

Be Religious!

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[0 : 0 0] Now like if you would turn back with me to Job chapter 8 in our ongoing study here of this amazing book, challenging book. When I was a teenager probably even maybe even earlier and I'm not quite sure there was a programme some of you will around my age and younger, older, we'll know it. It was a comedy programme, it was very anarchic at the time, it was called Not the Nine O'Clock News. It was kind of real front line anarchic comedy show and it had that kind of anachronistic title and it was a programme that challenged all the conventions of the day to be honest, probably one that my dad didn't let me watch.

But it was on the go and probably now if we looked at it it would be rather tame but it had that title of Not the Nine O'Clock News. Job, the book of Job is a little bit like that at one level in the sense that it challenges a lot of our own human based conventions and ideas about God even and about religion and about our life and above all it's challenging a very big fat lie, the big fat lie that says life is going to be easy and life is black and white and we come across that again and again in the book of Job that that is not the case, it's not easy and it's not black and white and so that is a real challenge.

The book itself, if you read the book, if you've read the book then you recognise and know that it's a tough book, it's not an easy book, it doesn't allow us to have easy believism, it doesn't give us simple answers to some of the most difficult questions in life nor does it allow for me to do patchwork preaching that is preaching that has it all sewn up, you know where we take a few verses and we unpack them and we apply them and it's all clean cut and it's all black and white and it's all simple and it's all easy for us. I have to say I absolutely struggled with this book and particularly with trying to get across the theme of the comforters of Job in the time and in the scale that we have to look at it but we often look for life without any grey areas in them and we look for that in our faith, we look for black and white faith and easy faith and easy believism and

I really think that Job doesn't allow us and God's word doesn't allow us to have that premise in our lives or that underpinning philosophy. Can I recall briefly and again we're summarising and you can never really summarise all of what is in the book but can I summarise from one angle anyway the basic premise of Job which is that God is revealed and that humanity is exposed. If we take that as a premise, the plural of premise, that God is revealed in this book. Right from the beginning there's a curtain pulled back isn't there? So we see something that, we see things that Job doesn't see, we see things that none of his friends see, we see a spiritual challenge, a spiritual battle going on, we have God placing before Satan the redeemed and saying look these are my people and they will follow me, this man will serve me because he's an example of redeemed humanity with a gift of faith and he will serve me even through the deepest and most difficult suffering and Satan of course says no he doesn't, he's only following you because you've given him good things in life and if you take away these things he'll curse God and die and that's really the theme, this God, the challenge of God being revealed and also God himself being revealed right through the book particularly in the last few chapters. But also humanity is exposed isn't it in this book? Job's faith, Job's life is challenged but maybe specifically in the answers that come from Job's comforters that take up such a large portion of the book.

We are exposed to their faith which is formulaic at best and you know they're basically, we know their basic premise Job you have got secrets in, if you confess that sin you will know blessing in your life and things will be great again, it's a very black and white, very simple premise that they have, there's no room for gray areas in their understanding and their reasoning is hugely external, they seem to have a truncated view of mercy and under realised expression of mercy and the grace of God that they believe in confession as in repenting and turning to God and confessing your sin but it does seem as we go through the book, it does seem to be quite mechanistic, it seems to be quite ritualistic and almost can I say mercantile in the sense that if you confess, if you pay by giving confession then you will receive blessing, it's almost like it's an act of works of religion in some senses I believe that seems to be the case. And we see that God exposes the poverty of their, both their understanding of Job and of their understanding of God and in the responses that we've seen so far there's variations and again a very brief summary of that is again you know they say Job you can become a good believer again by confessing the secrets and knowing the blessing and prosperity of God, it's very simple, it's very black and white and they argue as we've seen in previous weeks God has spoken to us, we know what God is like. Now, Bildag goes on to say this is what God expects from you, now it's kind of artificial to separate out the arguments of the three comforters and to give them specific emphasis but we've done that because it's easier thematically to do that and so today we're looking at Bildag and the emphasis he has on being religious that if Job is religious in what he does and we'll go on to see that then he will know blessing again and again it's quite formulaic and it's quite simple. And these three men argue in three blocks of three and each time they become more entrenched in their arguments and each time Job reacts more strongly against them so there's a progressive frustration in them and a progressive reaction from Job against what they're saying and the characteristics of their arguments are interesting for us and ones that we need to consider in our own lives and in our own responses they're dogmatic, they're deaf and blind to Job's cry and to

[7 : 59] Job's need and to Job's desperation, they're well intentioned, clearly they're his friends but their arguments are full of assumptions and they reduce God and faith to a set of formula, they're judgmental about Job and his condition and therefore that colours how they respond to him and it's easy for us to condemn them and we can sit here with our knowledge and our insight and the whole of the New Testament and the whole of the Bible behind us and time and everything else and we can condemn them but what God is reminding us here when he has characters like this in the Bible we're not to spend our time condemning them but rather to learn from them and to recognise that they reveal what is naturally in all of our own hearts, the temptation to respond and to treat God and to treat other people the same way as they did because that's what we are like by nature, we are irreducibly religious in nature and we also like them what seemed to be in their experience wanted things easy, wanted the blessing of God and wanted everything to be black and white and easy to unpick and understand and unpack and that's what we are like, we like it black and white, we like things that are easy, we want our lives to be easy and we want all the answers and we want to be the standard just as Job's three comforters seemed to be the standard themselves and Job was being compared with them and we are often in the same way dismissive of others in the way that they were, we despise a God of the grey areas, we don't like that, we like things to be clear cut, we like parameters, we like it all neat and tidy, we don't like a God of the grey areas and if you read this book it reveals a God where there are grey areas for us to respond to and to understand and to take note of and the challenge is not to condemn his three friends but the challenge is to our own hearts and to our own belief system and to our own walk of faith and to the way that we think of God and think of other people.

So chapter 8, there's three chapters where Job, where Bill Dadd, sorry, responds, there's chapter 8 and chapter 18 and there's a third chapter also which I have forgotten which is at the moment but it's in the sheet for Wednesday evening but I'm looking specifically at chapter 8 today and with the theme of being religious, this job, if you do this, this is what God expects of you and just do this and things will be fine, things will be better for you again and he starts by reminding Job and us that God is just, verse 2, does God pervert justice or does the Almighty pervert what is right and he's immediately saying God is right Job so presumably you're wrong and things need to be put right in your life and he goes on to say in verses 5 and 6, Job is not too late for you, it's not too late, you can turn back to God if you will seek God and plead with the Almighty for mercy, if you are pure and upright surely then he will rouse himself for you and restore your rightful habitation.

Do the religious thing, Bill Dadd says to Job, all you need to do is to live morally and uprightly, pure and upright and confess what you've done wrong, plead to him for mercy for you obviously have this secret sin that you're keeping from him, if you plead that it's not too late and everything will be right because that's how God works, that's how God lives, that's how God responds to us and he pulls in here the testimony of tradition verses 8 to 10 inquire, you know, bygone ages, consider what the fathers have searched out, we are but of yesterday and know nothing for our days are but a shadow but they will teach you and they will tell you and therefore he says, look this is always the way it's been, God blesses those who are blameless and God judges those who are evil, that's the way it's always been, it's the testimony of tradition and he then goes on to use the illustration of the papyrus which is cut down when it rejects or like the evil person who rejects God and it doesn't found himself in God, evil always fails so if you confess your evil job everything will be right.

Now these are orthodox truths generally speaking but there's no place in his arguments for righteous suffering and there's no place for taking account of job zone cries and God's purposes in jobs life, he has already made the decision about what is wrong with job and what God is doing with job and what is happening in jobs life, he is not inquired at least we don't see any inquiry of God by Bildad as to the situation that we have here, it's all clear cut, it's all black and white, he knows what job needs to do, he knows what job is done wrong and it's full of presumptions, it's orthodox general truth but it doesn't match the situation and it doesn't take account of the mercy of God, it's insipid in its understanding of mercy and simply quite ritualistic, go and confess and come back and God is bound to again restore you, it's even presuming of God what God will do and what God ought to do as it were but can we look at it just for a minute and see some things that bring us round to recognizing why God was angry with jobs, three comforters at the end of the book and we see a little bit of it here in this chapter because he starts off and he's clearly dismissive of job right from the beginning, before he says anything he says how long will you say these things and the words of your mouth be a great wind, you know it's not exactly the great place to start with in your counseling of someone is it, where he's clearly angry and he's saying you're really just a windbag job, you're just blustering out things and you don't understand what you're doing, it's not the best way to get a listening ear and he's dismissive of job right from the very beginning which is unhelpful to him, he's also insensitive, do you know this story, no job has lost everything, he's lost all his family, all his children and Bildad that basically just says look your children have sinned against God and he's delivered them into the hand of their transgression, your children were desperate and God has judged them for that, at best that's insensitive to a grieving father and it's judgmental isn't it, he's assuming their guilt both in job and in jobs family, he's assuming that they have done something that has brought upon them the wrath of God for their sins and there is a degree of arrogance in that he is again presuming how God should respond, if job ticks all the boxes then God will respond in a certain way, it's truth with a grimace, it's formulaic and it's almost orthodox, almost orthodox but it does expose and I want to just spend a minute on this, expose the problem of religion because it seems to be here that Bildad that is speaking about religious observance, now we don't know their hearts, we don't know ultimately their relationship with God but we do know God was angry with them and we know that the kind of arguments they had and the paths that they were going down are dangerous paths for us to go down in our lives and in our walk of faith and so we learn from them and learn about how to respond differently and learn about God, it does expose the problem of a black and white maybe legalistic, ritualistic

religion where we believe certain things and we do certain things and therefore God will respond to that in almost a legalistic way that we earn our salvation by the religion that we observe, the gospel must transcend religious observance, it must do, I'm not saying that we don't observe religious ritual and that we don't obey and that we don't confess but it is more than that, the gospel is more than mere propositional truth, even the devils believe and shudder, the gospel is about the glory of God and it's about the grace of God that has touched our hearts, that has moved beyond the external experience of religion and has touched our hearts and souls, it's about trusting in His love to transform our sinful hearts and our lives and it's about trusting Him even in the grey areas where we don't get it neat and tidy, where we don't know the answers, where it's not black and white and especially where it's not easy, in these places of intense suffering, that's what faith is about and that's what God is saying Job has, even if Job doesn't even realise it, that he is a faith that is going to persevere through the suffering and that he doesn't just believe because he's rich and blessed and has been shown God's favour, it's about being touched by the redeeming love and power of Jesus Christ and the cross.

[18 : 43] Then doesn't need a cross, it doesn't need a toning sacrifice.

There's a couple of things about religion, I'm broadening it here but using the principles I think of their arguments, it doesn't really need revelation, excuse me, it would seem at least in their experience in their outworking of their own faith that the three wise men, the three counsellors, they certainly didn't give indication of relying on God, they did seem to rely on intellectual assent, their knowledge of truth and of tradition of their fathers, the way that their fathers had believed in the past and morality and even confession of sin, you know he does talk about pleading to God for mercy and for forgiveness but I think there is a difference between confession and repentance and I think we can confess our sins with a cold orthodoxy and we know that that can be the case.

Repentance is different from confession because confession is just telling God about your sins and asking for forgiveness and maybe plunging back into them that very same day. That's different from repentance because repentance is about confessing your sins but vowing by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to not sin again and to move from that particular course of action in our lives.

It's about a movement of our hearts towards God and it's something we should be doing every day in our lives.

We need to recognise the importance of revelation and the revelation of God's mercy into our own lives and into our own hearts.

[20 : 52] It's easy to confess in the sense of thinking that we will earn God's favour by doing so.

What we need to do is to ask God to reveal our hearts and even the depravity with which sometimes we ask for confession or we confess our sins and recognise that the price has been paid, that He is our brother, He loves us and we can't add anything to His work and we mustn't take anything away from His work and that when we trust in Jesus we are those who are dependent on the revelation by the power of the Holy Spirit of a loving and gracious God who has already paid the price.

Very often our religion doesn't need that and if you're living your life without prayer, you might be the most orthodox believer in Christendom but I believe you're in a dangerous place because orthodoxy without grace or orthodoxy without revelation, orthodoxy without prayer is from the pit of hell and we need to recognise that our orthodoxy doesn't allow us to be independent of God and to be independent of the Spirit of God and of the grace of God.

If we can know about God without knowing God, it's a desperate place to be and it's a place where religion is.

It's not about what we know primarily, it is about taking what we know and going to God to transform and change our hearts and to become His children and His servants.

[22 : 52] The price has been paid. Your religion wouldn't get you any closer to God. Your religion will not stand up on the day of judgment.

Your orthodoxy will not be the grounds in which you will be accepted into His kingdom on that great day where He will say, well done, good and faithful servant. It will be on the basis of His Son, on the basis of what His Son has done and we fall in behind that and we need revelation for that.

So religion doesn't need revelation. I don't think religion or I think religion demands certainty. I think religion and that kind of tight intellectualism hates jobs, grey areas.

And maybe you look at the book of Job and you read the book of Job and you think, this is completely unsatisfactory. This is not how we expected the book to end. This is not giving me the answers I was looking for.

Maybe in the same way as you read Jonah and think, what a strange way for that book to end. That's not what you expected. That's not how God should have finished the story of Jonah or of Job.

[24 : 04] And we demand certainty. We want all the answers and we want them now and we want justice now and we want the promises of God now absolutely, completely fulfilled in our lives and we want to make judgment now and we want to look at other people and we want to judge their hearts.

That's why we find it so easy so quickly to fawn over some people and to write off other people because we've already made judgments. We know what they're doing wrong. We know that they're orthodox or unorthodox.

We know that they're worth knowing or not knowing because we've judged their hearts. We demand certainty. We want certain parameters and most of these are by nature they're going to be external because we can't see into people's hearts.

We want everyone else to fit into our paradigm of faith and truth and we want that certainty. Black and white.

You want it black and white. We want everything black and white. We don't like gray. We don't like people to think differently from us. We want everyone to think like us. Religion does that for us.

[25 : 11] But can I put in there two caveats? One is that truth of course can be known. I'm not suggesting that we all have our own individual paths to truth and eventually it will somehow lead us to God.

Truth can be known of course, there is real propositional truth in God's word. God's word is truth and we know and we follow and we love and we all come in behind God's truth as we recognise it and as we see it in our lives.

But I think it's important for us to recognise that with humility.

When we know the truth, James 1 verse 19 says, know this my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

James isn't saying anything there about that we can't know truth, but he's saying in our lives the truth that can be known, the propositional truth of God, it's a toning sacrifice and all of God's word can be known, but we should always be humble and be slow to speak and be quick to learn under that truth.

[26 : 36] We aren't to lord it over that truth, we aren't to think we know that truth better than the truth itself. Truth can be known. And the second caveat and this may seem a bit paradoxical and I'm speaking in circles here that faith is being certain.

There is a certainty to faith isn't there? Again if you look up Hebrews you know that passage very well. Hebrews chapter 11 the great, the only real place where we are given a definition of faith.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction or the certainty of things not seen. So there is a certainty to faith, but it's different from the certainty that religion demands.

The certainty of faith is trusting in what is unseen, the unseen realities of Jesus finished work and the unseen realities that we have even revealed to us in this book of Heaven and Hell and God and Satan.

And it's trusting in the God of these unseen realities, God who is Spirit, even despite or despite our circumstances.

[27 : 48] Even when our circumstances seem to cry out that you can't possibly trust God anymore. There is a certainty of faith which remains able to trust in God because we've come to know Him through Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross.

Paradoxically this certainty of faith that is spoken of in Hebrews is knowing that He knows even when we don't.

You see the difference between that and what Job's Comforters are saying? It's saying that He knows and that in our lives it's okay to have great areas because we trust the one for whom there are no great areas.

It's okay not to judge because we know the one who is able to judge. It's okay not to understand in no people's hearts because we put our faith in the one who does know.

And it's okay to doubt as we go to Him with our doubt because we know in Him there is no doubt but there's certainty. And faith has that great certainty that's not based on our own understanding and our own intellect and our own orthodoxy and our own judgmentalism but is based on what Jesus Christ has done and on its trusting in Him in the darkness as it were and in the dark areas.

[29 : 19] That's where the certainty of faith lies. I was reading this week a quote from Spurgeon who says something like it's easy to trust God in the light but it's much more powerful and faith is trusting God in the darkness.

And that is absolutely the story of Job, isn't it? Now when things are going well for us, it's easy for us to trust and it's easy for us to judge everybody else but when we're struggling and in difficulties as Job was in and we're not minimising that in his life or his experience, the certainty of faith looks very different from the certainty of religion.

Very different because the certainty of religion, the third thing about it, it doesn't need revelation, it demands certainty. The third thing about religion is that it's soul destroying.

Religion is miserable. It's soul destroying. It's horrible because being religious leaves the weight on ourselves and is demanding of our own abilities and because of that, there's the tendency to compare ourselves with others so that we don't feel so bad about ourselves because others are struggling as well.

And that seems to be some of the ethos behind Job's comforters. They were watching very much what Job was going through rather than focusing on God and on what God might be saying to them and so it became soul destroying.

[31 : 06] They didn't encourage Job whatsoever. They may have been loosely, they may have been almost nearly completely orthodox but they were of no benefit to Job because they missed out the realities of truth for him.

Being religious and all of us are tempted to do this avoids true heart knowledge of ourselves and other people. It's much cheaper.

It's much easier because it doesn't allow the light of God's purity and perfection and glory to expose our own hearts but it allows us to judge other people's hearts at least our lives outwardly.

It's miserable in practice and it's miserable in comfort. You see that here, don't you? How it's, Bill that is immediately judgmental.

He's kind of angry. He doesn't get what Job is going through. He doesn't take time to listen to Job's complaints really. He's just formulating his own response.

[32 : 14] He's not looking at the reality of Job and seeking to bring the gospel into that and the truth of God into that. It leads both to frustration and to discouragement both in himself, Bill that and in Job.

If you read the whole book and do it, if you have time read the whole book because you find that it just becomes more and more frustrating and they become more angry with each other because they're kind of both at loggerheads and they're missing each other.

The comforters and Job. And so we recognize that very often it's soul destroying to be religious. That's why churches are so good at splitting.

They're so good at being judgmental. They're so good at being on God's side. And it's why church fights are the worst of all fights because it's soul destroying and because it's graceless.

And that is the battle that so often we fight. We make judgments on other people. We think we expose what's going on in their lives but we haven't listened.

[33 : 35] And we haven't listened to what God is saying and we haven't listened to what other people are experiencing. And we haven't allowed the grace of God to first deal with the beam that is in our own eye because we are too interested in the spot, the tiny speck that lies in the eyes of everybody else.

That is what we naturally do. That is religion. That is what is the sinful inclination of our hearts and that is not grace.

That is not the gospel. The gospel is something completely different. It's the prodigal message that we come to God with nothing, nothing.

And we come to this gracious Father who is looking out for us with his arms open wide who runs towards us and who accepts us because of what his Son has done in our place.

So I conclude just with two things very briefly that I hope we can understand from this difficult passage and from the difficult series of arguments between Job and the three comforters.

[34 : 47] Religion without Christ stinks. That's the first thing I want to say. Okay. Remember that. That's not a flippant or a light comment.

Remember that if you take Christ out of your life and out of your walk of faith or if you're relying on anything other than the mercy and grace of Christ in your life, your life will stink spiritually.

It will be odious. It will be judgmental, self-righteous, self-reliant, graceless and unhelpful.

Religion without Christ stinks. Secondly, faith in Jesus Christ helps us to walk in the shadows. Now, the psalm speaks of that.

The psalm 23, the shadow of death, and that could have many interpretations broadly of what death means there.

[35 : 48] But faith in Christ helps us to walk in the shadows. That's what people, that is what most of us are going through in our lives, isn't it? Our lives are not black and white.

Our lives are not easy. We are not yet in the kingdom to come. We are in the shadows, in the gray areas, in the times of darkness and suffering and complexity.

Satan brings great darkness and complexity into life. But faith, the gift of God, the gift of grace and faith, as we see from this book, which is what Job is all about, this great gift of faith keeps us from saying, curse God and die in the difficult and in the dark times because he is our great shepherd and he will lead us out his way.

Now, things might be going great for you today and you may think, this is of no relevance to me. I really hope that's the case. I hope you're knowing blessing and grace in your life.

But many of us might not be. And therefore, we hold on by faith and cling on to the Savior in the darkness, in the gray areas, in the shadows, in the sufferings that we go through because we believe he is ordained a way through it for us.

[37 : 17] And that obviously goes right into the valley of the shadow of death itself and through into eternity. On whom are you relying as you face death?

And we all face death. Maybe we don't think we do, but we do. On that last great day, you stand before God. If we can use that illustration, what are you relying on?

Is it going to be your religion, your orthodoxy, your knowledge, your comparison with other people, your understanding? Or is it going to be as a naked person covered in the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone?

If you're not a Christian today and I don't make this appeal often enough or heartfelt enough or serious enough, don't leave here without considering who you are and who you serve because religion will take you all the way to hell.

Christ alone and in Him alone is the one in whom we can trust and I implore you if you're not a Christian and you may well be religious because you're here.

[38 : 36] Don't rely on your morality or on your goodness or on your knowledge, but on Jesus Christ to come and change your heart and renew you from within because your heart is black and broken as is all of our hearts.

Amen. Let's pray. Father God, we ask that you'd help us to know and to understand and to appreciate who you are, that the book of Job would help us with all its difficulty and challenge and all the answers that we don't have in it.

Forgive us grace, we pray, and we ask for great forgiveness, for not seeing, for sometimes choosing blindness because we prefer it from turning aside from you.

Forgive us, Lord God, and hear us as we praise you in response to your word. For Jesus' sake, amen.