

Week 4 The Job Paradox: *The God who is actively inactive.*

It is easy to talk of worshipping an all powerful, benevolent, Father God who loves us and wants the very best for us (**Jeremiah 29:11, Matthew 7:7-11**), but how do we react when life is not all plain sailing?

What do we say to people for whom life has become one of pain, suffering, tragedy or loss?

How do we, as Christians, answer their questions of 'Why?'

'Why does God stand passively by when there is so much suffering going on all the time? Why does he criticise our tendency to walk by on the other side of the road when we see people in need, when he himself sees all suffering and yet chooses to do nothing? Does God not care? Does God not understand? Or perhaps he is, after all, incapable of stepping in? God's deliberate policy of not fixing things when we are suffering highlights one of those universal paradoxes – we believe that God is active and powerful, so if he does not intervene, we are forced to conclude that this God is actively choosing to be passive.'

Indeed, the question about where God is in the midst of suffering or crisis in our world is not confined to Christians, but is common to believers, non-believers and other faiths. It is the most common reason for people's rejection of God. The challenge for us is to confront this issue before we reach times in our lives when we watch or experience suffering ourselves or among family and friends, only to find that the apparent absence of God challenges our beliefs and stops us from worshipping him.

Have you ever experienced challenging times that have prevented you from worshipping God?

Has your relationship with God been restored and how did you overcome this barrier?

It is useful for us to understand the way other faiths, like Hinduism, Buddhism and Atheism, deal with the question of pain and suffering. It will help us when we talk to people with those faiths.

At the heart of the **Hindu** religion, which believes in re-incarnation, is the philosophy of karma, the idea that it is the good and bad deeds of human beings carried out in the present that will determine the quality of their lives both now and in future births. The suffering they experience now is punishment for the bad things they have done in previous lives. This is a line of thinking, in various forms, common to Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism and relies on oversight of an impersonal cosmic principle at work in the universe.

Does the philosophy of karma provide any hope of redemption? Is there any incentive to help anyone else?

Buddhist teaching centres on the problem of human suffering, which results from a fundamental mismatch between what we desire and what we receive. If we remove the desire, then we will avoid suffering. If we are sufficiently desensitised and we reach Nirvana, the complete absence of desire, then nothing will hurt us. A total detachment from this world will protect us from grief, pain, loneliness or despair.

Is there any place for empathy and love in Buddhist philosophy? Is there any incentive to help anyone else?

The **Atheist** position on suffering is that it is just sheer statistical bad luck. The Atheist case has been made quite extensively by Richard Dawkins in a number of books, in one he says that *'The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.'* His case is that there is no ultimate difference between good and evil, thus denying any moral sense – but he still uses a moral argument to denigrate God.

In a world where some suffer more than others, apparently without cause, is it bad karma, bad desire or bad luck?

Do you have any sympathy with Hindu, Buddhist or Atheist thinking? Why?

The book of Job addresses the Christian paradox of belief in a powerful and loving God when we live in a broken world full of injustice and suffering. It is a book of 42 chapters, many of which do not present an easy read, but the storyline is essentially contained in three chapters (**Read Job 1, 2 and 42**).

What qualities did Job demonstrate that allowed God to have confidence in him as a perfect believer?

In part of the story, set in a heavenly courtroom, God gives Satan the authority to test Job's belief and commitment to God, confident that he will continue to honour him. In a series of catastrophes all of Job's wealth and his family are taken from him, yet still his faith does not waver (**Job 1: 20-22**). Job expresses a deep confidence and trust in God

despite his suffering and loss. His perspective is that life itself is a gift, as is everything that comes with it, and he will continue to love and worship God for who he is, not what he has given to Job.

How would you feel if you suffered the same loss as Job?

Do you think that you could continue to love God, or would you be angry and blame him?

Job passed the test with flying colours, but Satan is then given authority to inflict physical suffering on him, so long as he spares his life. In the midst of all his suffering, Job's continued integrity is challenged by his wife who encourages him to "Curse God and die!", but his faith stands firm (**Job 2: 9-10**). **Do you have some sympathy with his wife?**

Hearing of Job's afflictions, three of his friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar came to comfort him, but most of the book of Job is taken up with these three friends and a fourth called Elihu engaging in extensive, repetitive dialogue with Job about his suffering, grappling with the question, 'Why?'. His friends reason from the position that 'if you sin, you will suffer' and therefore 'if you are suffering, you must have sinned' and try to convince Job of that he is at fault. Job continually protests his innocence and defends his integrity. However, three things are clear:

1. God is sovereign and even Satan can only be active with God's permission. In a book dealing with suffering there is no getting away from the fact that God is in control.
2. Not all suffering is deserved, Job is an innocent and blameless person, yet he suffers. Jesus clearly taught that suffering is not related to sin (**John 9: 3**).
3. The book of Job challenges the premise that God is either too weak or too mean to stop suffering, but asserts that there are times when he allows it to happen.

The classic Christian defence, that the existence of suffering is due to free will, does not appear in the book of Job. Simply put, God desires genuine relationships with human beings and this is only possible when there is a free choice. God therefore gives us the freedom to choose whether to love and obey him or to ignore and disobey him. It is the wrong choices that humanity has made in the world that led to all the suffering, we reap the consequences. Inactivity by God is not idleness, but rather his patience and mercy in giving us time to recognise him, before he eradicates all evil and suffering in the world, along with everyone not in a relationship with him.

Job's suffering does not diminish his belief in a personal and powerful God who can be called to account, so he asks for an audience with God in order to state his case (**Job 23: 3-4**). Yet when he is granted the audience he is more inclined to listen than to speak, (**Job 38: 2-7**). God asks questions about who is in control of the universe in an attempt to help Job see the wonder of the world and experience a sense of awe. As a result Job finds himself knowing and trusting God better (**Job 42: 2**). God allows Job to prove in his own experience that he really does love God more than the gifts he has been given – he draws closer to the all-powerful God. The free will defence of suffering has, at its heart, God's desire for genuine relationships with human beings and Job demonstrated that this relationship is possible because he chose to trust God even when he had lost everything. At the end of the story God silences Job's unhelpful friends and publicly affirms and vindicates Job, restoring to him more than he had before, a kind of Old Testament resurrection.

The book of Job points us to another time when someone who was innocent and blameless experienced pain and suffering because God's honour demanded it – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Job's suffering was involuntary and Satan was not allowed to touch his life, but Jesus voluntarily chose the path of suffering and death. Suffering was the way God chose to buy our freedom. (**Isaiah 53: 4-6**).

How helpful is it knowing that God shared in our earthly suffering? Does it help us when we try to comfort others?

'Ultimately, God has not been passive about the evil in the world: he has actively submitted himself to suffer on our behalf. First, when we suffer we are not further away from but rather drawn closer to the one who suffered for us. Second, when we reach out to relieve the suffering of others we are most like God, because God did everything that was necessary to deal with the evil and suffering in our world. We who live this side of the cross of Jesus have even more reason than Job to trust that even when God seems to be holding out on us, in fact he is actively working out what is best for his universe. We worship a God who acted decisively to deal with suffering, and a God skilful, reliable and wise enough to be trusted in the dark times.'