Simple faith', though a mark of spirituality in much pietistic evangelicalism, is neither a satisfactory answer to prolonged suffering, nor apparently particularly biblical.

Elihu champions divine immanence and inspiration, especially in himself! God communicates with man all the time, through experiences providential and spiritual. He is intimately acquainted with our doings, and beyond criticism. For Elihu, suffering is a valuable channel of divine communication, a warning against future sin¹¹. For Job to find relief, he needs

revelation from God, and this will only be gained by full submission. But Job isn't broken enough! He is too full of himself, so God cannot help him, although he would like to. The similarity of this to some holiness teaching is striking. Once more the sufferer is thrown back on a fruitless search within himself, rather than in God.

❖ ***The place of God in suffering***

To accept that God has a clear role in the advent of innocent suffering poses many problems, but is absolutely necessary in finding true understanding of it. Although the idea is almost *anathema* nowadays, the Bible takes God's sovereignty in suffering for granted, and *Job* is no exception. Despite the satan's activity, and the mediate agents he uses, the book never questions that Job only suffers by God's will. The arguments devolve upon the question of whether that suffering is deserved. Only God's speeches in chs.38-41 take us beyond this uncomfortable truth.

The very fact of God's response constitutes some answer to Job's suffering. The man who was held to be a secret sinner receives a revelation of God, and without an experience of full submission, too! But though this fact gives our suffering clients an example, it gives them no revelation of their own.

It is the *content* of God's answer, taking in all the majesty of his creation, which provides the climax, both poetically and theologically¹², of the book. At first sight it appears that God is simply overwhelming Job with his power, as Job had feared in ch.9. But in fact the first part of his speech is a direct reply to Job's wish for death in ch.3, 'a brilliantly painted reversal, in

structure, image and theme', as one writer puts it¹³. Job mentions creation only to seek to extinguish it¹⁴.

In direct contrast... God's poem is a demonstration of the energizing power of panoramic vision. Instead of the death wish, it affirms from line to line the splendor [*sic*] and vastness of life¹⁵.

Job had demanded a court hearing, but God takes him to the joyful exuberance of creation. But then he gives lengthy descriptions of *behemoth* and *leviathan* (perhaps the hippopotamus and the crocodile, only described in the semi-mythical manner men use of a mysterious creation¹⁶). These creatures, incomprehensible and even useless in Job's eyes, are completely under God's control (40.15), and fitted for *his* purposes. So, Job realises, are the sufferings which God has permitted him to suffer.

The Omnipotent knows what he is permitting, and why, and for how long.¹⁷

❖ ***The place of the sufferer in suffering***

Job is concerned not only with the theology of suffering, but with the question, 'How can I suffer? What am I to do when I am suffering? In what spirit can I go on suffering?'¹⁸ Job's vindication shows his responses are right, even in his extremity. His first attitude is *calm acceptance* – the patience of Job. This is commended as righteous. But,

When he can no longer accept... he does not try to suppress his hostility towards God... he says that he will speak out "in the anguish of his spirit". And he does not complain or shout into the air to express his anger and frustration; his bitterness is directed towards God¹⁹.

In counselling the sufferer, we should by all means encourage patience where it is present, though only the experience of faith can distinguish Job's attitude from mere fatalism. But when confronted by the sense of injustice of the innocent sufferer, let us help him complain to his Creator, knowing that God is really there to answer for himself²⁰. And let us point him back to the abundance and mystery of God's creation which, though it cannot make sense of suffering, can teach us that there is meaning beyond that which we can understand.

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References

¹ There is argument over whether vv.23ff. speaks of a resurrection hope or simply earthly vindication; and over whether the redeemer is God, an angel or Job himself. Any other vindicator than God seems unlikely, but the very fact that he believes in his vindication reveals his faith.

² ‘The sufferer’s fundamental need is for the maintenance or recovery of his communion with God. This is threatened by the sense of desolation caused by the thought that God must have lost control to allow such things to happen to his faithful servants.’ Job J. 1977, p.77.

³ ‘What the book depicts is not the abandonment or rejection of ... principles of reward or punishment, but their *suspension* ... The beginning and the end emphasize the ordinary outworking of these principles.’ *Ibid.*

⁴ ‘The fact of Job’s essential righteousness is essential to the book ... Job is not considered to be perfect or sinless. All the speakers in the book, including Job himself, are convinced that all men are sinful’ Andersen, 1976, p.79.

⁵ ‘It is due...to the believer’s participation in a battle which is being fought out at the supernatural level, the details of which can only be hinted at, or described in picturesque terms, so that in the nature of the cause the sufferer can never have concrete evidence’ Job, *op. cit.*, p.81.

⁶ ‘What is made clear [in the prologue] is that Job’s sufferings are not in any sense either retributive or corrective. Their purpose is to vindicate... not only Job: for God’s honour too is involved’ *ibid.*, p.77.

⁷ ‘It is more important to vindicate the reality, the depth, the indissoluble spirituality of the relationship between God and the believer than its material profitability’ *ibid.*, p.80.

⁸ ‘Some comforters have but one song to sing, and they have no regard to whom they sing it’ John Calvin, *Commentary on Job*.

⁹ Green, Andrew, *personal communication*.

¹⁰ Clines, 1994, p.484.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² ‘Through this pushing of poetic expression towards its own upper limits, the concluding speech helps us to see the panorama of creation, as perhaps we could do only through poetry, with the eyes of God’ Alter, 1990, p.87.

¹³ *ibid.*, p.96.

¹⁴ ‘a relentless drilling inward towards the unbearable core of Job’s suffering, which he imagined could be blotted out by extinction alone’ *ibid.*, p.97.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ ‘Innocent suffering is a hippopotamus. The only sense it makes, it makes to God, for it is not amenable to human rationality’ Clines, 1989, *p.xlvi*.

¹⁷ Kidner, 1985, *p.84*.

¹⁸ Clines, 1994, *p.460*.

¹⁹ *ibid*.

²⁰ ‘[God’s words] are spoken to the spiritual need of the sufferer, and only secondarily to the intellectual need of the reader’ Job, *op. cit.*, *p.76*.

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