

Introduction

Over the last three weeks I have looked at the responses to Job's suffering. We considered the responses of Job's comforters...

Eliphaz the Gentle Mystic who saw everything in the ideal – in heavenly terms - *"Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed?" (Job 4:7. NIV)*

Bildad the Firm Traditionalist, who interpreted reality in such an earthly and concrete way, as part of his cause and effect approach, that his words seem to tie God's hands. *"But if you will look to God and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your rightful place."* (Job 8:5-6 NIV)

Zophar the Dogmatist who was a straight talker. He believed in speaking the truth no matter what the cost - his main problem was that he did not listen. *"Oh, how I wish that God would speak, that he would open his lips against you and disclose to you the secrets of wisdom, for true wisdom has two sides. Know this: God has even forgotten some of your sin."* (Job 11:5-6 NIV)

Elihu the Brave the young man who waited and listened. *"But those who suffer he delivers in their suffering; he speaks to them in their affliction."* (Job 36:15 NIV). Elihu, listened and created an opportunity for Job to develop the possibility of a new paradigm that prepared him to hear God speak.

Different views of suffering

The question of the suffering of the innocent is at the heart of Christianity. This is embodied in the sinless Saviour, Jesus, who suffered and died for the sins of humanity. Some Christians explain in natural disasters God's punishment of sinful people or the world as a whole. (retributive view)

Others see catastrophes as a way a loving God tests the faith and fortitude of survivors. (Suffering as testing and refining)

Still other Christians see innocents' suffering as evidence of the inscrutable will of a God who "works in mysterious ways" toward an ultimate, but presently unknowable, good. In the fourth-century Augustine said,

"God would not allow any evil to exist unless out of it he could draw a greater good. This is part of the wisdom and goodness of God."

Some Christians, and others, see a redemptive purpose to suffering, in the sense that it makes us more human.

Abraham Lincoln said,

"Adversity does not make us frail; it only shows us how frail we are".

A Jewish survivor's answer to the haunting question of his people's experience of the Holocaust was that *'only the broken hearted can heal the world'*.

The Christian writer Henri Nouwen would be associated with this approach

"The more I think about the human suffering in our world and my desire to offer a healing response, the more I realize how crucial it is not to allow myself to become paralyzed by feelings of impotence and guilt. More important than ever is to be very faithful to my vocation to do well the few things I am called to do and hold on to the joy and peace they bring me. I must resist the temptation to let the forces of darkness pull me into despair and make me one more of their many victims. I have to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus and on those who followed him and trust that I will know." --

Henri Nouwen

The prophet Isaiah cries out that the Messiah will be ‘*acquainted with grief*’ and that by his ‘*wounds we are healed*’. These prophetic insights are picked up in a Hebraic Talmudic legend about an inquirer of Elijah who was told that the Messiah could be found amongst the poor, binding and unbinding his own wounds ever ready to assist others. Though not often acknowledged, Judaism has a tradition of a suffering Messiah.

Like Henri Nouwen, the rabbis were concerned not so much with *why* but *how*. The rabbis of the Talmudic era were more interested in the human response to suffering than in finding theological justifications for its existence. Remember that I began this series with the quote from Jonathan Sacks, “*In Judaism, faith is in the question – not the answer.*”

Many causes and different approaches.

It is possible that there are many different causes of suffering and so an explanation which satisfies in one context of suffering will fall short in another.

Second suffering is a personal issue. Whether it is the suffering of those caught in the genocide in Rwanda or the Tsunami in East Asia, or our own very personal pain, suffering has a way of addressing very deep issues within every one of us. C.S. Lewis says it best, “*[Pain] removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.*” - C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

At different times and in different circumstances certain explanations and approaches will appeal to us more than others.

“This is evident in the way the Rabbis have approached this, and many other complex life issues, “The aim of Talmudic discussion is to find a viable way of life, not a metaphysical truth, the Talmud does not give exclusive preference to any of the ways it offers.”

Rabbi Dr. David Hartman

For me personally, the issue of suffering is addressed most helpfully by C.S Lewis, Philip Yancey and Jonathan Sacks.

Others find Henri Nouwen’s writings speak most powerfully to them. Christian maturity in this issue is to see that no-one is fully able to answer this complex question, but like the facets of a diamond each thoughtful consideration of suffering illuminates another facet of our human experience.

Then Job answered the LORD: "I am unworthy--how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer-- twice, but I will say no more."

(Job 40:3-5)

I conclude with Paul’s statement about knowing.

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

1 Corinthians 13:12