

Job 23 – Who will plead my cause with God?

The background to Job's complaint

Most of you will know the story of Job. He was a wealthy man who was also righteous and God-fearing. Yet he had lost everything he possessed. His oxen, donkeys, sheep and camels were lost to raiders and disaster. Then he had lost all his children when the house in which they were feasting together collapsed on top of them killing them all. Lastly he had lost his health – he was covered all over with painful boils. Nor was his wife a help or comfort to him; she urged him to, "curse God and die."

Job left his house to sit outside on the rubbish tip where he tried to find relief by scraping his skin with a piece of broken pottery. There three of his friends came to mourn with him. For seven days and nights they sat with him saying nothing. Then they began to speak!

These friends are sometimes spoken of as Job's comforters, and I'm sure that they were a great comfort to Job while they sat silently with him sharing his pain. But the comfort they offered Job rapidly ceased when they opened their mouths. There is an important lesson for us here. Very often the greatest comfort we can bring to those who are going through painful experiences is to sit silently with them and share their pain – to weep with those who weep.

But Job's friends now seek to reason with him. The general theme of their argument is that God is just and righteous – so far so good. But then they argued that since Job is experiencing great suffering he must have offended God in some way – he must have committed some great sin even if it remains hidden to others or even to Job himself.

This is what I call "Sound of Music" theology. You may remember that in *The Sound of Music*, Liesel sings "I am sixteen going on seventeen". She is filled with wonder that her young man, Rolfe, should love her and she sings:

Nothing comes from nothing
Nothing ever could
Somewhere in my youth or childhood
I must have done something good.

It's a form of belief in Karma: if something good happens to you, it must be that you have done something good to deserve it; or, on the other hand, if something bad happens to you, it must be that you have done something bad to deserve that.

That's what Job's friends are saying to him for chapter after chapter of this book, adding to his sufferings with their accusations. And Job is weary and frustrated with trying to defend himself.

In chapter 22 Eliphaz has argued:

Submit to God and be at peace with him;
in this way prosperity will come to you.
Accept instruction from his mouth
and lay up his words in your heart.
If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored (vv. 21-23a)

So in chapter 23 we have read of Job's response as he cries out in pain and frustration, "If only I could find my way into God's presence" (vv.3-4). He is confident that an upright man like him can prove his case before God. "But", says Job, "where can I go to find him?" (vv. 8-9)

It's a sad and deeply moving complaint. Job feels that he is hemmed in by darkness (v.17). But even in this dark chapter, a ray of hope shines through as Job declares of God (v. 10),

But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold.

Even in Job's pain and confusion – he does not understand what is happening to him – he retains a confident hope in God. He trusts God, trusts that God is acting for his good and that it will result at last in his blessing.

Have you ever felt like Job: not understanding the way God is dealing with you; perhaps feeling trapped in darkness; longing to be able to put your case to God?

Like Job, you can trust God even in the midst of your pain.

A bold and Dangerous strategy

Now this I want morning to adopt a bold and dangerous strategy. I want to become one of Job's comforters; I want to talk to him and, against the background of his great suffering, say words that will help and encourage him. I say that this is a bold and dangerous strategy because when God appears at the end of the book of Job he declares that his is angry with Job's friends because they have not spoken the truth. They had spoken what seemed sense to them but what was not true and moreover, what turned out to add to Job's pain and torment. Again, we need to be careful when we seek to counsel others going through times of trial that we do not add to the pain of those we seek to help.

I want to bring encouragement to Job and to honour God not by words of human wisdom but to bring to Job's comfort something of the word and revelation of the living God. So here goes:

Brother Job, I know that you are a godly man. You have always tried to live in a way that was pleasing to God and a blessing to others. I know that you were concerned for your own family and prayed for your children and offered sacrifices on their behalf when you feared they might have fallen into sin. You were and are a good man.

And yet you have experienced great suffering, a suffering that seems undeserved, unjust and is ongoing. What can I say for your comfort?

I want to tell you about another man. He also was a godly man who sought always to live in a way that was pleasing to God and brought blessing to others. His life was devoted not only to comforting those who mourn but to healing the sick and feeding the hungry. He told everyone who would listen of God's great love and compassion. We was a righteous man who never did anything wrong, unkind or selfish – he was sinless.

And yet this man was subjected to the most terrible suffering. Those who hated him wanted to be rid of him and in the end falsely accused him of acting in rebellion against God. They arranged for him to be subjected to a mock trial where he was beaten, spat at and treated with scorn and cruelty before being hung on a cross to die in terrible agony. He also felt that he was abandoned by God – the God whom he loved and had always served. In his agony he cried out in anguish asking why God had forsaken him.

This righteous and sinless man suffered unjustly as no other had suffered – he suffered even more than you, Job.

But God had not abandoned this man. God owned this righteous man as his own Son. God did not leave this man dead in his grave, he raised him from the dead – raised him to indestructible life. By this God demonstrated that this was not just a good man but that in him God himself had come among us. God had come among us to share in our humanity, its joys and its pains. He had come among us to show us the greatness of his love and his compassion for a world gone wrong.

But he came to show more than sympathy for us. In this man's death, God entered into the depth of our suffering – into the depths of your suffering, Job. More than that, you remember, Job, how you offered sacrifices for your children in case they had sinned, God made this righteous man the perfect atoning sacrifice for our sins – for your sins, Job, and for the sins of the whole world:

He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,

each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5-6)

And when this man was raised again from the dead it was proof that God was pleased with his sacrifice and that no further sacrifice is necessary to atone for human sins. Moreover, this man, God incarnate, God the Son, was raised up into the presence of God his Father in heaven where he now intercedes for us – he intercedes for you in the court of heaven.

Job, you do not need to ask where you can go to find God; God has come down to find us and live with us in this man, in Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

Job, you do not need to ask how you can go and state your case before God; this man pleads for you at God's right hand – he states your case with God, and God hears the pleas of his own Son.

Imagining Job's response

Job might well reply, "That's wonderful to hear, but how does it help me right now in my present suffering?"

What might I say in answer to Job? "Job, this man not only knows what it is like to suffer unjustly, to suffer as you are suffering, he not only pleads in the courts of heaven on your behalf, he is also always ready to come alongside you to help, encourage and comfort you in your sufferings."

This is not a promise that all your sufferings will magically be brought to an end. But Job, I want to remind you of the conviction you yourself expressed from the depth of your sufferings and despair:

I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
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! (Job 19:25-27)

I want to assure you of the reality you have yearned for. Even if your present sufferings should end in your death and your body being buried to decompose in the earth, this Lord Jesus has conquered death. He tasted death for all of us – he suffered death for you – and he rose again from the dead in a glorious new body that death cannot touch any more. This man, Jesus, is the living Redeemer you longed for and he will one day return in glory. His feet will stand again upon the earth and he will call you and all his people out of their graves. We also shall rise not only to see him in his glory but also to share in the glory of a resurrection body like his own resurrection body – a body no longer subject to death. We shall be welcomed into a renewed creation in which there is no more suffering, no more pain, no more injustice, no more tears but only joy for evermore in the presence of our God and Saviour.

Job, you may not imagine that this can be true at the moment, but I want to assure you that your present sufferings, great though they are, are not worth comparing with the everlasting and glorious joy which will be yours on that day.

I don't know whether I would have been an effective and helpful comforter to Job. But that is only an act of the imagination; Job is long dead and waiting now the day of resurrection which he had glimpsed in the depth of his despair. What is important this morning is what all of this means to *us*.

The message for us

My purpose is to show *you* the grounds of *your* confidence before God this morning.

Jesus came into this world to identify himself fully with us. He was a righteous and upright man like none other before or since – he was without sin. Yet he suffered unjust accusation and rejection by those among whom he lived. He even took our sin and guilt upon himself when he hung and died upon the cross – his body broken and his blood shed for us. And there at the cross he experienced

the horror and darkness of being separated from God, crying out from the cross, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?"

But Jesus was not forsaken by the Father for he was raised from the dead and has ascended into heaven and is at the right hand of the Father interceding for us.

When we feel at a loss and in darkness, not understanding what is happening, wishing we could find our way into God's presence so that we could put our case to him, look to Jesus. He is the one in whom God has come to meet with us. He is the one who has shown us that God is for us – that he loves us and wants us to be his own. Listen to Paul's wonderful words in Romans 8:31-39:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. 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. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

‘For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We do not need to put our case to God or plead our cause before him – what have we to plead? Jesus the righteous one is pleading for us. He is answering every charge brought against us. He is the one whose death, resurrection and intercession guarantee that, come what may, we shall be brought safe to glory.

Here is a better foundation for our confidence in God than that expressed by Job in 23:10 –

He knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.

Christ our great High Priest has entered heaven for us and pleads our case for us, not on the grounds of *our* righteousness, but on the grounds of his perfect righteousness and his shed blood.

There is nothing that is "able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We need to see and feel the truth of this reality. It needs to shape the way we live, particularly in times of trouble.

Peter Misselbrook

Christ Church Downend, 16/6/2021

Whiteshill, 24/10/2021

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea,
A great High Priest whose name is Love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is graven on his hands,
My name is written on his heart;
I know that while in heav'n he stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart,
No tongue can bid me thence depart.

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Saviour died,
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God the Just is satisfied
To look on him and pardon me,
To look on him and pardon me.

Behold him there! The risen Lamb,
My perfect, spotless righteousness;
The great unchangeable "I AM,"
The King of glory and of grace!
One with himself I cannot die,
My soul is purchased by his blood;
My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ, my Saviour and my God,
With Christ, my Saviour and my God.