

Patricia Goode draws out insights for counsellors of victims of severe trauma from the life of Job.

Comfort from Job

The best thing Job's friends did ... was to sit with him quietly for a week

Post-traumatic stress disorder can follow rape, assault or major life-threatening accident or illness. It also occurs after seeing shattering incidents happen to others, especially when the person is called upon to help the victims: examples are serious train or air accidents and events such as the football disaster at Hillsborough.

Victims of such trauma need help with their anxiety and depression and particularly to relieve their feelings of guilt. Even though it is obvious that the victim was in no way responsible for what happened a complex of guilt can build up, making that person feel that in some way they were to blame.

This article explores possibilities for helping such victims using the pastoral theology of the book of Job. The book of Job grapples with the problem of suffering, especially the affliction that may come to a perfectly innocent and good person. Applying the book may lead the sufferer to find a path to submission before, and a new relationship with, an all-powerful and sovereign God.¹

Moreover, the book of Job demonstrates, through the role given to Job's friends, how easy it is to engage in careless pastoral theology and mistaken pastoral approaches to suffering people. The best thing Job's friends did for him was to sit with him quietly for a week at the beginning. In this they showed real empathy, only to spoil it afterwards by their misguided approach. Job raises

many classic questions about human suffering. This article considers three such questions.

Question 1: Is suffering the result of sin?

The doctrine of the Fall and subsequent corruption of every member of the human race would explain Job's suffering in traditional religious terms. His three friends assume that God always rewards good and punishes evil; therefore Job's suffering must have arisen because he has sinned. But to this Job replies that he is innocent as far as it is possible for a man to be: he knows that he has led a good life. The very beginning of the book states that Job was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. His suffering was certainly not the result of his sin.

Few people get through life without at some stage suffering some sort of trauma, be it ill health or experiencing tragedy. It is usually genuinely no fault of their own but in spite of knowing this they still tend to react with 'What have I done to deserve this?' or 'Why has God allowed this to happen to me?'

Just as the story of Job shows that his suffering was not the result of his sin, so the suffering of people in crisis is seldom the consequence of their sin. This knowledge may well relieve them of the burden of guilt that so often prolongs the suffering after a traumatic experience. Some views relate sin

and suffering in terms of the equation theory (ie. exact retribution). This closes the doors to many developments and the value of Job is that it reopens some of those doors.

Counsellors should avoid trying to explain suffering as punishment for sin: this is where Job's three friends went wrong. In addition counsellors should not explain the failure of prayer for healing in terms of lack of faith or of unconfessed sin. Patients can obtain comfort and encouragement from Job and his experiences. In the end Job was restored, but it was in God's way and in God's time.

Jesus himself was emphatic about the mistaken belief that the wicked always perish while the righteous always flourish. When told about some Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices, he replied, 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no!'² On another occasion Jesus was confronted by a man who had been blind since birth and was asked by his disciples, 'Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' He replied, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned'.³

Of course, there are times when suffering can be the result of unwise action or sin: for example smoking related-illness and sexually transmitted diseases. The sin or carelessness of others can indeed cause suffering. The drunken driver who kills or maims causes suffering to an entire family, not just the victim.

Recovery from trauma can possibly be hindered by unresolved sin and it may fall to the counsellor to point these things out in a sensitive and gentle way. The well-known passage in James 5 emphasises the need to confess sin when seeking healing.⁴ Job was himself aware of this when he asks Bildad, 'How can a mortal be right before God?'

Question 2: Why do bad things happen to good people?

Although Job deals with a good man to whom bad things happened, the answer to the question 'why' is not immediately clear, although there are some pointers. The main questions are, 'Can human beings have a disinterested faith in God, not fearing punishment or seeking reward?' and, 'Are human beings capable, in the midst of suffering, of asserting faith in God and speaking of him without expecting return?'

It seems that Job's suffering was inflicted because of his supreme righteousness, making him a sort of test case. Job needed to be seen to remain faithful to God for God's own sake.

Question 3: Is it wrong to be angry with God?

It is not uncommon for the sufferer of trauma or

stress to feel extreme anger with God. Why does God allow this? Why doesn't he do something to stop it? Job experienced some of these emotions: confusion, disillusionment, frustration and even anger.⁵

It will be of comfort to the distressed patient to know that he or she is not alone in experiencing such feelings; even a righteous man like Job did for a time although never completely losing his faith in God.

The idea of venting anger and frustration towards God as Job did may provoke uneasiness and guilt both in counsellor and patient. However, God understood Job's anger and ultimately commended him. C S Lewis, in the journal he kept about his wife's death (*A Grief Observed*) recorded that at the moment of his greatest need God, who had seemed always available to him, suddenly seemed absent. But in spite of suffering a patient can keep in communication with God especially when God's love is perceived through very ordinary people.

Warnings

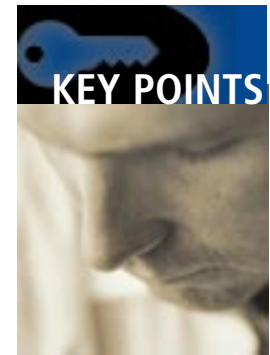
There is a very real warning to counsellors here. The three friends were concerned with their view of how God acted and their thoughts about the theory of retribution, rather than with actually helping and comforting Job. They only added to Job's misery because they neither pointed him towards a positive answer nor offered him sensitive pastoral support. People who have suffered trauma may be angry with God and say terrible things about him. It does not help to propound personal theories, however deeply felt, or to correct their theology. Care must be taken in the choice of biblical texts. Some may appear inappropriate and unhelpful at the time.

Job is a book for anyone who knows a suffering person. Learn how not to help a sufferer!

The book of Job with its story of an innocent man's suffering encourages looking forward to Christ, that other, but this time perfect, innocent sufferer. All the 'meanings' of suffering converge on Christ.⁶

It is easy to dismiss the book of Job as too difficult to understand and inappropriate for today's living. However, Francis Andersen, formerly Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Archaeology, describes it as 'the story of one man who held on to his life in God with a faith that survived the torment of utter loss and expanded into new realms of wonder and delight'.⁷ It is possible to show that Job can well be used as an extra tool by Christian crisis counsellors.

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KEY POINTS

The book of Job gives valuable insights into the pastoral management of post-traumatic stress disorder. Whilst suffering can be a result of our own or others' sin, accidents, sudden bereavement and illness also happen inexplicably and indiscriminately to innocent people. In these situations it is both appropriate and healthy for sufferers to vent anger and frustration towards God, and the best approach for counsellors wanting to help people hold onto faith is to sit quietly and offer pastoral support rather than attempted explanations. Overall Job points us forward to Christ, through whose innocent suffering God worked sovereignly to bring great blessing.

References

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3. John 9:1,2
4. James 5:14
5. Job 23:2
6. Andersen FI. *Job, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976
7. Ibid