

Job's World Falls Apart

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[0 : 0 0] with what you might call a health warning. And that is simply to say that these sermons may be a painful experience. Painful perhaps for me to preach them, painful for you to listen to them and to grapple with the message of this great Old Testament book.

Now the book of Job is not a book for those who want their Christianity to be a sunshine only experience. It grapples with our pain and perplexity.

But for that very reason, because it addresses some of life's most difficult questions, it has the capacity to build in us a more robust faith. Biblical faith, in other words faith that is taught and shaped by the Bible, learns how to live and survive in the shadows as well as in the sunshine.

So we may have some tricky, perhaps upsetting moments over these next few Sunday evenings, but I hope and pray that by the end of it all, we will be better equipped to face the harder episodes of life which almost certainly lie ahead of all of us.

So let's open our Bibles at Job chapter 1, page 417. It may be a minute or two before we actually get to the story and the text because I'd like to say a few more things by way of introduction.

[1 : 2 0] The Bible deals with questions of evil and suffering in a variety of ways. So sometimes wrongdoing receives its punishment in this life.

For example, King David commits murder and adultery and is punished in his own life in the years that follow. Then at other times in the Bible and particularly in the New Testament, we learn that evil is not punished until Christ returns and the day of judgment has come.

Then sometimes the role of suffering is to chasten people and to humble them. At other times, God uses instruments like war and plague and famine as terrible means of his judgment coming to people.

So the picture is a varied one in different parts of the Bible. But the thing that makes the book of Job so distinctive is that it addresses the question of innocent suffering.

Innocent suffering. And that point is made very clearly in the first verse of the book because that first verse, I'll just read it again, tells us what kind of man Job was.

[2 : 3 4] There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. Now to call him innocent is not to claim that Job was perfect, but it is asserting, this first verse, that he has personal integrity.

He is, verse 1 says, upright, which means loyal to God and straightforward in his dealings with other people. And verse 1 is also making it quite clear that he is a believer.

However, he fears God. Therefore, he bows before the Lord in awe and reverence, acknowledging God as the creator. And also he turns away from evil.

So in New Testament terms, this is a life deeply marked by faith and repentance. Jesus says, turn away from your sins and believe the good news. Here we have a man who turns to the Lord and turns away from his sins in repentance.

Because to shun evil is to repent and to fear God is to trust him and take his lordship seriously. In fact, Job is introduced to us in this first verse, not merely as a believer and a good man, but also as a wise man.

[3 : 4 8] Deep in the heart of the book of Job, at chapter 28, verse 28, biblical wisdom is defined. I quote, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.

And so here in chapter 1, verse 1, we're told that is exactly Job's way of life. He feared God and turned away from evil. So not just a believer, not just a good man, but a man of real wisdom.

And it is this man, not some scoundrel, who is struck by catastrophe. Now let me give a modern parallel. I remember when I was working in Manchester as a young minister in the early 1980s, I met a man called Robin Oak.

Now Mr. Oak, Robin Oak, was not the chief constable of the Manchester Police Force, but he was, I think, one of the assistant chief constables, a very senior policeman. He was a delightful man, one of these men about 6 foot 5 or 6 inches tall, with an open, happy, engaging face.

And I remember he came and spoke at our church one Sunday evening about the role of being both a policeman and a Christian, and holding those two things together. Now you probably don't remember this, but in January 2003, a young detective constable was stabbed and killed in a horrible incident in Manchester, leaving behind a widow and three young children.

[5 : 14] And his name was Stephen Oak, Robin Oak's son. Like his father, Stephen was a committed Christian and sometimes used to preach in his own local church in Manchester.

Now why was he killed? If a policeman had been murdered who'd been involved in fraud or internet pornography or some other criminal activity, you might possibly see some moral logic in his being killed, although it would be a rather brutal kind of logic.

But why this godly, believing man? And why should his widow and his three children be having to spend the rest of their lives coping with the aftermath of that kind of trauma?

Now we have to face the fact that this kind of thing happens, and not infrequently. Bad things happen to good people. And there's something in us that cries out to God, why do you allow this kind of thing to happen?

These horrible events seem to fly in the face of natural justice. There's something in us that wants to say bad things should happen to bad people, and good people should be rewarded with blessings.

[6 : 29] But the real world isn't like that. In fact, quite often, it's the believers who suffer, while their neighbours, who don't care in the least about God, live long and healthy lives.

So what is going on? What kind of a God runs a world like our world? Isn't it true also that in every Christian congregation, almost in every Christian household, there is pain, illness, disappointment, broken relationships, bewildering, mind-numbing difficulties?

Now, if the Bible taught us that peace and contentment was the sure reward for living uprightly, and that suffering was the sure punishment for living wickedly, I guess we would simply close our Bibles or throw them away, because we would know that they were not telling the truth.

But God has kindly given us the book of Job to help us to see that while godly people sometimes suffer great loss and great trauma, it is possible for such wounded people to go on trusting and loving and worshipping and rejoicing in the God who made our world.

Now what I'd like to do now is to talk you through the action of Job chapters 1 and 2, where we see Job's world falling apart. And then I want to draw some conclusions, which I hope will give us a grip on what is going on in the big picture of Job's life, and will help us to grapple with this over the next few weeks.

[8 : 08] So let's look at our text now. Verses 1 to 5 in chapter 1 give us a thumbnail sketch of Job's domestic and business life. We've already looked at the second half of verse 1, but let's notice a few other things as well.

The first is that he lived in the land of Uz, or Uz. Now you can't buy a British Airways ticket to the land of Uz. Nobody knows where Uz was or where Uz was.

What we do know is that it wasn't anywhere in Israel. And this means that Job is a representative not of the people of Israel, but of mankind.

So there's a gentle reminder here that the true God can be known and worshipped by non-Jewish people as well as by the Old Testament Israelites. The next thing we learn is that Job had a large family and fabulous, fabulous material wealth.

Verse 2 tells us that he had seven sons and three daughters. Verse 4 says that these children each had their own home. And verse 3 describes the extent of Job's wealth in terms of his livestock and servants.

[9 : 19] And of course in Old Testament times wealth was seen to be a token of God's approval and blessing. And at the end of verse 3 he is summed up as the greatest of all the people of the East.

An enviable position to be in. Now we're not told whether Job believed that his wealth could shield him from tragedy, but we do know lots of people have believed in that kind of idea since Job's day. So the story very much starts on a happy family note. We have peace, prosperity, good health, and all this within the framework of godliness and faith.

You might almost think that Eden had been restored. There is nothing in these first five verses that prepares us for the shocking events which follow in quick succession.

Now the structure of the story from chapter 1 verse 6 to chapter 2 verse 10 is quite simple. We have four scenes in the drama which is being played out before us.

[10:24] Scene 1 begins at chapter 1 verse 6 with the words Now there was a day. Scene 2 begins at chapter 1 verse 13 with that same phrase Now there was a day.

Scene 3 begins at chapter 2 verse 1 Again there was a day when. And scene 4 begins at chapter 2 verse 7. Now the first scene beginning chapter 1 verse 6 takes place in the council chamber of heaven.

The second scene takes place at Job's property. The third scene brings us back to the heavenly council and the fourth scene back to Job's home and land again.

So let's see what happens. Scene 1 which is chapter 1 verses 6 to 12. Now it's a little bit like a cabinet meeting with the prime minister in the chair surrounded by his senior colleagues.

Clearly we're in heaven. the seat of the government of the universe and the Lord is in the chair. This same imagery appears elsewhere in the Old Testament and it conveys the point that we live in a world where real spiritual powers and authorities are at work but all of them are subject to the authority of God.

[11:39] But verse 6 tells us that Satan is also there. Now literally he is the Satan. It's a title rather than a name just as the Christ is a title for Jesus rather than a name.

Now the Satan means the accuser. We're not told why he's there in the heavenly council any more than we're told why the serpent suddenly appeared in the Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 3.

But there he is in verse 7 and the Lord addresses him. Where have you come from? Well he replies I've been on my usual travels.

I've been here and there doing my regular sort of thing. Now he doesn't say this but he seems to imply I've been looking around for real believers your majesty but of course as per usual I haven't been able to find any.

As though he's accusing God of being so weak that he couldn't make anybody a true believer. Isn't that why the Lord then says in verse 8 Have you considered my servant Job that there is none like him on the earth a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil?

[12:59] It's as if God is saying of course there are real believers. Take Job as an example. You couldn't have a finer believer on earth. Do you see what's going on?

Satan is implicitly accusing God of weakness and in verse 8 the Lord challenges Satan as if to say to him Job is a true believer.

Now what are you going to do about that? And it's that challenge from the Lord to Satan which launches this whole story into action. From this moment onwards Satan is determined to prove that he is stronger than God that he can destroy Job's integrity as a believer.

Now his reply in verses 9 to 11 is fascinating and I'll try and paraphrase it. Do you honestly think that Job is a sterling silver believer?

Of course he's not. He doesn't fear you for nothing. He professes all this faith in you because you've blessed him so much. You've put a hedge around his property and his family to protect them from all harm.

[14:07] You've showered him with wealth. Well of course he's going to believe in you and thank you while his life is so full of sunshine but take away all these blessings and you'll find out how feeble his faith is.

In fact he will curse you to your face. He's nothing but a fair weather believer. Now verse 12 is really very shocking. Very well then says the Lord you've asked me verse 11 to strike Job with my hand but you do it for me.

I'm going to put all Job's possessions into your hands take them away but don't touch the man himself. Now don't you think that's astonishing?

We know from verse 1 that Job was a believer of great integrity and the Lord himself endorses that opinion of Job in verse 8. Job doesn't deserve to suffer and what's more God is not under any obligation to Satan.

He could have told him simply to get lost. Satan's power though real never threatens God's control of the universe and yet the sovereign Lord the compassionate God of the Bible gives Satan permission to go off and cause Job to suffer and Job begins to suffer unspeakably.

[15 : 33] how well do we know the real God? Is he on our side? Certainly at this stage in the book of Job we have to wonder whether he's on Job's side.

Now we can look more briefly at the second scene which runs from verse 13 to the end of chapter 1. Here we see the first onslaught of Satan as he takes advantage of the Lord's permission given to him.

Four devastating blows fall on Job. First, verse 14 a messenger comes to Job to tell him that bandits, raiders have rustled his oxen and donkeys and killed Job's servants who were looking after them.

Then before the first messenger has had time to finish his message a second man arrives and says that the sheep and the shepherds have been struck down by lightning or some such phenomenon. Then a third messenger arrives to say that more raiders have taken Job's camels and killed the camel herds. And then a fourth messenger comes. Your ten children all of them have been killed by a freak storm.

[16 : 44] So Job hears all these things within about thirty seconds or so. Each messenger bursts in before the last one has had time to finish speaking. So within half a minute Job hears that all the precious blessings listed at the beginning in verses two and three are taken away from him.

Do you ever wonder how you'd cope with a policeman arriving at your front door one day cap in hand and saying quietly is it Mr. Lobb?

Can I come in? I'm afraid there's been an accident. Some of you I'm sure have been through that. I haven't but I've often imagined it happening. Now what does Job do?

Well he is devastated. Verse 20 tells us that he tears his robe and he shaves his head signs of deep mourning but he doesn't turn against God.

Astonishingly he praises him as he worships. Tragedy doesn't turn him away from God it compels him towards God.

[17 : 54] isn't there a lesson for us there? Satan must have reeled as he saw Job's reaction. This was not what he was bargaining for.

He was hoping to see Job's faith collapse. But here was Job the blessings all taken away from him and yet still worshipping God. So we're beginning to see what real belief is like.

To Satan this must have been a great setback but he hadn't finished with Job. Not yet. Not by any means. Scene 3 occupies the first six verses of chapter 2 and takes us back again to the heavenly council.

Now the first two and a half verses in chapter 2 almost exactly repeat verses 6, 7 and 8 of chapter 1 except that in chapter 2 verse 3 the Lord gives Satan further challenge by saying Job is still holding fast his integrity.

In other words you thought Satan that he was just a fair weather believer whose faith would collapse when times grew tough but I guess you've got to eat your words now haven't you?

[19 : 10] But Satan proves to be a resourceful adversary and in verses 4 and 5 he says in effect to God this man hasn't been under very great pressure yet he's only been relieved of his possessions and his children but if his health should be taken away as well he will get really desperate fill him up with illness and he'll curse you to your face and again it's a shocking thing to read we might expect the Lord to say you've gone quite far enough Satan this man has suffered more in one day than most people suffer in a lifetime but the Lord says to Satan alright then go and do it make him terribly ill but don't kill him shortly afterwards when Job is very ill he wishes that he might be able to die in chapter 3 verse 21 he speaks of those who long for death that does not come surely he was voicing his own longing at that point because his suffering seemed more than he could possibly bear well then we're straight into scene 4 at chapter 2 verse 7

Satan covers every part of Job's body with painful horrible sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head so physical suffering is added to the emotional and mental torment that Job is already going through at the loss of his possessions and his children and if you contrast chapter 1 verse 3 with chapter 2 verse 8 you'll see how the greatest man the most honoured man of all the peoples of the east is brought down to a seat on a heap of ashes do you remember how in Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke's gospel chapter 16 at least poor Lazarus covered in sores has the relief of some friendly dogs who come and lick his sores but Job doesn't even have that comfort he has to scrape his festering wounds with a piece of broken pottery what humiliation no longer the fine robes of a wealthy man presumably by this stage he could wear little more than a loin cloth

otherwise he wouldn't have been able to scrape his sores his wife poor soul simply can't bear to see him suffer and when she says in verse 9 curse

God and die she seems to have joined Satan because Satan's aim is to get Job to curse God we can be the mouthpiece of Satan even to our nearest and dearest if we're not careful but Job resists her and he says in verse 10 you speak as one of the foolish women would speak shall we receive good from God and shall we not receive evil and then comes the crucial assessment in all this Job did not sin with his lips echoing chapter 1 verse 22 so despite the battery and assault of Satan Job's faith stood firm did not buckle now what happens next well Job's three friends arrive Eliphaz Bildad and Zophar they've heard about his terrible sufferings and they've made an agreement to come together to bring him some comfort but when they see the state that he's in they're so shocked they say nothing to him for a whole week they simply sit there feeling his pain with him well what can we say that these two chapters chapters one and two teach us by way of clear lessons let me mention four just briefly first

Job is a believer with real integrity we're going to see as the chapters of this book unfold that Job steadfastly asserts again and again that he is righteous and upright and we're also going to see that his three friends will dispute that fact they will dispute that he's in the right the conversation that he's about to have with them it goes on for the next thirty chapters or so of the book it's rather difficult to follow at times but basically Job is saying I'm in the right and his three friends are saying but Job you cannot be in the right because suffering like this only comes to wrongdoers but what is critically important about Job is not what his three friends say about him but what God says about him God's assessment of him in chapter 1 verse 8 is that he is blameless and upright a man who fears God and turns away from evil and God repeats that assessment in chapter 2 verse 3 so we need to remember as the book unfolds that that is God's opinion of Job whatever his three friends may say to the contrary now secondly

Satan is an adversary with real power he hates God as we're beginning to see in these two chapters and he hates men and women particularly those who love the Lord and serve him the book of Job teaches us that it would be too simple too naive to think that the only real spiritual power in the universe is the power of God and that everything antagonistic to him is human rebellion and human selfishness no Satan is real and malignant and hostile there is no need for Christians to fear him but it would be naive for us to ignore him thirdly despite Satan's hostility the Lord's sovereignty is completely uncompromised it's not as though some great battle is being waged in the heavenly places between God and Satan with the outcome in doubt no

[25 : 20] God's sovereignty is unchallengeable there's a great battle but the outcome is always certain Jesus once said of the evil one he has no power over me John's gospel he has no power over me here in the first two chapters of Job Satan cannot go an inch further than the Lord allows him to the absolute ultimate victory of God over Satan is never doubted in the Bible but fourth the Lord allows profoundly painful things to happen sometimes Christian people suffer shocking traumas and reversals so we mustn't be too surprised when they come our way the book of Job will help us to leave the cloud cuckoo land of thinking that to be a Christian is to be exempted from suffering I do hope that as we study Job we'll begin to see some of the reasons why believers sometimes suffer great pain but this book of the Bible will help us not to take offence at

God when pain and suffering strike us well let me end now with one suggestion and one question my suggestion is that over the next week or two you try and read the whole book of Job it isn't an easy read but having a go at it will be a great benefit and remember in that long section when the so-called comforters are arguing with Job his main point is I'm in the right with God and they are saying to him you cannot be because suffering of this kind only comes to wrongdoers so try and have a go at reading Job if you can my question is this will Job prove to be a real believer at the end of the story after all his suffering and his pain are over after all his heart searchings and struggles as he argues with both God and his friends will he emerge at the end as a man who still worships and trusts and loves the Lord remember as a man from the land of us he represents all mankind he represents you and me so the question is raised about ourselves will we be still believing at the end of all our trials it's a question to keep in mind as we engage with Job's sufferings over these next few weeks well let's bow our heads and we'll pray to the Lord