

Ultimate Reality

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, so we're starting a study this morning on the book of Job and I hope that it will change your life. That's what we're hoping for. That's what we always hope for with God's word, whether it's word read, preached or listened to on your iPad or iPhone or whatever it happens to be. We're looking for God's word to change our lives and I'm looking for you to come to our worship times expecting God to change your life as I need to as I study God's word and study this passage and this book of the Old Testament. For those of you who hope to be here over the next number of weeks, can I implore you to read the whole of Job first? Twice. So I'd like you to go home at some point over this week if you can. If you've never done it before, if you have done it before, even better. But do it again. Read the book of Job twice. It's really important that you get the kind of, the overall view, the overarching picture that you don't, it's a really difficult book to preach from and a very difficult book to break up into 12. But if you can take that, if you have an overarching understanding of the whole book, then that is really helpful. So please take time to read the book through twice. That would be very helpful. And then I think it will mean more to you as we look through it. Because it's a great book because it speaks of the nature of God and of faith. And if you're a Christian then obviously that's very significant. If you're not a Christian then it's just, if not more significant, that you consider the whole reality of faith and what that looks like. And it speaks about life.

It will blow your mind. It's that kind of book. It's not like any other book in the Bible. It's a book that will blow your mind if you are open to the word of God and the Spirit of God working through His word. Because it deals with so many, so many things, so many interesting and challenging and real issues that we face in our Christian lives.

It deals with the whole temptation we have to put God in a box. You know, we're great at that. We are always trying to put God in a box. Trying to believe that we have all the answers about God. That we kind of know God really well and that we can answer all the difficulties that there might be. This is a dangerous book. It's enigmatic. It's inscrutable. It's provocative. It's mysterious. And it's revelatory. It does tell us about God. Maybe things we didn't expect and things we weren't looking for. But I'm guaranteeing it will challenge your understanding of the person and the nature and the character of God. It speaks about faith. And it will challenge what we think about faith. Can I put out something provocative even at this point in the sermon? That faith is God's gift. And as believers with God's gift, we are more secure with the gift of faith now than our forebears in the original perfection in Eden. And that's part of what this book is about. It's telling us about how great God's gift of faith is to those who believe whatever happens in life.

It speaks about and challenges what we think constitutes a good life. What is it that you think will make up a good life? The book of Job will challenge that and make you think about that. And it will also challenge what we think about easy believism, particularly through the responses and the speeches of Job's four friends and the way they deal with Job's suffering and his pain and his provocative, dangerous questioning of God. It will challenge our easy believism, the trite belief that we know all that there is to know, that we can give quick and easy ABC answers to suffering and to pain and to death and to loss. It challenges a cold orthodoxy and a compassionless understanding of the Christian faith that doesn't care about people's feelings and people's needs and people's reality that makes snap judgments on what God is doing in the life of other people just by looking at the outside of their lives. So to boil it down, I think Job will challenge us with two questions, why you believe or maybe why you don't believe and what it is that you actually believe. And therefore it's going to be an important and a significant book for all of us. If you're coming along to church at all, I imagine that these are questions that you think about, that you're not merely coming for kind of ritualistic reasons or just to try and look good or whatever, don't think so. But why you believe and what we believe, that's very important, what we believe, that we believe what God reveals to us about himself and that is always going to be hugely challenging for us and it's going to move us, it's going to be like dynamite under the seat because that's what God does. We don't come to God and say, I've got it all together, I am what I am. We are people who humbly seek as Christians to be transformed by his grace and changed and drawn closer to him. So the book of Job is amazing, provocative and inscrutable revelation if you can mix that kind of word, words together. The first nine verses we've read by way of introduction, what can we say? Job's a real person, he's not make believe, he's not a figment of people's imagination, he's not just a fabled character.

In Ezekiel 14 we have Ezekiel saying when he's speaking about the sin of the city of Jerusalem, he says, even of these three men, Noah, believe it, Noah, Daniel, we believe in Daniel, or Job were in it, that is the land, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, he says that twice in that chapter. And of course Jesus accepts the book of Job and the story of Job as part of God's living word of the Old Testament, a real person who really lived, we don't know exactly when he lived, probably sometime in between Noah and Abraham. Very early, it's the oldest book of the Bible. This is a very significant book because it's the oldest book in the Bible. It's one of the earliest recorded stories in the Bible because it's saying something very important about God and about the nature of faith right at the beginning as it were of the Old Testament before the covenant with

[7 : 27] Abraham was formalized. But the reality is that it tells this amazing story. We don't have time to go through the story today, but you'll need to know the story I think as we go through it. Don't just, don't take it in chunks and find out the story as you go along. It's not that kind of book. It's much better knowing the story from beginning to end. So you've got Job who is rich and prosperous and who has a really great life.

And Satan is in the presence of God and God asks Satan about Job. Have you considered my servant Job? Satan says, he doesn't believe for no reason. And so God allows Satan to test him. And there's two major tests. The first is he loses all his wealth and all his family. Satan says, okay, but if he let me touch his flesh, then he'll curse God and die. And so he is made desperately ill, but he stays alive. That's the second great test.

His family have gone, his wealth has gone, his popularity has gone, his wife has gone, everything has gone. There's nothing there. And really from chapters 3 to 37 you have this wrestling between Job and God and Job throwing out questions towards God and then his three friends who come to comfort him. I don't want to give away too many hints, but you know, the best thing they do is the week they don't see anything. The first week they don't see anything. And that's the best week. Then it goes downhill from there. And they start accusing Job of all kinds of things and that he must be a secret sinner and keeping something from God if God has dealt with him in this way. And it's really just that discussion which brings us to the end of the story, which I'm not going to accept to say that God asks Job to pray for the three, four friends really, because they have said wrong things about God and Job hasn't. And Job then goes on and is blessed for the rest of his life. So that's a very, very quick summary of the story. It's a real person. We don't know who wrote it.

It may have been autobiographical, it may have been Job, it may have been edited by Moses, but we don't know. We do know that it's inspired by God and part of the scriptures that we recognise as God's word. But what I want to say at the beginning, I think this is very important because a lot of people ask about this, is that Job was an Old Testament believer. Okay. He was an Old Testament believer. Yes, within the shadows, he didn't have Christ.

He didn't have the cross. He didn't have all the things we've got. But he was an Old Testament believer. He was, we could equally say that he's a sinner saved by grace, just as every Old Testament believer is, albeit with the shadows that he had to work with, as it were.

[10:31] He is one who knew he was a sinner and who offered sacrifices for himself and his family. And he was one who trusted in the grace and the goodness of God. He speaks about his sin at different parts of the book. Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins?

How can a mortal man be righteous before God? He knew he couldn't be right before God in his own goodness. He knew he was a sinner. He trusted in the grace and goodness and the future saviour that would come, which was symbolised in the sacrificial system that he involved himself in. In other words, he's one of us. He's one of us separated only by being on the other side of the cross. Before the cross, we come after the cross, with all our privileges that we have. Okay? So he's an Old Testament believer. But we are told that he was blameless and upright. Verse 1, this man was blameless and upright. That doesn't mean he was perfect. And it's really important for us to understand that. That he was someone who trusted in God, who confessed God as a saviour and confessed his sin. It's the same way that the New Testament speaks about those going for leadership having to be above reproach. It's about Philippians 1, 10, speaking about us being pure and blameless for the day of Christ. It doesn't mean that we are pure and blameless in our own righteousness and in our own goodness, but rather in the righteousness of our saviour. But it does also mean that Job was someone who didn't have in his life secret sins. He wasn't a hypocrite.

He wasn't secretly living one way and outwardly living another. That's what his friends thought he was doing. They thought, you must be a hypocrite. You must be harboring secret sin.

And that is clearly not the case. Job was a great man. He's one of the greatest men who ever lived. And God is the one who says that he is blameless and upright. And he recognises that. No pretense, no secret sin. We'll maybe come back to that. He was also rich and successful.

Verses 2 to 5 speak about that. The enumerate, the kind of possessions that he had. And he had this great family, his grown up family. It seemed that his life was stable. He was well balanced, well adjusted individual. He enjoyed the good life. He obviously cared for his family greatly. He was a public figure. He's one of the most famous guys in the world at the time. He was reputed and known and was right up there as a really significant and important individual, rich and successful. Now I mentioned these two things because they're important. Blameless and upright, that is that he was a believer who kept short accounts with God. And he was rich and successful. These two facts are important because as the story progresses, they play a significant part in the on-going story of Job. In two ways. First because the devil accuses him before God. What does the devil say? Does

[13 : 52] Job believe God for nothing? You know, does Job, that was the last verse we read, does Job fear God for nothing? In other words, the devil is going to say to God, going into God's presence and saying, look, Job only believes in you because he has a good life.

He doesn't believe in you for nothing. He wants to keep in with you. He wants to worship you because he doesn't want to lose everything he's got. Of course it's easy for Job to be blameless and upright. He's got a great life. He's got a great family. He's one of the richest men in the world. Everything's going well for him. He doesn't believe in you for nothing. That is one of the crucial challenges that comes through this whole book.

The devil wants Job to curse God and die. What does that remind Job? Can I take you back to Genesis 3? Is that not really what Satan tried to do with Adam and Eve? That he wanted them to curse God and die. Job only believes for material gain. If he stays in your company and if he keeps being religious, then he'll carry on being successful. Life is good. God's the icing and I'll keep in with God so that my life will be easy. That's what Satan thought of Job. Does Job fear God for nothing? There's a reason behind his faith. But also this rich and successful stuff and this blameless and upright stuff is very important because as I said, his best friends accuse him to his face. It kind of gets more overt and more less subtle as we go on in the book. It's simplistic certainly and what I'm saying is a kind of simplistic summary. But basically they're saying Job, stop moaning and stop getting on at God for what he's done. God's inscrutable and God is just and you obviously are hiding some kind of secret sin for God to deal with you in this way. They're judgmental, hugely judgmental. But they're bad theology and this is really significant for us. They're bad theology is based on the fumes of truth. Okay? So I'm guaranteeing you if you read what they say, read their apologetics, read their words, read their arguments, I guarantee you'll look at them saying, sounds pretty good. I'm not quite sure whether they're wrong here.

I guarantee that. I certainly did at various points. You'll read it and agree because there's fumes of truth there. They've taken the word and they do say things about God that are true and right, but not in the context and not in their judgment of Job. So please read and consider these words and think about your own attitude as I have to think about mine and remember that right as you read right through it, these friends of Job are given strong words of rebuke from God. God brings strong words of rebuke to them. That's very important. So that's the introduction. What about us? How does Job, how is Job going to apply to us? Well, we are certainly going to need the Holy Spirit. We're going to need to work together to see God in this really complex book and I need God's help. I need your help. I need you to be praying and I need to be praying and we need to be working together to not mess up this book. It's so amazing that we don't want in any way to mess up, and I believe it sets a marker for all humanity and that includes every one of us here and

I pray that you will search your heart as I will need to search mine and find if there's ways in our hearts that need to be dealt with and challenged by what God is revealing about himself. So in the first place, can I go back to the two questions that we started with?

[18 : 16] Why do you believe and what do you believe? Why do you believe? Because this book is about the nature of true faith. Our trust in God is not about God giving us a good material life. We aren't believers because we think that God is rewarding our goodness. You think I know that? We know that we are filthy, wretched and everything else. Why is it? And I've said this so many times in the church, why is it then that outside of the church most people think Christians are moralistic, goodie goodies and that God likes them because they go to church and they do nice things. Maybe it's because we kind of tell them that unconsciously.

When was the last time in our testimony that we shared with people that we were miserable, blind, wretched sinners without Christ and that it's not goodness that has driven us to Him but it is our sin and our failure and our need? What if for any of us everything was stripped away? In our comfort and in our wealth and in our health and in our relationships, what if it was all taken from job? Everything was taken from job. What would it be for us?

What would it be like? Would we take our fist and shake it towards God and say, what kind of God are you? Do you love me or would we just not speak to Him at all? Would we completely deny our faith and say, well absolutely there can't be a God if He allows these things to happen to me. Job says there is more and our faith is more than simply our choice to hang on to some kind of invisible reality of a living God. Our faith is God's gift to us and it's a gift which we are told in Job is the greatest gift of all. It withstands the deepest opposition from Satan and from hell. It is full of promise. It is full of God's character. It is full of God's perseverance with us even when we can't see Him. Even when we don't know He's there and there's plenty of times in Job where Job doesn't know God is there and questions whether God is real and doubts the reality and the love of God will be kept. And the great salvation truth for us that Jesus Christ has, we are covered in His righteousness, in His goodness and we will be kept by Him. So I say again that this book highlights that the faith gifted to redeemed humanity, in this case Job's faith, leaves them or us more secure and strong than the perfect humanity in the Garden of Eden.

Now that's challenging and that begins to ask questions about the whole nature of us and faith and God and His provision for us. Why do you believe? You believe because God has implanted faith in you. And that's a great thing because otherwise sometimes we just look in the mirror and say I can't go on. I just can't keep believing. I'm trying. I'm doing my best but everything's going wrong and I can't hold on anymore. Job, the book of Job says that's okay because faith is my gift to you and it will not depart from you.

I will never leave you. If we say it's not up to you, God will keep you. God will keep us. That is hugely significant. Why do you believe? And can I also say what do you believe?

[22 : 21] And I hope over the next few weeks you will be challenged. And at City Groups, one of the things we're trying to do here is to take what we preach on the Sunday and then share it together in questions at the City Group on a Wednesday at least twice a month and hopefully two things because you can't deal with everything certainly. By questions.

But we can unpack it a bit more. My mic stopped working. Keep going. Okay. So that we unpack it a little bit more and we can ask our question because there should be lots of questions that come through studying a book like this and that we learn a little bit more about listening and taking sermons and not just forgetting about them or not just not applying them or not thinking they're irrelevant but recognizing God is taking and molding and shaping us through them in our own lives and asking these kind of questions in our own lives. So the first one is why do you believe? And then lastly in the second one is what do you believe?

What do you believe about God? I wonder if we were to take a straw poll here of what you believe about God. What kind of things would come up? I'm hoping that the same kind of things would come up. Same core essential realities about God. But sometimes the way we react in our lives, the way we ignore God in our lives, the way we think about God reflects that actually what we believe is not that great because it's not what God has revealed about himself. So I hope we will look at the actual reality of what it is we believe through unpacking this book. We'll learn about God. God initiates this test. It's not Satan. It's God. It's God who says to Satan, when Satan comes into his presence, have you considered my servant job? There's an unlike him on this earth. Does that blow any conceptions you have about God away? Does it make you feel rather uneasy and uncomfortable? God initiated this. It was set up by the maker of heaven and earth. This is not an ordinary event.

This doesn't happen every week. I believe it's a unique event. It's a unique event that God has given us to teach us something hugely significant about him, about suffering, about evil, about faith, and about his purposes for us. So we shouldn't really second guess God and usurp him by thinking, well actually, I don't think God would do that. Let's not second guess him. It tells us about God. It speaks also of a spiritual dimension, doesn't it? Job didn't know about the spiritual dimension. He didn't know about the test that was being unfolded. He didn't know about Satan entering into the presence of God along with the angels.

He knew none of that unseen spiritual world. None of it was revealed to him. He was in the dark about these things. It was presumably only revealed later on as the book was brought together. This is uniquely for our benefit also the reality of the unseen spiritual warfare that is not dualistic. It's not good versus evil. Who's going to win this week between two evenly balanced good and evil forces? It is clearly that there is a spiritual dimension.

[26 : 17] It's clearly the reality that evil still exists, that Satan is crushed but not yet destroyed. It's clear that there's mystery in all of this, which the book of Job nor the Bible answers. But it is a revelation that even the purposes for evil God will use and will transform and will change to reveal the nature of faith and his victory over evil death and the grave. If we were God we wouldn't have done this, but we're not God and we're not great. But he is. Spiritual dimension. It speaks and I hope will challenge what you think and what you believe about the Bible. Sometimes I think we look to the Bible to give us all the answers. The Bible doesn't give us all the answers. Job doesn't give us all the answers. It kind of finishes in a sometimes we think a really unsatisfying way. God's response is not the response. We wanted a kind of ABC clear response from

God to why he allows suffering and why he did this to Job. He doesn't give that and you'll feel and sense that as we go through it. There are things the Bible doesn't reveal and there are things the Bible says it doesn't reveal but asks us to trust him nonetheless.

But the great thing about going through Job is it legitimizes the most raking dangerous edgy questions that you would be embarrassed to pray before God. But they are legitimized by the Bible. They're legitimized by this word of God because Job asks all these questions, pours out all his doubt, all his confusion, all his darkness, wishing he was dead, suicidal, everything and he brings it towards God and God says it then I'm happy with Job. Even though Job's own response to his meeting with the living God is very different. Very often think atheists feel they've rumbled God you know. Oh yeah we've found out what God's really like. We can ask all these difficult questions that the Christians are afraid to ask. Well the Bible's got there before them. The Bible's asked these questions and allowed these questions and given these questions in this divinely inspired word. We have nothing to fear. The

Bible is, God is confident if I can say respectfully in his own skin. He is able and willing and fearless about receiving these doubts and questions and darkness and depression from Job because he knows who he is and he knows that he is good and he knows what he is doing.

The Bible legitimizes things that we are very slow sometimes to allow in our kind of spiritual snootiness which I'll come on to just as we close because it speaks also to us as individuals and what we genuinely believe about God and think about God and what we think about the good life and what the good life is and if God were to take it from us well he would receive it from us. He would get it. We feel deep down don't we? Do you know about, I battle with this idea that God owes me and when things go wrong why is that the case?

[29 : 55] When I start thinking quid pro quo if I am good this week then God will be good to me next week and we move away from grace because we think we are decent and we think God owes us and that our obedience is linked to legalism and that if we are obedient and if we go to church and if we read the Bible and if we pray God will bless us and we will deserve it and if He doesn't bless us what is He doing? Because we are good people, we are nice. God owes us and this boot will challenge that for us and it will challenge the glory of grace and it will expose the darkness of our hearts and the selfishness and the pride and the trite way that we often reject God and walk away and say well if God was God he would never do this. I don't want to believe in that kind of, how often have we heard that? I don't want to believe in that kind of God. Of course when He doesn't give us, when He doesn't act towards us like a big large fat Santa Claus figure and give us all that we want when we want it we feel perturbed and upset when we lose things. But this book asks us and challenges us to lay our faith deeper than that and to see the glory of what He has provided, what

He will provide, what His future is for us and that we might be darker and blacker than we can ever imagine but we are more gloriously loved and accepted in Christ than we could ever dream of and that is liberating and freeing up for us. Don't dismiss God for the playground.

Don't walk away from Him because you want a slapstick life and an easy good life because there isn't one and we face the realities of brokenness and death and evil and our own hearts and we face that in the light of the cross and what that means for us. And lastly and very briefly in terms of what we believe, not just about our own hearts but maybe about other people's lives, do we find it easy to cast judgment on what they are going through and blame them in the way that Job's friends so quickly and easily blamed him in a legalistic and judgmental way about the simple things he simply needed to put right. How often have we done that with people who are struggling spiritually we say, well if they just came back to church and if they just read the Bible everything would be fine and they must really be rebellious for God to be allowing these things to happen in their lives and as we push them down we rise higher and higher in our self righteousness and in our individual appreciation of our goodness and it justifies what we are like and that is exactly what was happening with Job's friends. They were acting as God, they were telling God what he should be doing and that merited a hugely judgmental response from God. They were uncompassionate, they showed no compassion to Job, they had a cold orthodoxy. Our understanding of the

Christian life and of the Christian faith will be marked by our understanding of others. The depth of our understanding of our own hearts will be marked by the way we respond to others. That is why Jesus said and we will mention this tonight that the mark of the Christian church was that they loved one another and that is because it reflects a true understanding of grace and of God dealing in the lives of others in his way. Compassion, interest, care, love, coming alongside, not having all the answers. See for a pastor that is one of the greatest things in the world, the book of Job because it reminds me that I do not need to have all the answers for people who come and you do not need to have all the answers for your life but you are asked to trust this great and glorious and good God who can do no more. Job in the shadows trusted, how we do not know, how he could without truly understanding

Calvary and the cost of Jesus' love for us, we do not know but he did. How much more reason have we to do so? I believe as we seek God's blessing and grace job and the book of Job will blow us away and I hope that you will take your questions and discussions together to the city groups and that we will learn more about these important truths.

[35 : 06] Father God we ask and pray that we would understand you more, that we would cast aside the trite and simplistic ABC understanding of God that we so often have and try to impress others with the older that we get the more we feel the less we know and Lord we pray and ask that that would not be a rallying cry for ignorance but rather a humbling submission to the greatness of God, the infinite glory and majesty of our King of Kings and of our own finitude, of our own mortality, of our own perspective which is incomplete but Lord may we look in all of our lives through the prism of the cross and find their hope, forgiveness, the ability to perform the impossible, the walk of faith and grace as gifted by God and a recognition of your outstanding commitment to us.

May that help us today, I pray for any who today might feel like giving up, who are going through deep darkness or depression or loss or fear, who have lost friends or have lost relationships, who have lost favour with people who are unjustly hated, who are picked on at work, who are facing battles that they never thought they would have to face and that they recoil from or may your truth and your love and your grace comfort and strengthen and help them today and us all for Jesus' sake.

Amen.