

A Sound Mind

Readings: Job 16:1-17, Ecclesiastes 8:14-17

Every time there's a big disaster in the news it's followed by a thing I like to call the jerk Olympics – where people all over the world compete to see who can come up with the most insensitive response in the wake of the disaster. These can range from the cheekily thought-provoking – for example, every time there's a mass shooting in America the Onion, a satirical news organisation, runs an article titled “‘No Way To Prevent This,’ Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens”. The problem starts when we get to the category I call “What's Wrong With You? Please Stop Talking”. These are the people who know exactly why it happened: God is angry at someone and it's usually a group that the speaker **really** hates. Take the recent Hurricane Harvey which hit North and Central America, killing 77 people. It didn't take long for some people to come to the conclusion that the hurricane was God's punishment for Houston electing an openly gay mayor. However, considering that she was elected in 2009 and left office in 2016, I can't help but wonder if God was procrastinating on that one.

Now many of us would have an issue with this type of thinking. Some of us might even call it bad theology. But what is theology really? It comes from two Greek words *theos* – “God” and *logia* – “sayings”. Put them together and you get “sayings about God” or “the study of God”. Put simply, theology is how you view God and how that view affects your everyday life. Don't believe me that your view of God influences your life? Well in 2008, researchers from Baylor University released the results of a multi-year study on how Americans view God.¹ And they found that Americans tended to fall into one of four views of God:

- 28% primarily see God as an **authoritative God**. In this view God is an ever-watchful parent you want to please, and if you don't please God you will be punished. The leadership coach Brian Gast notes that a leader who has this view of God will emphasise rules and policies and may be less forgiving of violators.² When asked in the Baylor study about the role of God in 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, those who believed in an authoritative God were most-likely to think that God was punishing society for sin.
- 22% primarily see God as a **benevolent God**. In this view God is caring and loves everybody equally. A leader who has this view of God may see their responsibility as being caring for and supporting their employees. Those who believe in a benevolent God will focus on a fireman who escaped, or the people who rebuild homes, or the divine providence of someone missing a flight that crashed on 9/11.
- 21% primarily see God as a **critical God**. This God is making a list, he's checking it twice, and he knows whether you're naughty or nice. Except instead of coal you're getting eternal damnation. In this view, especially popular with the poor and the exploited, God may not deliver justice in this world but he certainly delivers it out in the next. A leader who has this view of God appeals to principles, morals, and values to guide the culture but may have little patience with people who can't get with the program. Those who believe in a critical God said that no matter what happens now; God will have the final word.
- 24% primarily see God as a **distant God**. In this view God is present but he doesn't tell me what to do with my life. A leader who holds this view will emphasise personal responsibility and accountability. Those who believed in a distant God were most likely to see the 9/11

¹ Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Americans' views of God shape attitudes on key issues,” USA Today, accessed November 3, 2017, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-10-07-1Agod07_CV_N.htm.

² Brian Gast, “To Understand People, Understand How They Perceive God,” Quadrant, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://quadrantinternational.net/musings/how-people-perceive-god/>.

terror attacks amount to a sign of man's inhumanity, not God's action or judgment, and a storm as just a storm.

The chances are that you can probably see yourself as fitting into one or two of these categories. This is your theology. And where do we get our views of God from? The correct Protestant answer is the Bible but we also get them from church leaders, creeds, personal experiences, writers, political leaders, tv shows, movies, and songs. We also get them from what we might call "God-isms" or "bumper sticker Christianity" – little phrases we can pull out our pockets when we don't know what to say. "God helps those who help themselves." "God will never give you more than you can handle." "Everything happens for a reason." Anybody who has been on the receiving end of these sayings knows that they're either a) not helpful, b) overly-simplistic, c) or just flat-out wrong.

And that brings us to the story of Job. When bad things happen we often ask the question "why do bad things happen to good people?" And sometimes we'll remember that there's a book about a guy called Job who suffered and we think "ah-ha! This book will tell me why I'm suffering!"

And the book of Job is interesting because we often think of it as being a story of Job on trial when in reality the central theme of the book is God on trial. The book starts with God sitting amongst his heavenly court when a figure called '*the satan*' steps forward. And I want to touch on something real quick. A lot of simplified English bibles give this figure the capital S, i.e. the guy with the horns, but the original Hebrew doesn't do this. In the Old Testament, "*satan*" is quite a versatile title and is even sometimes applied to servants of God. The title means adversary, accuser, or challenger, and interestingly enough it actually functioned as a legal term in Hebrew society. The plaintiff or prosecutor was given the title "*the satan*" because they were bringing forth a challenge against another party. And this is a big pointer to the fact that we are witnessing a legal drama. And God starts by praising the righteousness of Job – a man who is blameless, reveres God, and shuns evil. But the Challenger replies by asking God if he's ever considered that Job is just gaming the system. Job knows that all he has to do to get rewards in life is to keep God happy. But surely if God were to remove his blessings then he would truly see Job's true colours. And so God allows the Challenger to bring Job suffering in order to build his case against God.

And so Job suffers. And his friends come to comfort him, at least at first. They sit with him in silence for several days. But then Job's comforters start making accusations against him. They are convinced that God has ordained a just world and so if you are suffering you are being punished for something you've done wrong. The world is very black and white in their theology. So they start harassing Job, insisting that he has some unconfessed sin that he's being punished for. Maybe he's being punished for something his family did. But if he'd just confess to something God will stop this punishment and he'll be in His good books again. It's like in one of those crime dramas when a crooked cop has an innocent person in the interrogation room and is screaming at the prisoner to just sign the confession and it will be over. And on some level I can see where they're coming from. If you read Job a chapter a day instead of as a whole you can quickly find yourself agreeing with Job's comforters if you've forgotten that they're the ones making the argument. After all, a big theme in the Old Testament is that sin has consequences, sometimes extreme consequences. The theology seems to line up on paper.

But Job continues to protest his innocence. This is the hill he is quite literally prepared to die on. And he even declares to his comforters that God will be his defender. But he still blames God for his suffering. Job's theology isn't all that different from his comforters'. He believes that God's justice means that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer. But if he's an innocent man that means that it's God who's in the wrong. From Job's perspective God has really dropped the ball and

needs to rethink his policies. He screams at God and demands that He take the dock and explain Himself.

And God appears. But he doesn't cuddle Job. In fact, to be honest, God kinda comes across as a bit uncaring. He meets Job's challenge by asking if Job was there when God placed the earth on its pillars. Tell me, have you been to the deepest depths of the ocean or the reaches of space? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Because if you think you can do this job feel free to show me how it's done.

And I think it's at this point that Job realises all the arguments he had prepared in his head aren't going to work. There's no way he can win. Instead he humbles himself and realises that he doesn't have the full picture of what's going on. But the thing that stands out is that God doesn't come across as wrathful in this exchange. He's not picking Job up the collar and leaning in sneering "Now see here, you little punk". God's anger is reserved for Job's self-righteous and assured comforters. God tells the comforters that He is angry at them because "you have not said what is right about me, as my servant Job did". He then commands them to make sacrifices while Job will pray for them not to be punished for their foolishness.

The only problem is that we've come to the end of the book and we don't have an answer for why we suffer. We just know that there was a fella named Job who suffered, that his suffering wasn't a punishment from God, and that his idiot friends insisted that it was. Such is the way of wisdom literature.

One of the genres of writing we have in the Bible is the wisdom literature. Comprising Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, these books make up a deeply philosophical reflection on what it means to live a good life in this world we've been put in. The first of these books, Proverbs, is probably the one that first comes to mind for many people when wisdom in the Bible is mentioned and for good reason. Proverbs is a deeply optimistic book about the pursuit of wisdom. It opens with a series of reflections on the value of wisdom, calling it more valuable than silver and gold, extolling the reader to seek wisdom if they want to avoid falling into ruin. The author moves on into reflections on what it means to be wise in everyday life. For example, consider the wise ant – it labours to store provisions in summer. You, on the other hand, if you do not cease to be lazy you will find that poverty comes upon you like a thief (Proverbs 6:6-11). Or, "If the righteous receive their due on earth, how much more the ungodly and the sinner!" (Proverbs 11:31). Simply put, the message of Proverbs is that wisdom is awesome and if you have it you'll live a sweet life.

The author of Ecclesiastes, our second wisdom book, isn't so sure. Some of you may be confused at this point – after all, didn't the same person write Proverbs and Ecclesiastes? Well the truth is that we don't know for sure who wrote Ecclesiastes. Unlike Proverbs, the author only ever identifies himself as *Qoheleth* – a Hebrew title simply meaning teacher. And Qoheleth seems to think that life is an absurd joke. So much so that he starts his book with "meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is utterly meaningless!" He's not exactly concerned with easing the reader into the book. And from this point on Ecclesiastes reads as a deconstruction and criticism of how humans try to give purpose to their lives. And he comes to three conclusions which are sometimes referred to as the three disturbing truths of Ecclesiastes.³ The **first** is the march of time – the world went on before you and the world will keep going on long after you're gone; and the chances are that no one will remember you in 100 years' time. The **second** is that none of us can escape death. It doesn't matter if you spent your life making wise decisions or foolish ones. It doesn't matter if you were a righteous person who

³ The Bible Project has a great overview of the themes of Ecclesiastes: The Bible Project, "The Book of Ecclesiastes" (video), August 17, 2016, accessed November 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeUiuSK81-0&t=227s>.

dedicated their lives to taking care of orphans or if you were a mass murderer on death row. We all meet the same fate in the end. The **third** is that you can't control your life. This may sound strange - didn't we just read a whole book about how you can control your life through making wise decisions? Well Qoheleth's criticism of those who think this is that they aren't taking chance into consideration. "The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favour to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all." Simply put, you never know what lies around the corner.

One thing we have to understand about the book of Ecclesiastes: much like modern translations of Job's "the satan", modern translations of Qoheleth's "meaningless" are also slightly misleading. The word *hevel* appears 33 times in Ecclesiastes and while it can be translated as meaningless it's better understood in this context as vapour, smoke, or enigma. Consider smoke or vapour - it's a fleeting thing that you can never fully grasp. You can try but just when you think you have it it slips through your fingers. So when Qoheleth says that everything is meaningless he is not commanding us down a path of nihilistic apathy; he is stating that life is full of enigmas. And this is the major theme of Ecclesiastes – life is an enigma that doesn't seem to want to play by our rules.

When he states in 11:14 that there are righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked who get what the righteous deserve and that this is meaningless, what he is saying is that this is something that is incredibly hard for us to wrap our minds around. And this is difficult to wrap our minds around because we live in a just world don't we?

But the problem is that we don't live in a just world. In fact, because the theme of this sermon is on cultivating a sound mind, it's worth mentioning a view that we might refer to as a fallacy. A fallacy is a belief based on unsound reasoning. This view is one that the Old Testament scholar John Walton calls "the retribution principle" in his work on Job. Walton defines this as "the conviction that the righteous will prosper and the wicked will suffer, both in proportion to their respective righteousness and wickedness".⁴ Or what goes around comes around. In layman's terms: You get what you deserve.

This belief is most commonly seen in the stories we tell. Good always triumphs in movies and the bad guys get their just deserts. In its more insidious form it presents itself as "victim blaming" – the act of saying that the victim of injustice did something to deserve it. The common example is asking the victim of rape what they were wearing or what they did to lead their rapist on. Or consider that a recent survey in America on the causes of poverty found that when given two options, 53% of White Evangelicals agreed that the poor are poor because they're lazy.⁵ 65% of non-religious Americans, on the other hand, choose the second option – that difficult circumstances are more to blame for poverty. Consider how much of the discourse leading up to our recent election in New Zealand centred on beneficiary-bashing, with people characterising those on the benefit as being druggies or lazy cheats, despite the fact that only 2% of beneficiaries failed drug tests and tax dodging is a monumentally bigger loss on our economy than benefit fraud. Psychologists believe that the reason this way of thinking is so persuasive is because it gives us a sense of control over our lives. After all, if bad things only happen to bad people then I'm safe because I would never think of myself as a bad person.

⁴ John H. Walton, *Job: From Biblical Text... to Contemporary Life*, The Niv Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 39.

⁵ Julie Zauzmer, "Christians twice as likely to blame a person's poverty on lack of effort, poll finds," *Independent*, 3 August 2017, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/christians-poverty-blame-lack-effort-twice-likely-us-white-evangelicals-faith-religion-a7875541.html>.

But Job and Ecclesiastes don't let us get away with this simplistic thinking that suffering is about whether someone is good vs bad. After all, God is full of wrath at Job's comforters for insisting that Job did something to deserve his suffering. And Ecclesiastes reminds that us that life is just too full of randomness and injustice and sometimes getting through life is just about putting one foot in front of the other.

But let's be honest with ourselves; would our grief really be taken away by knowing an intellectual theorem for why we're suffering? I'm a pretty intellectual guy and one of my first reactions when I encounter something that makes me uncomfortable is to intellectualise it. Make it play by my rules. But all the theories about suffering seem to fall apart when you're the one facing down the barrel of uncertainty and grief.

A brilliant young Christian writer named Randy Hardman wrote this a year after losing his wife to a car accident: *"There is a reason why, I think, so many of the philosophers, theologians, poets, and novelists who have attempted to treat the topic of evil through the centuries have found themselves in logical, existential, and emotional nihilism. It's because this is where evil leads. There is no comprehension of The Shoah; there is no sufficient rationalization for genocide of any group of individuals (including those spoken about in the Bible); God's glory is a terrible reason for tsunamis that take out entire nations or planes that fly into buildings. There is no logical theory as to why a child loses a parent or why a three year old develops incurable cancer."*⁶

So where are we to turn to in order to keep a sound mind when life gets hard?

The philosopher Peter Rollins writes: *"The truth of faith is not articulated in offering reasons for suffering, but rather in drawing alongside those who suffer, standing with them, and standing up for them. This is pastoral care at its most luminous."*⁷

In times of suffering we draw into the community of believers and allow ourselves to be loved and sometimes even carried. And as a community of believers this is why we need to be empathetic to people who are suffering and ignore our tendency to blame them for their problems.

Lastly, or perhaps first of all, we cling to the picture of God we see in Jesus – the God who suffers with us. I outlined the theology of this in my sermon *The God That Suffers* about Jürgen Moltmann's post-Holocaust theology. In the figure of Christ on the cross we see a God who cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?".

We recently lost our friend and sister Bridget to suicide. I remember at the funeral we were told about her faith and that her creed was "No matter what happens I know God understands me". And that's the God we follow, no not just follow, the God we are loved by. Not an uncaring distant God in our time of suffering, but a God who understands us.

⁶ This was originally from a piece titled "The More Knowledge, The More Pain". Unfortunately it is no longer online.

⁷ Peter Rollins, *The Orthodox Heretic: and Other Impossible Tales* (n.p.: Paraclete Press, 2009), 49.