

If Only

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[0 : 0 0] I like us for a few minutes tonight just to look at the passage we read together and Job. Job's one of the best books in the Bible, especially today, especially for, I think, 21st century people, because it deals with a lot of really deep issues, issues about God's justice, God's why God allows suffering, and it deals with faith in a very real and in a very powerful way.

And it doesn't shirk from dealing with the difficult issues, and it exposes some of the struggles of faith that we all have to a greater or lesser degree.

And it's just a great book, if you have time to read it, take time to do so. It's a tremendous book, and it's great help to us if we struggle and are struggling at different levels with our faith.

And Job, at this point, he is struggling with his belief in God. He's struggling to cope with it. Who wouldn't? He's lost everything. This was a guy who, in modern terms, he had it all.

He had absolutely everything he needed, everything he wanted. He had great family, he had great wealth, he had great health. He was kind of a blue-eyed boy, everything was great for him.

[1 : 2 5] And then we know that discussion between God and Satan, and now Satan kind of brings Job before God and says, this guy doesn't believe in you for nothing.

And then God tests Job, and it becomes a great scenario for us to look at the reality of faith and the reality of suffering and the reality of a spiritual warfare going on behind the scenes as well.

But no doubt, at this point, faith, jobs, faith is in great crisis. We're kind of in the middle of the story here, and it's important to remember that as we go through it.

We'll look beyond that. But it's a little bit like bursting into an operating theatre when someone is in the middle of their operation and they've been cut open.

I'll not go into the gory details. But it looks bad. Things don't look good, and we don't have the end of the picture and we don't have the end of the story. But here we're right in, excuse the image, we're right in the guts of the story here.

[2 : 3 6] And we're right in the middle of the struggle and the difficulty that Job is going through. And he makes three really quite shocking and quite frightening statements which are very real for a lot of people, nonetheless, in the struggles they face.

Some are and some aren't. But he's wrestling with the kind of greatness of God. It's maybe a different problem from what a lot of people today wrestle with. I think today a lot of people wrestle with how small God is and how insignificant.

But Job was wrestling with the greatness, the kind of infinitude of God and how God could possibly be interested and be able to help him and deal with him in the situation that he is in.

And he's wrestling with that. And he realises before this God in many ways he doesn't have any hope. He can't possibly have any hope.

His situation is bleak, it's miserable, and so he says, well, look, what hope is there for me in verse 2? He says, I've lost the chapter, verse 2, he said, how can a mortal be righteous before God?

[3 : 49] You know, he feels that he can't possibly be right before the greatness of God. And he senses just a great gulf and it's made worse by what he's going through.

He feels God is miles and miles away from him. And he's struggling with God's holiness. God is this amazingly holy God and he feels, there's a kind of, a mixture of emotions he feels, or a mixture of senses he feels both innocent in this situation.

He doesn't feel he's done anything wrong. But then intrinsically he also feels guilty. He just feels guilty before God. And there's this brilliant soliloquy really in verses 1 to 13 where he speaks about who God is and how amazing he is and, you know, he can move mountains without their knowing it and he shakes the earth from its place.

And, you know, it's in great kind of creative terms. He speaks about the God who is sovereign and powerful over all of the creation and nobody can stop him doing what he does.

And Job feels very small before that. And he feels very unclean and unrighteous. Who can possibly say, I can never be righteous. No one else can be righteous before this God.

[5 : 10] This vast, powerful, irresistible, sovereign, miracle-making, ever-present, unseen, unaccountable, sometimes even angry God that Job stands before him and feels wrong, feels unrighteous, struggles and just struggles with that, struggles with being a human being before a holy and righteous God.

And, you know, in many ways he's absolutely right. In many ways he gives us there a deep insight into the gulf between humanity and God that we've lost sight of.

We live for the most part in a pretty daft and shallow society. And as I've said before, our problem is more that we make God so small that we want Him in our back pocket or we have Him on a leash like a puppy dog.

And we titter nervously at the idea of a divine judge, someone to whom we're accountable, someone who will look into our hearts and will judge us for who we are and will judge us in the light of His own holiness, which leaves us, as Job says, exposed and unable to be righteous before Him.

And very often the society we live in has rubbed out and has erased the whole kind of reality of eternity from our understanding and from our living and the whole concept of God.

[6 : 53] We despise the idea of being accountable. What do you mean I'm accountable? I'm my own boss. I make my own decisions. I make my own choices. And we feel that nobody can enter into that arena of decision making in our lives.

We trivialise the idea of a separate and holy God and we trivialise the whole concept of guilt.

Now the problem with that, of course, I'm not going to go into this, but the problem with that is if we don't see a holy God, pure God, a righteous God, who is our judge and who judges us by His standard, if we don't see that we will never seek a Saviour.

We will never seek the one who will redeem us from our sins, which is the great good news and the wonderful good news of the Gospel at this time of year. We will never seek someone who will redeem us from our inability, as Job rightly says, how can a mortal be righteous before God?

We can't live up to that standard. We can't be in that relationship unless we have a redeemer. But I'll come back to that briefly. He says I can't be righteous.

[8 : 12] So that's very much a real statement that he feels in the way God's dealt with him and the oppression he feels from God.

But then he goes on to say something which in many ways you wouldn't think would be found in the Bible, but it's a recurring complaint among people today, and it is that God doesn't care.

In verse 22 he says it's all the same. That's why I say he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. And he's coming round to this argument of saying that really God doesn't care.

He doesn't care about my complaint, and it doesn't matter what happens. We all end up in the same way. We all end up six foot under. And there's a kind of real fatalism and a darkness and an oppression in his arguments at this point.

He argues very powerfully, but he argues from a wrong position. And yet we're not going to be quick in any sense to condemn Job for his argument, for the reasons that he's come to.

[9 : 27] But he says that God really doesn't care. In verse 14 he says how can I dispute with him? How can I find words to argue with him?

Though I were innocent I could not answer him. And then he goes on to say even if I summoned him and he responded, I don't believe he would give me a hearing. So he says, look God doesn't care for me and I can't even argue with him.

I can't speak to him. He doesn't even listen to what I'm saying and can't in any way come to any reasonable conclusion. He's got it all sewn up. Any way I turn he's got it sewn up.

And it's impossible to argue with him. And when I do argue or when I make my complaint he's not listening anyway. I don't believe he would give me a hearing.

God's death. How often do we hear that complaint? How often do we feel that ourselves? When I can't argue with him it's hopeless. And even if I could he doesn't listen.

[10 : 30] He's got maybe far more important things to do, but not in my eyes. But yet he's not listening to my cry. He's not falling on deaf ears. He's not listening to anything I say.

And worse than that it may even be that he enjoys my suffering. Verse 17 to 19. You know he says he would crush me with a storm and multiply my wounds for no reason.

He wouldn't let me regain my breath. He would overwhelm me with misery. And he's just saying it's almost as if the violence that I feel from God is gratuitous.

It's that he's just flexing his divine muscles against me and giving me absolute heartache and hellish experience for no reason.

And that leads him to a kind of rather hopeless despair in many ways in this chapter where it seems quite hopeless.

[11 : 33] In verse 25 he says, you know, my despair of what's going on. They fly away without a glimpse of joy and it's happening quickly and without any pleasure in them.

He doesn't seem to sense any hope or any joy in his life. So much so that he's tempted just to forget his complaint and just try and smile it through.

In verse 27 he says, if I forget my complaint, I will change my expression and smile. And it's as if there's this sense in which he's trying to just forget the reality.

And again it's easy for us to do that, to ignore the crisis, to ignore the difficulty we might be going through, to deny the fact, just put on a fantastic smile and live in a kind of fantasy world of denial.

But he knows that if he does so, he is still experiencing a sense of dread within himself. I still dread in verse 80 he says, all my sufferings, for I know you will not hold me innocent.

[12 : 52] And at the end of the chapter he says that he is in great fear and he's looking for the terror of God to be removed from him.

And that's where he is. That's how honest the Bible is. Honest with his position, honest with where he is at. He's in this deep valley and his vision is distorted and he can't see clearly and his faith is in turmoil.

You might be in that position at the end of a year in your Christian faith, there might be a crisis. You might know other people who are in that kind of crisis of faith. What do we do? How do we pray? How do we respond?

Well, it's good for us to read something like Job, but it's also good for us to remember that this isn't the end of the story for Job. We've got him, remember, on the operating table.

He is at his weakest point and things are very black for him. What's one of the most important things to do when someone is in a deepest spiritual crisis, maybe in deep depression and unable to see anything, unable to understand with sense of fatalism.

[14 : 21] As a Christian, what's the most important thing to do? Don't talk back to them. Don't give them all the theoretical answers of where God is and who God is.

Job's friends tried that. They got increasingly frustrated as you read through the book with Job's complaints and they kept trying to correct him and tell him about God and it was the worst thing they could have done.

The best time that they spent with Job was the first seven days when they sat with him in silence. People struggle and when people are in darkness, they don't really need theoretical spiritual answers.

They need your comfort and your presence, your prayers and your nearness and your close company, even if it's sitting in silence with them.

But the other good thing about Job at this point is how he verbalises his struggles. I know that that's done for us. It's done as part of Scripture. But there's a great sense in which as he verbalises his complaints and his struggles to his friends and to God, it's the beginning for him of healing and it's the beginning of him working through some of the issues.

[15 : 46] If we have issues with God at the end of a year and the struggles of it, it's important for us to verbalise them before God, to work them through and to verbalise them with others too.

To speak through crisis of faith, to complain and make our complaints before God and not necessarily always have the answers.

But even at the darkest point, we're beginning to see the seeds of a response and of healing and of a future.

His faith is on the move, even at this dark point. In verse 33 we have these fantastic words. If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both.

He recognises there's a great gulf between the holiness of God and how he is and he needs an arbitrator. He needs someone to come between himself and God and he is simply holding on to that hope, if only.

[16 : 55] And it's almost a subliminal reality that there must be someone who will bridge the gap and who will heal him and who will bring hope into his life where the answer will be.

Here he doesn't seem to grasp who that is, but nonetheless he's crying out and he's pleading and praying for a sense of hope that there may be indeed someone who will deal with him in this situation and bring him from it.

So he's crying out for an answer and that's great, isn't it? And it's great always to be crying out for an answer and to be seeking the answer from God in our crisis of faith.

Because I want you just to turn with me to a couple of different parts of job just to see the progression. Because he moves from that, if only there were an arbitrator between us and God to another response that he gives to these guys who come and tell him who he should be and what he should be like and how he should be different and how right God is.

And in chapter 19, one of the greatest passages in Scripture, 19 verses 25 to 27 before he says, oh my words were recorded, that they were written in a scroll, of course they were, that they were inscribed with an iron tool and letter engraved in rock forever.

[18 : 32] And then he says, I know that my Redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand upon the earth and after my skin has been destroyed yet in my flesh I will see God.

I myself will see him with my own eyes. I and not another. How my heart yearns within me. What an amazing jump from the previous declaration of looking for an arbiter.

He realises and as he's worked through things he knows who has God and he knows as God's Redeemer even with the kind of limited vision and limited sight that he could have had in the Old Testament.

What a statement of faith with our New Testament eyes. How bold we should be in our attributing glory to Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, but he knows that he does have a Redeemer that Christ or the God in whom he has put his trust will save him and that he is in a relationship with him and that even though he dies, yet you live and he will be in a relationship with God and he has a longing for that day to come.

And he's holding on to God and holding on to that hope in a wonderful way. This is a great, great couple of verses. In the middle of a really dark and difficult book here is what a claim, what a triumph of faith as he begins to rise up from the valley and the darkness that he's been in and begins to see more of his God.

[20 : 16] And that of course develops throughout the book. There's more discussion and conversation between Job and his friends. And then there's that wonderful couple of chapters where God speaks to Job.

God does answer him. God does reason with him. In fact, God, more than anything, God asks him a whole lot of questions just to make him think himself.

Wonderful chapters where God speaks about his own creative genius and his glory and his power and if you do have time, I think I've asked this of you before, do take time to read from verse 38 through.

It really is an absolute p.s. the resistance of divine soliloquy in the Bible. And then we come to Job himself as he responds in chapter 42 and verses 3 to 6.

You ask, who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge? Surely I spoke of things I didn't understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, listen now and I will speak, I will question you and you shall answer me.

[21 : 33] My ears have heard you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes. And we have this phenomenal meeting of which only a tiny portion I think is really spoken of here.

It must have been an amazing meeting between God and Job. And he teaches him and God speaks to him and God makes clear that he knows, he knows what Job is going through, that he cares, that he loves him, that he gives him a gentle rebuke through these verses and through these chapters, but also makes clear the overwhelming concern and love of a gracious father.

And Job through it knows that he's accepted and he's forgiven and that he is a hope and a future and it's personal and it's real.

And it leads him to see things clearly, to repent and to be in a renewed relationship with God.

And that faith is a growing faith as God speaks to him and reveals him. And that really is absolutely what we need in our lives.

[22 : 54] Particularly in the crisis of our faith is an awareness and a confrontation in the best possible way of that word with the living God.

And as he goes on, we find in verse 8, second part of verse 8 of chapter 42, my servant Job will pray for you, that's for the three men, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly.

You have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has. And then it says, the Lord accepted Job's prayer and after Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord made him prosperous again, gave him twice as much as he had before.

And it's almost as if he's taken into a place where he's almost Christ-like himself, Job. He's given the position of being an arbiter between his friends and God.

He becomes quite Christ-like. He prays for their stupidity and for their ignorance. And he forgives them as he himself has been forgiven. And as he has tasted forgiveness and knows an arbiter, then he becomes himself an arbiter before God and others.

[24 : 25] And there's this great sense in which God gives him responsibility and gives him a place and gives him an honour that he couldn't have possibly imagined in the depth of his darkness.

Now just as we close, we know our great divine someone. If there were only someone to arbitrate between us, we know that someone, don't we?

As believers, we've come to accept that someone, as the Lord Jesus Christ, born in a manger, lived his life, died on the cross for our sins.

And it's in him that we trust and there will be for us sometimes deep wrestling involved as we know his forgiveness and know his grace.

But he makes God known to us. He enables us to know forgiveness and holiness and relationship with God. And we need to pray that we know this divine somebody, this Saviour Jesus Christ, better and better.

[25 : 47] And as we do so and as we accept grace and forgiveness free and full, the good news of the Gospel, we need also like job to live that forgiveness to others, arbitrate between others and God and pray for their forgiveness and pray that we will know forgiveness in our relationships with one another, living that life of grace with others.

And as we experience ourselves, we find it easier to share with others. May it be that we know this God and love this God and serve this God over the following year, 2011 that we are about to move into.

May our faith also be on the move, a growing, developing faith in the darkness sometimes, but with the hope of looking forward, knowing that we have that arbiter between ourselves and God, the Lord Jesus Christ who is with us and who enables us to repent and to be in relationship with him and to rejoice in hope as we know him better and know him more fully.

And may we be sensitive and gentle and caring and wise in the way we deal with one another and in the way we deal with those who struggle with issues of faith.

And may we not be unwise and say things that we need forgiveness about, but may we recognize the struggles of faith and each of us come to the living God and work through our issues with the living God and know grace and strength and hope.

[27 : 38] Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, we ask that you would help us to know you better, to understand you more clearly, to recognize the great gulf that is between us and God that we cannot bridge in our own, but that has been bridged by God coming down to us, the person of Jesus, and living that life that we can't live, that righteous life, and then dying the death that we deserve on the cross.

And may we understand that and may we grasp how great it is to have an arbiter between ourselves and God. And may, as a result through Christ, may God become close and real and personal and living in our relationship and take us, we pray, through struggles of faith and may they test but deepen our faith and purify it and make it more clear and real.

May we not always look for the house of feasting and laughter and a life of ease and pleasure. May we recognize that that isn't always the way of life and may we look to serve you in good times and bad times and trials and in tribulations as well as in joys and may we be close and support one another in times of difficulty and need.

And remember as we pray, we thank you for bringing us to this last Sunday evening of 2010 and we pray that you would help us, teach us to number our days so that we know how to live and how to live in a relationship with you and not to take for granted that we have an indeterminate number of years ahead of us in which to either make our peace with God or become more like Christ but may we seek each day to be in relationship with God through Christ and to be as Christ like as we can be. Help us to put others and think of others before ourselves.

Bless as we pray then we ask and hear us as we sing our parting Psalm of praise together this evening In Jesus' name, Amen.