

What is God doing when we suffer?

Job 40:6-41:34

In my final year of High School, ancient history was one of my subjects.

I remember learning of a group of Roman rulers called the *Julio-Claudians*.

The first of these men was the dictator Julius Ceasar,
and the last ruler of this period is almost as famous: Emperor Nero.

History has not been kind to Emperor Nero.

Among us Christians he is known as a cruel persecutor of the early Church,
And even the earliest non-Christian historians saw Nero as a deficient leader.

Sources written close to the time describe some strange behavior from Nero
during the great Roman fire of AD 64.

We know that Nero loved to perform on stage,
and these historians describe Nero dressing up in stage costume
and performing an ancient Greek poem about the sack of Troy
while the real-life disaster was unfolding before his very eyes.
This is where we get the popular picture of Nero fiddling while the city burns.

It's the very picture of an unresponsive and uncaring leader, isn't it?

I mean, if this really was Nero's response during a great civic disaster,
then the guy was in no way deserving of such a high office,
and he certainly didn't deserve any respect from any of his subjects,
and nor does he deserve any respect from the historical record;
he deserves to be remembered as he commonly is:
as nothing but a big fat joke.

There is a very real temptation to see God in much the same way, isn't there?

As disaster strikes we can find ourselves asking
"What is God doing in all of this mess?"
If God is meant to be our leader and our King,
how come he seems *so absent* when the world is crumbling around us?

For 37 chapters, Job has been left wondering about what on earth has just happened.

Once wealthy and powerful with a wonderful family life,
everything has been stripped away in a series of disasters.
Why has this happened?
Job is a godly man who's done nothing to deserve this,
How can he make sense of it all?

In his grief Job notices God's silence,

and he longs to hear God offer an explanation as to what's going on
If only I knew where to find him Job cries out in Ch 23; if only I could go to God's
dwelling! ⁴I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. ⁵I would find
out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me.

And then, long after Job's been wrestling with this for some time,
 God does answer Job in chs 38 through 41.
 There are two speeches by God in these chapters,
 —we'll just be considering the second which starts in ch 40—
 and what we'll hear can help us form an answer to this question:
What is God doing when bad things happen to us?

So we pick things up in Ch 40:6

⁶Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: ⁷"Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.

It's a strong opening, perhaps a little bit stronger than what we might expect!
 Why is God speaking so abruptly to Job?
 One of the difficult questions that this OT book poses for us
 is the matter of whether Job sins in what he says as he suffers.
 Early on in the story we are told that Job
 did not sin by accusing God of doing wrong,
 And in the book's final chapter we are told that, unlike his friends,
 Job *has* spoken truthfully about God.
 So with these two bookends in place
 the overall idea is that Job does a good job in honoring God with his speech.

But with God's response in these verses
 it does appear that Job came really close to crossing a line.
 So close that God deems it necessary to offer a corrective to Job's thinking.
 In what way was Job treading on thin ice? God gives us a clue in verse 8:
 "Would you discredit my justice? He asks Job.

At a couple of points, Job has noticed how slowly God responds to unjust suffering.
 Job has said things like [God] mocks the despair of the innocent
 When a land falls into the hands of the wicked, he blindfolds its judges. (9:23-24)
 And in chapter 10:3 he's accused God of smiling on the plans of the wicked
 So Job has made a point of questioning God's sense of justice,
 and so God seeks to correct Job's understanding.

God does this by asking whether Job thinks he could do a better job at being judge.
 Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? God asks in v9
 Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty.
 Unleash the fury of *your* wrath, look at all who are proud and bring them low,
 look at all who are proud and humble them, crush the wicked where they stand.

About 15 years go Jim Carey and Morgan Freeman starred in a film called *Bruce Almighty*. Jim Carey's character complains to God that he isn't doing his job properly, and so God, played by Morgan Freeman, allows Bruce to have his own divine powers and responsibilities for a week. Needless to say, Bruce soon discovers that being God

is not something we humans are equipped to do, and that it's a nearsighted move to accuse God of failing in his responsibilities.

It's the same kind of lesson we see being offered here
as God challenges Job to consider whether or not he really does know enough
to question God's justice.

Of course, reading outside the story of Job,
we know that God *does care* about the injustices that people can suffer.
When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt and they cried out to God,
God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them (Ex 2:25)
Psalm 146:9 The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the
Widow.
And of course in the NT we see Jesus responding with friendship and healing
towards those who were dealt cruel blows by life in the first century.
Despite Job's perception of things,
and despite the way that we might be tempted to look at the world,
all the Biblical evidence points a to God
who does notice and who does care about life's injustices.

Many of us were horrified by the carnage wrecked in Manchester this week.
But did you also notice the response from Buckingham palace?
First a public notice where the Queen shared her own horror at what had
happened, issuing a word of support for the victims and those charged with
responding to the disaster, and then just two days ago a personal visit from
the 91 year old monarch to those recovering in hospital.

Of course, this is exactly the kind of response you'd hope for from a monarch.
Can you imagine how long the monarchy would last
if all the people received to a disaster was indifference?
Friends, the God we worship is not indifferent, he really does care.

"That's great", you might say in response,
"but caring is one thing, taking action is quite another. It would be nice if God
moved away from mere sentiments to a place where he is moved to act."

Well, the rest of God's speech does say something about his actions,
even though what we hear from him is a little hard to understand.
From ch 40:15 through to the end of Ch 41,
two incredible beasts are described.
The behemoth has a tail that sways like a cedar, ch 40:17
the sinews of its thighs are close-knit.
Its bones are tubes of bronze, its limbs like rods of iron.
God describes this creation of his as hiding along a riverbank,
But the raging river does not alarm it;
it is secure, though the Jordan should surge against its mouth.

And if this beast is impressive, then the Leviathan in Ch 41 is even more so,
 although, perhaps its better to describe the leviathan as terrifying rather
 than impressive:

Ch 41:14 Who dares open the doors of its mouth, ringed about with fearsome teeth?
 Its back has rows of shields tightly sealed together; each is so close to the next
 that no air can pass between. They are joined fast to one another; they cling
 together and cannot be parted. It's snorting throws out flashes of light; its eyes are
 like the rays of dawn. Flames stream from its mouth; sparks of fire shoot out.

And as this monster wreaks havoc,
 don't put your faith in any human champion to tame it, because,
 v 25 When it rises up, the mighty are terrified; they retreat before its thrashing. The sword
 that reaches it has no effect, nor does the spear or the dart or the javelin. Iron it treats like
 straw and bronze like rotten wood. Arrows do not make it flee; slingstones are like chaff to it.
 A club seems to it but a piece of straw; it laughs at the rattling of the lance.

So what on earth are these two beasts?
 As you can imagine,
 much ink has been spilt trying to explain how best to understand them.

Some people think they are the hippopotamus and the crocodile,
 because the behemoth is found in the water like the Hippo
 and the leviathan has tough skin like the crocodile.
 But I don't know of any crocodile that breaths fire out of its nostrils.
 And the Hippo doesn't swing a tail like a cedar, it's only a tiny little thing.

Others have interpreted these verses as describing dinosaurs;
 it's proof, they argue, that humans and dinosaurs have coexisted.

But I think there's a much more convincing interpretation.
 Think back to the opening chapters of the book of Job.
 Which characters are introduced to us in those chapters?
 We have Job and his family of course,
 and then the scene changes and we enter into the heavenly throne room
 with God having a conversation with Satan.

We're with Job all the way through the book,
 and now we have heard from God again as the book draws near its end,
 but Satan is never heard of again,
 unless he's the one we're meant to identify with these ferocious beasts.

Think about it! Throughout the Bible Satan is referred with animal metaphors:
 He's that ancient serpent, a ferocious Lion, a dragon in the book of Revelation.
 And it forms a neat symmetry to have him reappear,
 (or at least made reference to) as the book comes to a close.
 I think these animals are meant to represent the Devil himself.

So what do we learn as these descriptions unfold?

The principal thing we learn
is that while Satan is much more powerful than any of us,
he is certainly no match for God.

In the middle of both descriptions we find verses that put Satan in his place.

While the Behemoth ranks first among the works of God, ch 40:19,
its Maker can approach it with his sword.
And while the mere sight of the Leviathan is overpowering,
Ch 41:11 reminds us that everything under heaven belongs to God.

And so with this knowledge in place,

we discover some answers to the questions asked by God
as Ch 40 ends and as Ch 41 begins .

Can anyone capture the Behemoth by the eyes, or trap it and pierce its nose? "Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook or tie down its tongue with a rope? Can you put a cord through its nose or pierce its jaw with a hook? Will it keep begging you for mercy? Will it speak to you with gentle words? Will it make an agreement with you for you to take it as your slave for life? Can you make a pet of it like a bird or put it on a leash for the young women in your house?

The answer to these questions is that no human can do these things, but God can.

God can trap Satan, *and* pierce his nose, *and* lead him by a cord.

God can make a pet of Satan, putting him on a leash.

And isn't this exactly what we see God doing in the opening chapters of this book? Ch 1:12 The LORD said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."

I'll let you go this far Satan, but no more.

Sometimes the only difference between life and death is a thin cord of rope.

You'll know this to be true if you've ever been abseiling,
or if you've ever had to wear a harness while working from a height.
And I think what Job is teaching us here in these final chapters
is that the only difference between all out spiritual warfare
and the relative stability we enjoy is the lead that God has but Satan on.
What is God doing when we suffer?
God wasn't indifferent to Job's suffering, and nor was he inactive.
All the while he was holding Satan back
so that things didn't become as bad as they might otherwise have been.

And, given our vantage point all these thousands of years later,

we can see that God has been active in the face of evil in other ways as well.

Through His death and resurrection,

Jesus Christ provided the ultimate foil to the devil's aims.

With all the terror in the news in recent years

I've noticed not a few journalists try to answer the question:

What is it that the terrorists want?

Do they really want a religious outcome
or do they simply want to be accepted in their home countries?
It's a difficult question to answer.

But what is it that Satan wants as he seeks to terrorise us?
What was the point of all the suffering inflicted upon Job?
Satan wanted Job to be so upset and despondent that he'd curse God,
Satan's aim was to break the relationship between the man and his God,
because he knows that our salvation is dependent on that relationship.
But what do we learn from the NT?
Through Jesus God has reconciled to himself all things ...
by making peace through Christ's blood, shed on the cross.

Our law enforcement officers and our intelligence people
are working really hard to foil the plans of those who want to hurt us.
Often they are successful, praise God.
Christ on the other hand, *once and for all*, has foiled the plans of Satan.
He'll still try his best, he'll still try the same trick with us as he did with Job;
casting us low in order to tempt us to give up on God.
But if we resist his ploy then he won't be able to harm us in the long run
because, in Christ, God has acted to secure our relationship for all time.

And God will act again in the future.
The Bible ends with the picture of the Devil being done away with for good;
the final victory of Christ over the one who seeks to harm his people.
Suffering is a reality but it's certainly not forever.
The devil will be gone, and we will remain with God in paradise.
As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17 our light and momentary troubles are achieving for
us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

I'd like to take you back to Emperor Nero.
Was he as bad as people commonly think?
Well, dig a little deeper and we see he wasn't as bad as all that:
There are other ancient sources who indicate that
Nero was out of town when the fire happened,
and that on his return he helped to search for the lost
and that he helped house the homeless.
So there's more to the story: He did care and he did respond.

And there's more to the story of what *God is doing* when the hard times hit.
He's restraining evil,
He's planning our reward in eternity where there will be no suffering.
And in Christ he's already acted to ensure
that we'll receive this reward despite the devil's plans
So let's not give up him, because he does care and he is acting.