

Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

H4. The 'answers' in the book of Job

There are two passages in the book that purport to offer 'answers' to the Job's situation:

1. Chapter 28 is a magnificent poem comparing the search for wisdom to the mining of precious stones. It describes the miners working by candlelight deep in the earth. But wisdom is more priceless than any jewel and more difficult to find. The only one who knows where to find it is God and the only way anyone else will find it is through fear of him (23-28).
2. The speeches of Yahweh. Chapters 38 to 40 offer a matchless description of the complexity and beauty of creation. God challenges Job to tell him if he can understand it all, much less make it all happen. The world does not revolve around human beings: there is more in it than we will ever understand.

Job's response to this speech is finally to repent. In 42:5-6 he replies, 'I had heard of you with the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' And this is the climax of the poetry: having resisted all his companions' urgings to repent, face to face with the Lord Job finally does so.

So what might the message of the book actually be? I would like to suggest four perspectives:

1. It is acceptable to be angry with God. The companions say a great many pious and true things while Job spends his time accusing God of injustice. but in the end it is Job who is vindicated while the friends are accused of having spoken wrongly (42:7). Thus the book is a protest against pat answers and facile solutions. it is a plea to allow people suffering to express their anger and bewilderment, based on the insight that it is only by accepting and living with these emotions that the sufferer is likely to arrive at a deeper faith.
2. There is no final answer to the problem of suffering. We can say that suffering in general is a result of sin in general but not a given person's suffering is the result of their own sin. to the question, 'why am I suffering?' we have to remain agnostic and simply support the person concerned while they find out their own answer. Bishop John V. Taylor describes a visit to a couple whose daughter had died in a cot death:

They were still stunned and haunted by the old question, why? and sometimes, Why her? I simply could not offer the conventional reassurance about it being all part of God's providence, a mystery now but one day to be seen as part of a loving plan. I know that many good souls derive lasting comfort from such counsel, and it certainly squares with a good deal in the Bible ... but to me it has become unconvincing and strained. I said to them that their child's death was a tragic accident, an unforeseeable failure in the functioning of the little body; that so far from being willed or planned by God, it was for him a disaster and a frustration of his will for life and fulfilment ... that God shares their pain and loss and was with them in it ...

3. God is present *in* the suffering. Job's anger, frustration and bewilderment arise because he thinks that suffering means that God has gone away. In 29:1-5a, for example, he recalls the previous good times 'when God watched over me'. the solution he is grasping at and is finally revealed is that God has been there for him all the time. The book shows that

conventional piety, whose reward is worldly blessing, is not enough. Instead it commends a deeper faith based on trust in God for his own sake.

We see this in the way Job struggles towards faith. first he wants an umpire (9:33) to enable him to argue face to face with God; then in 16:25 he is convinced that he has a witness in heaven, in 19:25 'I know that my redeemer lives' and finally he is granted his desire to go beyond the 'hearing of the ear' or second hand faith and see God for himself, even though he is overwhelmed led to a more profound repentance than that the companions had urged. He becomes aware that God is bigger than his own suffering and worthy of worship regardless of the circumstances of his life.

We have seen the same answer given in Habakkuk 3:17-19 and in Psalm 73:25-28. These expressions of faith come from a society with no belief in an afterlife except the shadowy existence of Sheol. the one thing you could say for sure about the grave was that God was not there; but in these declarations of faith, the presence of God, so satisfying in itself, is all that is needed.

In a *Church Times* interview in September 1994, American church leader John Wimber described the lesson he learned through illness:

'I realised that much of my life and much of the Body of Christ has assumed that the avoidance of pain is one of the blessings of being a Christian. I've found just the opposite: that the embracing of pain is one of the blessings. They had to carry me out of my bed to get the treatment every day. Every time I was absolutely frightened out of my wits. Every time the Lord was there, in the midst of the fear and the panic and the horror. He could have removed it, but he didn't. Jesus went under the mask with me every time. I was aware of his presence. A lot of bad things happen to Christians. Painful things. Devastating things. But the difference between being a Christian or not is that you have Jesus to go with you.'

4. Throughout the book, although Job does not understand why he is suffering, the reader does: it is because he is Yahweh's servant (1:8). Although Satan is putting Job through this trial to test his faithfulness, Yahweh is allowing it in order to deepen his faith. In session 10 we will be looking in greater depth at the vocation of the Lord's servant through the servant songs of Isaiah. There we will see that it is the vocation of the servant to suffer for the benefit of others. This vocation is perfectly portrayed in the life of Jesus, but the fact that in the Old Testament we see it in figures such as Jeremiah, Joseph and Job, as well as Daniel and his three friends, suggests that it is also part of the vocation of all those whom Jesus calls to take up their cross and follow.

Activity 8.12

Having studied the variety of responses to suffering in the Old Testament, which of these do you think is most significant for you at this point in your life?

Preparation

The next short session is on the Song of Songs