

Job 19.1-29

Is God for me or against me?

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 16 July 2023

Job: Out of the Storm [5]

Recap

While I was away you heard from Susan and Bobbie about Job's friends – or '**miserable comforters**' as he called them (16.2). His friends and their almost-but-not-quite-true theology had done him no good, and in fact made him feel worse.

He and they were going round in circles. He was really unhappy, not only with what had happened to him, but with what they were saying to him. He *knew* he hadn't done anything to deserve what had happened – but they kept insisting he *must* have.

They insisted the world is like a vending machine, where you get out what you put in. In chapter 18 Bildad is pretty brutal: he tells Job to 'shut up' (18.2), and then lists all the ways God punishes the wicked – which so happens to include all the things that have happened to Job. The implication is clear: Job *must* be wicked.

Despite all this, Job longs for God. In verse 27 of our reading he says, **‘How my heart yearns within me!’** (What he *actually* says is, ‘How my bowels fail!’ In Hebrew you don’t feel in your heart, you feel in your gut. It’s like he feels sick, faint with hunger – that’s how much he longs for God, for things to be right.)

1. Job is... accused (1-6, 28-29)

When Job **replies** in v1, he isn’t only replying to Bildad but to all three of his friends – and probably his wife. ¶ He feels **tormented, crushed, reproached** and **attacked** (2-3). I don’t blame him. They have been accusing him of all sorts of wickedness – and accusing him falsely; remember, Job is **blameless and upright** – he is not perfect, but **shuns evil** and knows forgiveness (1.1, 1.8, 1.22, 2.3, 2.10). Not only were they accusing Job of being wicked, they were by implication declaring themselves to be better: **‘you exalt yourselves above me,’** Job says (5).

They probably thought they were speaking for God, acting in truth and for the best. But their almost-but-not-quite-true way of seeing the world was hugely damaging, and not from God; they weren’t speaking for God, they were speaking for someone else, whose name means ‘Accuser’ or ‘Adversary’ – remember? Satan.

A number of years ago a clergy colleague phoned me up to tell me I had was no use to God any more, I had no business leading a church, and if he walked into a church and I was there he would turn around and walk out. I can still hear him speak those words, I can still remember my own stunned silence as I lay on my bed, phone against my ear, totally unable to respond. His words echo down the years, especially when I make a mistake or find myself struggling.

He had his reasons, and he wasn't entirely wrong – and that's the secret behind the accusations that stick. The ones that are ridiculous, clearly wrong, are easy to brush off. But the ones that are partly true – *they* are hard to shake off.

He wasn't entirely wrong – I needed a break, which ended up lasting four years – but neither was he right. And he forgot that those who accuse had better watch out – as Job told his friends, **'you should fear the sword yourselves'** (29). In the end they are only saved from that sword by Job himself, who prays to God for their forgiveness (42.8).

So are we better to keep our mouths shut? Often yes, but the opposite error to accusing one another like Job's friends, is going around overlooking wrongdoing, or pretending that sin isn't sin.

At the end of his letter James says **J**:

My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

James 5.19-20 (NIV)

I think James had in mind Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 **J**:

'If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.'

Matthew 18.15 (NIV)

Jesus goes on to talk about more formal church discipline, but it begins with a gentle (and private) warning. Friends, we need one another! We need to encourage one another along the way, to help one another stand firm, because it's hard being a Christian. We need to love and support one another through the ups and downs of life. And, we need to help one another grow as God's **holy** children, which means being ready to warn our sisters and brothers, *and* being ready to hear and heed warnings from them about our own attitude and behaviour.

I've had many more helpful conversations than the one I just mentioned, given humbly and with love, that have helped me change and grow in holiness. ¶ At 40 I am not the Ben I was at 20, thank the Lord – well, almost. Most recently two or three people have warned me about my attitude to the diocese and the way I speak in public about it. I am taking that to the Lord in prayer, and asking him to transform my thinking.

Friends, let's not pretend that everything is ok and ignore Jesus' call to be holy, the need to be transformed and renewed. But let's also not be like *Job's* friends, who accused Job of wrong and acted as though they were better than him. Instead, when necessary, let us warn one another with love, grace and humility, recognising that our turn to be warned will come soon enough.

2. Job is... attacked (7-12)

In verse 6 Job's complaint moves from his friends to God. ¶ It's quite the list: God ¶ ignores him (7), he has ¶ **blocked** and ¶ **hidden** Job's way (8), he has ¶ **stripped** Job of his previous **honour** (9), ¶ **tears** him **down** and ¶ **uproots** his **hope** – ouch – (10). Job says God's **anger burns against** him (11) and he is surrounded and besieged by God's army (12).

Job has woken up to find the whole British Army camped outside his house, RAF jets flying overhead. He's woken up and found himself splashed all over the front pages of the Sunday tabloids and the world speculating on social media about his behaviour, salivating over the salacious gossip.

Job has nowhere to turn, he is feeling Very Sorry for himself. And it's all God's fault; in verse 21 Job says,

'Have pity on me, my friends, have pity,
for the hand of God has struck me.'

Job 19.21 (NIV)

But is he right? *Has* God done all this? As we are finding in the book of Job, the answer is not straightforward. **'The hand of God has struck me'** Job says – but do you recognise those words from earlier? In chapter 1 Satan tells God, **'Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has'** (1.11). And in chapter 2 Satan says, **'Stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones'** (2.5).

But, who does the striking? It is not God, it is Satan, with God's permission and within God's constraints; God replies to Satan, **'Very well, then, he is in your hands'** (1.12 – see NET footnote – and 2.6). Job does not know that, but we do.

Christopher Ash puts it like this:

The Satan is fond of disguise; he ‘disguises himself as an angel of light’ (2 Corinthians 11.14). Again and again in the book of Job the Satan masquerades as the Lord and persuades Job that it is directly the Lord who has turned against him.

Christopher Ash, Job: The Wisdom of the Cross, 213

In verse 11 Job feels like God’s **anger burns against** him, like God **counts** him **among his enemies**. But *we* know that isn’t true – *we* know God is *pleased* with Job and calls him his **servant** (twice – 1.8, 2.3) – a term of honour used by God of Moses and the prophets. Job does not know that, but we do.

Can we be God’s precious child and still suffer terribly? Yes.

Are forces of evil real and active in the world? Yes.

If we suffer does that mean we are God’s enemy? *NO*.

Job didn’t know what we know about his situation, and so he was stuck in confusion, anger, pain and sorrow. He didn’t understand what was going on – and so often neither do we. We don’t know why, and often we’ll *never* know. In those times I pray we don’t drift away or turn our back on God, but like Job not let of him.

3. Job is... alone (13-22)

When I was at school we studied a book by Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. I remember my English teacher going on about windows a lot. It's a long time ago and I haven't read it since but in my head the entire book is about people looking through windows as a literary way of framing and focusing the reader's attention.

Dickens does the same thing in *A Christmas Carol*, where Scrooge looks through the window to see the Cratchit family making the best of their meagre Christmas meal.

Something like that is happening in verses 13-19. Job has been rejected by: his **relatives** (13, 14, 17), **friends** and **acquaintances** (14, 19), **servants** (15, 16), the **little boys** kicking a football in the street (18), and all **those** he **loves** (19).

See the words Job uses to describe how utterly alone he feels: **alienated, estranged** (13), **gone away, forgotten** (14), **foreigner, stranger** (15), **ignored** (16), **offensive, loathsome** (17), **scorned, ridiculed** (18), **detested, turned against** (19). | His face is pressed up against the window, he longs to be inside but he is alone, trapped outside in the depths of loneliness and despair.

4. Job is... assured (23-27)

We saw him **J** alone in chapter 2, **scraping himself with a piece of broken pottery** (2.8), and now we read it in his own words; which makes what he says next even more astonishing (verse 23):

J ‘Oh, that my words were recorded,
that they were written on a scroll,
that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead,
or engraved in rock for ever!
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 19.23-27 (NIV)

I don't know about you but sometimes it's in my deepest and darkest moments that I have the most clarity. When all else is stripped away, we are left with our deepest longings – and that's what happens to Job in these verses.

Thanks to Satan's plan, Job has no-one and nothing else. But instead of cursing God as Satan thought he would, *God is all Job longs for*. His **heart yearns** – his bowels fail: he feels sick, he is faint with thirst and hunger for God.

A true worshipper is not someone on a constant spiritual high – though those moments are precious. A true worshipper is not someone for whom everything goes well.

No: a true worshipper is someone who doesn't drift away or turn their back on God when things are hard.

These verses are a highlight and high point: of the chapter, book and Old Testament. They begin with a knowing wink from the Holy Spirit: Job's words **were recorded** and **written on a scroll** (23) – in fact several scrolls over centuries – and *will stand for ever* (24), unlike rocks which Job knows erode away (14.18-19).

Job was **accused** by his friends (1-6), he felt **attacked** by God (7-12), and completely **alone** (13-22) – but here he is **assured** in his faith. **I know**, he says: I *know* I have **a redeemer** who **lives**, I *know* **he will stand on the earth** (25), I *know* **I will see God** (26). Job had the faith described in Hebrews 11.1: **confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see**.

Job did not see, he did not understand, but *he knew God*.

It is startling how Job can talk about God wronging him (6), counting Job as his enemy (11), treating Job as he would the worst of sinners – and then describe God as his **redeemer** (26). It is so startling some think Job must mean someone *else*, other than God – perhaps a relative who will speak up for him after he's dead.

But that ignores the fact that Job *has* no-one else: his **closest friends have forgotten** him, his **relatives have gone away** (14)! It also ignores one of the central tensions of the book: is God Job's enemy or Job's redeemer?

Our title today is another way of asking that, one of the central questions of the book – Is God for me or against me? – and here we find the answer is 'Yes'.

This is one of the central tensions of the whole Bible, as God wrestles with his people, redeeming and saving them time after time, needing to punish them for their sin time after time. When God speaks through the prophets you hear at once his love for his people and his anger at their sin, you hear at once his sadness at the way they turn away from him and his longing for them to return, to honour him with their hearts as well as with their lips.

Here, yet again, the book of Job points us forward to Jesus. Is it not interesting how, in this book that poses all these questions about suffering, time after time we are driven to the cross?

For it is only on the cross that God shows how justice can be done and mercy can be shown *at the same time*. It is only on the cross that God demonstrates his holiness and his love *at the same time*. It is only on the cross that God is against us as our Judge and for us as our Redeemer *at the same time*. Paul says in Romans 5 :

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us... while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son...

Romans 5.8 & 10 (NIV)

Job was not blessed as we are to know about the cross and resurrection of Jesus, but still he said: **'after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes'** (26-27).

He spoke more truth than he realised; in that deepest, darkest of nights he saw clearly that however much he felt God was against him, ultimately God was *for* him – he just didn't know how.

And so he felt sick with longing, longing for more, longing for that day, to see God with his own eyes.

Do you know how that feels?

Sometimes when we read about God's love and care for us in the Bible it just doesn't feel that way. In our darkest moments it feels like God is against us, like God is *only* against us – or perhaps that he isn't even there at all.

In those moments we need to help one another cling to that precious truth – **our redeemer lives.**

In those moments the words that end Romans 8 might not feel real – but however we feel, they *are* true and will *always* be true, because in Jesus God is *always* for us, and there is *nothing* that can take away his love for us in Jesus **J**:

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.

Romans 8.38-39 (NIV)