

Is God My Friend or Enemy?

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[0 : 0 0] Dear God, our Father, your word is indeed wonderful and delightful and yet at times hard and difficult.

And this book of Job is a hard book for us. And we pray therefore that you will help us to understand it more truly and deeply and to be blessed by you as we understand it better.

And our prayer is that our faith, our real grasp upon you, may be deeper, more robust and more filled with a real grasp of what the Christian life is about.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well friends, we're in chapter 19 of Job, as I think you know.

And I'd appreciate it if you'd turn that up with me. Page 429 in our large hardback Bibles, if you have one. And tonight, as we read this chapter, which is part of Job's speech, the question raised is the question, is God my friend or my enemy?

[1 : 1 7] Is God my friend or my enemy? I came across the story of two friends who were on a walking holiday in a moorland part of the United Kingdom together.

And one of these good friends was a Christian and the other was an atheist. And as they walked along in the moorlands, they were discussing Christianity and atheism. And the Christian said, when you're a Christian, everything is different.

You step out in faith and God looks after you. And having said this, he stepped out in faith and he landed in a bog up to his middle. Now if you take the humorous element out of that story, you could say that it's a bit like the story of Job.

Here is Job, the servant of the Lord. He steps out in faith. He lives the life of faith for many years. And yet, all in a moment, he ends up in a terrible predicament, losing his children, all ten of his ten children, his wealth, his servants, his flocks and herds and so on, all gone.

And then soon afterwards, his health breaks down dramatically. It all happens one after the other. And the tortured journey which is the book of Job acutely raises the question, what is going on when an innocent, godly believer has to endure such terrible suffering?

[2 : 4 6] Now last week, if you were here, you'll remember we looked at the arguments put forward by Job's three friends, Job's comforters as they're called. And we saw that their fundamental error was this, that they assume that suffering must be, must always be, the consequence of sin.

They look at Job, they see his dreadful pain, and they say, Job, it's quite clear to us that you're a sinner and a pretty bad sinner at that. Because if you were innocent, your life would have been all sunshine.

But this suffering, this bad suffering, proves just how guilty you are. Now Job, at no point, will admit their argument. And he continues to protest his innocence.

But whereas last week, we looked at the false arguments of his comforters, this week, we're going to turn back to Job himself and to try to understand his perception of his suffering better.

Because rather like that man in the bog, Job is very stuck. But he's not stuck so fast or so deep that he is unrescuable. And I hope that our study this evening will help us to see the first signs of approaching rescue.

[3 : 59] Though I'm afraid we're going to have to face quite a bit of pain for a while before we begin to see the first real rays of hope. Now tonight, we'll largely be in chapter 19, though we will look at one or two other short sections as well.

Job's fundamental question to God is the question that all sufferers sooner or later ask. And that is the question, why? And it's worth looking back through the book to see some of those moments when Job raises this why question.

So if you'd like, if you have quick fingers and you'd like to follow, let's turn back to chapter 3, verse 20. This is part of Job's very first speech. 3.20 It's not quite his first why.

I can see others at verses 11 and 12. But here's 3.20. Why is light given to him who is in misery and life to the bitter in soul? Or verse 23.

Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? Now these are questions about why life should be continued at all when suffering is so acute.

[5 : 08] Well let's turn on to chapter 7, verse 20, where Job is addressing God directly. And he says there, 7.20 Why have you made me your mark or your target?

Why have I become a burden to you? And the next verse, Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie in the earth. You will seek me, but I shall not be.

In other words, I'm going to die very soon. Well let's turn on to chapter 13, verse 24. Why do you hide your face and count me as your enemy?

So Job is wrestling, not only with pain, but with perplexity. The why question is a pressing question for him. Now it's not really, I think, the why me question.

It's more of a, to God, why you question. The why me questions focus on me as opposed to other people. Whereas the why you questions focus on God and his dealings, his activities.

[6 : 18] Job is not really asking why is it me that is suffering and not my neighbours? He's asking why are you God treating me like this as though I were your enemy? It's a why you question about God's activities.

And this is just the kind of question that we and our friends ask. Let me give one or two common popular examples. We've all heard this sort of thing and perhaps have said it ourselves.

Why God did my father have to develop Alzheimer's disease causing such grief to my mother and such difficulty to the whole family? Why? Or a widower asks, why did my wife have to die just before we retired?

We were so looking forward to a decade or two of life together and now I face a future alone humanly with almost nothing. Or a Christian worker, a missionary or a pastor might ask, why God did you get me into this job?

It is such a difficult position I'm in. There are so many frustrations. It all seems to be working out so very badly. Now really, all those are questions about what is going on in heaven.

[7 : 30] who decided that such and such a traumatic event should happen? What was the point of it? Was there a point? Is God my friend or my enemy?

What kind of a God is it who did what he did to Job? What kind of God puts his servants in positions of frustration and loneliness and difficulty?

You see, says the Christian, I read in my Bible that God loves me greatly and cares for me and protects me. that God is on my side, that God is my friend. But at times, it feels as though he's anything but my friend.

He sometimes feels like my oppressor. This question, is God my friend or my enemy, lies right at the heart of the book of Job.

Now if you were to go into our Sunday school on a Sunday morning and speak to the children and ask them the question, is God for us or is he against us, what would they say?

[8 : 32] Well, you know what they would say. Of course, they would say God is for us. God is on our side. If you'd been to visit Job before his calamity struck him and if you'd asked him that same question, he too would have said, God is my friend.

He's blessed me greatly. God is on my side. But now, Job is not at all sure. It sounds like a glib answer to say that God is his friend and Job cannot bring himself to say it.

Well, let's turn to chapter 19. Now you'll see that in verse 2, Job replies to his comforters, his friends, how long will you torment me and break me in pieces with words?

And that is a pain-filled response to Bildad's speech in chapter 18. And when you look at chapter 18, you can see why Job feels so crushed by what Bildad has said.

Bildad, for example, gets up on his high horse at verse 5 in chapter 18 and he says, Indeed, the light of the wicked is put out and the flame of his fire does not shine.

[9 : 45] And then for the rest of the chapter, he details the gory particulars of how the wicked man is to be punished for his wickedness. So verse 7, his strong steps are shortened, his vigour leaves him.

Verses 8, 9 and 10, he finds himself caught in a trap, then terror and calamity and disaster. Look at verse 13, parts of his skin are consumed, eaten away.

Now who could Bildad be talking about at that point? There is Job, his skin covered with sores from head to foot, sitting there in front of him, scraping his skin with a piece of broken pottery.

It's pretty clear that the wicked man whom Bildad is lambasting is Job himself. Or look at verse 14, he's marched off to the king of terrors.

Verse 19, he has no posterity, this wicked man, no progeny among his people, no survivor where he used to live. What a thing to say to a man who has just lost all his children.

[10 : 49] Talk about rubbing salt into the wound. Who is this man? Well, verse 21, surely such are the dwellings of the unrighteous. He's a wicked man, he's unrighteous.

And worse than that, end of verse 21, this is the place of him who knows not God. Bildad is telling Job that he and God are strangers.

He does not know God. No wonder Job feels tormented and crushed by the words of his so-called friends. However, the hostility of his friends is really the lesser of his problems.

It's the apparent hostility of God towards Job which is even worse. Let's see how Job speaks of God's hostility from verse 6 onwards in chapter 19.

In verse 6, he feels that God has closed his net about him like a fish. Not a God who liberates, a God who traps.

[11 : 53] Verse 7, that's the language of a man who's being mugged. Violence! But nobody comes to help me. A call for help, but there's no justice to which Job can appeal.

Is there justice in heaven? Then verse 8, God seems to have set up a roadblock. He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass. I can't get through and I can't see my way.

I'm like a blind man groping in darkness. Verse 9, I've been humiliated in society. He has stripped from me my glory and taken the crown from my head.

We sometimes hear of prominent people in society being publicly disgraced. Though normally there are good reasons for the disgrace. But here, Job is being disgraced in the community without any reason that he can see.

Then there's verse 10, a violent verse. Job feels that God is breaking him down on every side and I'm gone, almost tearing at him with tiger claws and uprooting his future like a great beast uprooting a tree.

[13 : 00] My hope he is pulled up like a tree. In verse 11, he feels that God is burning with anger against him. And verse 12, it's as though there's a great army, machine guns and tanks, bombers and fighters overhead, armour-plated JCBs digging a siege ramp against...

against what? A great fortified city? A city with walls twelve foot thick, armed with gun turrets and rocket launchers? No. Against a one-man tent.

A tent. My tent, says Job. All this armoury against a flimsy canvas tent with a broken-down man inside it. I remember when I left school, it was in the days when youngsters often went hitchhiking and I went hitchhiking with a friend of mine down into Europe.

And we arrived with our little tent late one night in Munich in the south of Germany. And it was dark and we didn't know where to put our tent up. And we found a nice big open space, plenty of grass there near the city.

And we erected the tent and had a good night's sleep until about seven in the morning when there was a clip-clop, clip-clop of horses' hooves which stopped outside the tent.

[14 : 14] And I unzipped the thing and looked up. And there were two enormous horses seated upon which were two enormous German policemen. They looked about ten foot tall on top of the horses and one of them looked down at me and he said, camping is verboten.

I didn't speak German. But I understood what he meant by camping is verboten and we legged it within about three minutes. Job's tent experience was much worse than mine.

Then look at verse 13. A new sorrow enters Job's lament at this point. And this is the element of acute loneliness. verse 13.

My brothers no longer visit me. My friends are wholly estranged from me. I'm on my own. Verse 14.

My in-laws and cousins have all gone away. Then verses 15 and 16. He finds that his own household servants treat him with contempt. Look at verse 16.

[15 : 24] I summon my servant. Jones, bring me a glass of water please. But Jones doesn't even answer. Jones, I beg you, bring me some water.

But he treats me as though I'm invisible. Then look at verse 17. His wife comes down to the ash heap where he's sitting. She comes to talk to him as he's scraping away at his saws.

He perhaps says to her, come and hold my hand darling. I need your comfort. But she replies, I can't come near you Job. Your breath stinks. Do you see that?

My breath is strange, offensive it means to my wife. Illness can make people smell horrible. That's what is happening to Job. Then his brothers come to visit and Job sees them looking at him from behind the lace curtains in the house as he sits down there at the bottom of the garden.

A look of disgust crosses their faces and they leave by a side door and don't even speak to him. He's become an object of horror to his own family. But also an object of ridicule.

[16 : 31] There's a group of little boys, verse 18, who stick their heads over the garden gate. Now remember, this was a society in which age was held with great respect much more so than in our society today.

And yet these little boys, they stick their tongues out at Job and they chant, Job, Job, Job, what a smelly old man. And verse 19, what about Job's best friends?

The people that he's known for years and worked with for decades? Old friends from school and college. Are they sending him grapes and get well cards? Does he have a stream of supportive visitors popping in every afternoon?

No. They abhor him, verse 19. They hate him, they've turned against him. Perhaps like his three comforters, they believe that his suffering proves that he's done some very wicked things and they don't want to have anything to do, thank you very much, with a man who is so obviously vile and immoral.

So in verses 6 to 12, Job dwells on God's antagonism or apparent antagonism towards him. And in verses 13 to 20, he laments the antagonism, even the hatred of his family and his friends.

[17 : 48] And then he says in verse 21, isn't this a cry from the heart? Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has struck me or touched me.

Now is that true? Is it the hand of God that has touched him, blighted him, blasted him? Let's look back to something which we know but Job doesn't know.

Let's turn back to chapter 1 verses 11 and 12. Chapter 1 verse 11.

Satan is speaking to the Lord and he says to him, but stretch out your hand and touch or strike all that he has and he, Job, will curse you to your face.

And the Lord said to Satan, behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand. So in verse 11, Satan says, you strike him but the Lord does not touch him or strike him.

[19 : 01] Instead, he gives Satan permission to do it. And if you look over to chapter 2 verses 5 and 6, the conversation is repeated almost word for word.

Verse 6, the Lord says to Satan, behold, he is in your hand. Now do you see the implication of this? The hand which has wreaked such havoc with Job, destroying his wealth and his children and his health, is not the Lord's hand at all.

It is the hand of Satan. It was Satan's hands, going back to chapter 19, which break Job down on every side and pull up his hope like a tree.

It's Satan's hand that blocked his way and shrouded his paths in darkness in verse 8, that sent what appeared to be this monstrous army against him in verse 12, that isolated him from his friends and his brothers and even his wife in verses 13 to 19.

Yes, Satan was acting with God's permission, but was also acting within the limits placed upon him by the Lord. The Lord permitted Satan, but the Lord also restrained Satan.

[20 : 20] I think we could even put it like this, that Satan masquerades as God and gets Job to believe that it is God who is against him and who is attacking him.

For a parallel situation, do you remember just before the crucifixion when Jesus is blindfolded by the Roman soldiers and they begin to hit him and in mockery they cry out, who hit you?

Who struck you? Jesus knew he was being struck, but he couldn't see who was striking him. Job too knew that he was being struck, but he couldn't see who was striking him.

He thought it was God, but of course he hadn't read chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Job as we have. It gives us a great advantage. Friends, next time you or I go through a really traumatic episode in our lives, let's remember this and then we won't make the mistake of thinking that our friend has become our enemy.

It is Satan who strikes the believer. So let me put this first section of our study into a simple sentence. Job's real assailant proves to be Satan, not God at all.

[21 : 40] Well now secondly and lastly, I won't give you a summary sentence yet, but we'll look now at verses 23 to 29 of chapter 19. Verses 23 and 24 are very striking.

Job cries out, Oh that my words were written, oh that they were inscribed in a book, oh that with an iron pen and lead they were engraved in the rock forever.

There's a happy irony here of course because inscribed in a book is exactly what Job's words have been and they've been reproduced hundreds of millions of times in most of the world's languages.

In fact Job's words are bound together with the words of Moses and Isaiah and Jesus and Paul and many others. But why does Job say these things here in verses 23 and 24?

Isn't it because he's so deeply frustrated that his three friends won't accept his words? He's been protesting his innocence and his friends are simply not listening to him.

[22 : 43] His words penetrate them as little as a pea shooter penetrates the hide of a rhino. They simply won't listen to him. In fact, verse 22, they pursue him he feels.

They're never satisfied. He says, why are you not satisfied with my flesh? It's as though they already have him hung, drawn and quartered but they still haven't finished with him.

No, no. They want to make sure that his reputation is besmirched forever. In fact, if they had the opportunity to write his epitaph on his gravestone, they'd probably write something like this.

Here lies Job, a sinner who refused to confess his vile secrets but the justice of God caught up with him at last. May he not rest in peace.

So in verses 23 and 24, he's wanting his words, his words that speak of his real innocence, to be recorded in perpetuity so that when he dies, even though his three friends have blackened his name, the truth about him will not disappear.

[23 : 51] But then, in verse 25, a shaft of light appears. It's as though Job is granted a moment of clarity and conviction which overrides the gloom and bleakness of everything that he's been saying in the earlier part of the chapter.

He says in verse 25, I know that my Redeemer lives. Now the word translated Redeemer means more than just a rescuer.

It speaks of covenant obligations. Probably the best known biblical use of this word is found in the Old Testament book of Ruth. And you may remember the story where Ruth arrives at Bethlehem.

She's an alien, she's a widow, she's a refugee, she's come up from Moab, and she's virtually destitute. But she discovers, in fact she happens to meet him, she discovers a man at Bethlehem called Boaz who is a close relative of her late father-in-law.

And in Old Testament law, which is an expression of God's covenant with his people, this man has an obligation because of the family relationship, he has an obligation to look after Ruth and to make sure that she is properly provided for.

[25 : 06] In fact, he not only cares for her, he goes further from that and marries her and thus provides her with a permanent security in Old Testament Israel. And the son of her marriage to Boaz is Obed, and Obed becomes the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of King David.

So the role of this man, Boaz, as the Redeemer or Kinsman Redeemer, is to bring Ruth out of destitution and alienation into the safety and security of membership of God's covenant people.

This is a picture of what it means to become a Christian. When you and I become Christians, we're brought out of the estrangement and alienation of being sinners and rebels against God into the safety and security of the covenant and membership of the covenant people.

And when Job uses this very word in chapter 19, verse 25, it's the same process that he has in mind. Here he is at this stage living outside everything in utter degradation.

Everything has been taken from him that has made his life happy and purposeful in the past. But in the black pit of his suffering, he suddenly knows that he has a Redeemer who lives and who is therefore able and willing to rescue him.

[26 : 27] So Job is saying, I will not finally believe that the enemy who has been attacking me and clawing at me is the God who made the world.

No. The God I trust and love is related to me by covenant, by his promise. So I belong to him and to his people.

And in the end, even if it's after my death, I shall see him and he will vindicate me so that everyone will know that I was truly a believer with a clear conscience.

This is gospel faith, gospel conviction deep in the heart of the Old Testament. Look at verses 26 and 27. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God whom I shall see for myself and my eyes shall behold and not another.

And then look at the next phrase. How my heart faints within me. Or as the New International Version puts it, Oh, how my heart yearns within me. Well, of course it does at this point.

[27 : 41] He is yearning here to see God. To see him. For us, to see him is the ultimate goal of the gospel. Our kinsman redeemer Jesus has rescued us and has cemented us into membership of the eternal people of God so that in the end you and I will see God bodily in our flesh.

It will be a raised flesh, a different sort of flesh. But we shall see him and we shall live with him and we shall delight in him forever and our eyes will be fixed upon him. As we sang in the hymn, the bride is not looking so much at her dress as into the face of the bridegroom and that will be characteristic of our life in heaven.

And if somebody says, but isn't this just the wishful thinking, the wishful thinking of poor old Job, the answer is to turn on a thousand years or more and to think of another real believer who was attacked and besieged and clawed at by Satan, a blameless man who suffered a most horrible death which he did not deserve and the Redeemer God publicly vindicated him on the third day by raising him from the dead.

So the bodily resurrection of Jesus assures us that Job's confidence expressed here was not wishful thinking but rather rock solid hope.

So Job chapter 19 brings us comfort in two ways. First, it is Satan who proves to be Job's real assailant and Job's real enemy.

[29 : 23] And second, it is God who proves to be Job's real redeemer. Friends, there are bound to be times in the future, perhaps even in the present, when you and I will be brought very low.

Times when, just as Job did, we feel that everything is against us. We may even cry out, is God for me or is he against me?

We may feel very much alone as Job did and very much in pain of body or mind. But Job's faith recorded here in verses 25 to 7 is in the Bible for our comfort.

it's here for us to follow, to imitate and to make our own so that even in our worst moments we can say, I know that my redeemer lives and at the last he will stand upon the earth and after my skin has been thus destroyed yet in my flesh I shall see God whom I shall see for myself and my eyes shall behold and not another how my heart yearns within me.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. We thank you again our dear God and Father for this book of Job and for this man Job and for all that he went through because we know that it's all recorded here for our learning and our blessing.

[31 : 05] And we do pray for ourselves and for one another that when we go through times as awful as Job's or perhaps that's impossible but very bad times very difficult times you will help us to look up to you and know that Jesus is our kinsman redeemer and that through our trust in him we've been brought into the security and safety of the eternal covenant from which nothing can remove us.

Please deepen this trust in our hearts and enable us we pray dear Father to glorify you in our lives and our thinking and we ask it all in Jesus name.

Amen. Amen.