

So later today it is the final round of the Open Golf at St Andrews and there will be lots of testing putts, of trials and tribulation, suffering fans and this is just sport!

One person who isn't playing is Seve Ballesteros. You may be aware that in Oct 2008 he was diagnosed as having a brain tumour, which has required a number of operations as well as chemotherapy. It had been hoped he would make a visit to the Open Golf but has not been well enough to. In a recent interview in the Daily Telegraph he said this, ""Every day I see the unbelievable things that happen to people, and I don't understand why. I think, 'Why does it happen to those people'. I think the same thing with myself. Why did it happen to me? It is unfair, because I have been a good person."

What we have been seeing over these weeks as we look at the book of Job are questions about suffering and certainly in the section we look at today from Job 29-37 we see Job firmly convinced that his suffering is unfair and that God is not being just.

In Chapters 29-30 Job proclaims again his innocence. In Chapter 29 he remembers his life before all the suffering:

V4 when God's friendship blessed his house

V6 when life was rich and good

But now things were different and in Chapter 30 he laments his situation

V9 he is mocked

V17 he gets no rest from pain

V20 he doesn't seem to get an answer from God.

And, as we have been seeing, he can't understand why. As we saw from that brief section of Chap 31 we had read Job knew he was blameless, v6, "let God weigh me in honest scales and he will know that I am blameless." He goes on in the rest of the chapter to describe all the things he has not done wrong and finally v35 he signs his defence papers and demands God to answer.

It is as if he had thrown down the gauntlet to God and demands an answer. Humanly we might expect the next bit of the book to be an answer from God.

But not yet, in fact as we will see next week not at all does God answer Job's charge. Instead as we see from 32:1&2 he has left his three friends speechless and now someone else speaks up to tell job why he was suffering.

This is Elihu who as we see from v2 was the original angry young man. Have you ever been with someone who just won't stop talking? They hardly seem to pause for breath and you just can't get a word in edgeways. That is Elihu. The next six chapters are full of his explanation of why Job was suffering. Every so often the narrator adds in "Then Elihu said" as is he thought perhaps he should have paused for a response from Job, but none ever came.

However, what Elihu said doesn't seem to carry much weight for Job doesn't answer him nor does God mention him in the summary at the end.

However he does raise some interesting points, which is more that some sermons do!

1. Suffering equals punishment.

What we have been seeing so far is the idea that Job was suffering because he had done wrong. The three friends were firmly of the opinion that suffering is God's judgement and punishment for sin.

Elihu also was of this opinion as we see from 34:11, "He repays a man for what he has done; he brings upon him what his conduct deserves."

We recognise that is sometimes true. Going back to the golf, the misdemeanours of Tiger Woods are well known and he knew that when he came back into golf he would have a tough time from the crowds because of what he had done. Certainly in some interviews last week the question was asked of what kind of reception he would get. He has done wrong recognises his guilt and is in many ways suffering because of it. However as we have been seeing that is not always true and suffering very often has nothing to do with what we have done or not done.

2. Suffering and repentance

However Elihu has another perspective on suffering and that is that God uses suffering as a warning, as a means of encouraging people to change their ways. We see this in the section we had read where firstly Elihu assured Job that, "For God does speak—now one way, now another— though man may not perceive it" (33:14) and secondly he explains why God speaks, "he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, to preserve his soul from the pit" (33:16-18). He continues the same thread in vs19-30 where Elihu takes the idea of someone who is ill, v19, and wants to die but God has mercy on him and he is restored to health and v27 the man recognises his sin and the mercy of God, he sees that the suffering was brought to turn him around. Elihu points us to a loving God who uses suffering as a means of redemption, what CS Lewis would describe as a "severe mercy". In this way suffering is a sign of mercy rather than wrath.

Now again there is an element of truth in this in that sometimes suffering does have that effect on the person to make them turn from their wrong. CS Lewis picks up this idea in his book 'The Problem of Pain', where he described pain as "God's megaphone". He wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience but shouts to us in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." He then goes on to say, "No doubt pain as God's megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead us to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul."

Now certainly this can happen pain can cause people to reflect upon their lives and bring about a change of direction. Some people I know told me that this was the way they came to faith. Their eldest child was seriously ill and taken into hospital. As they sat in the waiting area the hospital Chaplain came and he sat with them. During that time he read the Bible with them and prayed with them. Eventually the boy did get better. They parents didn't forget what had been a help to them on that night and they went along to a local church where that experience was built upon and finally nurtured into a true faith

In a sense we see something of this in Tiger Woods who in an interview last week said, ""I'm trying to become a better player and a better person." So Elihu's words do stack up. God can use suffering to bring about repentance however, with Job his words are aimed at the wrong person for as we have seen from the beginning God's view of Job was that he was blameless, "Then the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." (Job 1:8)

So while what Elihu said may be true in some circumstances it was not with Job and so is not the answer to why Job was suffering.

However for some of us it may be that God is trying to speak to us through the difficulties we are experiencing and calling us to repent of some wrong in our lives. Let me encourage us to stop and reflect. As I say please it is not an infallible rule. It is not always a case of there's suffering so I must be being punished nor is it always the case there's suffering so God must be saying something through it – but he might.

3. suffering and the testing of faith

What we do know is that Job was suffering not because he had sinned and was being nor because God was calling him to repent of sin. Job was suffering because he was good and because his faith was being tested. The devil was out to destroy his faith to reveal Job as a fair weather believer in God while God allowed Satan to act to show that Job's faith was real.

Sometimes suffering is just that a test, a trial which can strengthen our faith in God. We saw early on in these studies when we looked at Acts 14:22, where Paul and Barnabas taught the early Christians saying "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God".

Peter in 1 Peter 1:7 spoke of his Christian readers suffering grief in all kinds of trials, "These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed". I'm sure many of us would affirm that it is suffering that has deepened our faith in God despite the pain of that suffering.

As we have been seeing over these weeks there is no clear answer to the problem of why people suffer and especially to the question as to why the innocent like Job suffer but we are seeing here that suffering can bring us closer to God and that as we saw last week is wisdom as we engage with what is happening in our lives in the context of a God who is both powerful and good and seek in all things to submit to him and to come closer to him.

It reminds me of John Eddison's hymn:

Father although I cannot see
the future you have planned,
and though the path is sometimes dark
and hard to understand:
yet give me faith, through joy and pain,
to trace your loving hand

Let's come back to the golf. Seve Ballesteros has been suffering yet he feels he hasn't done anything to deserve it and there is a sense of injustice even anger. Tiger Woods recognises he has done wrong and is suffering justly and so he feels guilty.

The gospel message focussed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ tells us yes we are guilty but we are not being punished for our sin because Jesus took the punishment we deserve. However, because we are guilty we can't be angry because we deserve punishment. So the gospel encourages us to ask what is suffering for and the gospel tells us we share in the sufferings of Jesus and that God the Father uses suffering to test and strengthen our faith.

The gospel if you like is the fairway between the two bunkers of anger and guilt.

My prayer for all of us who suffer is that we will stay on that gospel fairway and recognise that our Lord and Saviour suffered and that steering away from the bunker of anger and the bunker of guilt our suffering will draw us closer to God, will encourage us to look and trace his hand and through it we will grow in our walk with God.

So we draw to a close the debates of Job with his friends without coming to any clear conclusion as to why suffering happens. However we have been reminded over and again of the twin themes of the sovereignty and goodness of God who as we are reminded in Romans 8:28, "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" even in the intense pain that Job was suffering and even in the pains you and I go through.