

## **Job: Sermon 1**

Job 1-2

John 9:1-12

*Gracious God... we come before you today with many questions and much unresolved in our lives. You know our heartaches, our fears, our greatest longings, and our deepest sadness. We ask that you wouldn't simply satisfy our brains, but our hearts as well. We need you to show yourself to us. We ask that as we sit beneath this text for these next few weeks, that you would fill us up with a glimpse of you; in Jesus name, we pray. Amen.*

It's January. It's cold, dark, and wet... If there is a single book of the Bible that you'd associate with misery and suffering, it's Job. Why would we spend the next few weeks looking at a book as desperately unhappy as Job? What happened to good news of great joy for all mankind?

God has got something in this book that all of us need to hear, that our joy in him might increase. I've been conscious of how many of us in our community have been up against suffering lately. Bereavements, long-term illness, inexplicable illness, relationship breakdown, declining physical capacity, mental health concerns, money worries, exhaustion- the list could go on. For some of us here this morning, suffering is a very present reality. I recognise that some of you are in the trenches right now.

There'll be some of us who aren't in acute pain now, but will have the scars from previous episodes and tragedies in our lives that still cast a long shadow. It's impossible to go through life without accumulating heartache- each of us will know that.

And for those of us who aren't in the thick of it now, or have been lucky enough to avoid major tragedy, so far- suffering is a given for *every single one* of us. At the very least, even the most carefree and charmed of us will either die early or live long enough to see people they love die.

For all of the wonderful benefits of modern medicine, our survival rate is zero. We live in the reality of shortness of life under the shadow of death; *'born into trouble as the sparks fly upwards'*. Suffering is not optional. It is a given. What is not a given is how we will respond to it. When calamity hits, when our lives are battered, will we curse God? Or will we say, along with Job *'though he slay me, I will trust in him'*?

Any sensible attempt to live thoughtfully and truthfully in our world will have to make room for suffering and death. We don't want to be a trivial church, parroting clichés, giving one another baptised versions of 'cheer up, it'll all be ok'. The Bible makes room for tragedy and pain. They don't get the last word. The triumph of the empty tomb is waiting for us.

If we are to draw the full measure of Easter, we must reckon with that which it ultimately rescues us from. Let's not make shortcuts. So let's hit Lent kneeling. Let's gird our loins, and read Job.

Job is a long book, and 95% of it is poetry. This shows that the problem of pain can't be distilled, figured out neatly into logical parcels. God doesn't give us a tract with bullet points. He gives us a poem, because he doesn't just want just to reach our heads, but our hearts as well. And that means a slow and thoughtful reading. We won't have space in our services to deal with all of the book in depth, and we'll only hear a fraction of it read on a Sunday morning. Can I encourage you to read Job, slowly- maybe aloud?, from now until March 18<sup>th</sup>? It makes for less than a chapter a day.

**So- Job- who was he?** Perhaps you'll turn with me to page 509 of our Bibles. Job is a poem, but it is framed by a plot, which is set in a particular time and place, even though we don't know exactly where and when. We don't know where Uz is, but we know it's not in Israel. The setting of the story is ancient, because the book itself is, even by Bible standards, very old; reading around, it feels most likely that Job is around at a similar time as the founding fathers of Israel- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, in a land nearby.

Job was very good, and very rich. Verses 1-5 show this; Job was the greatest man among the people of the East. His family was large (7 and 3 both numbers of perfection) and were wealthy enough to enjoy feasting- given feasts last several days, with 10 children, that is a lot of partying. But Job isn't decadent, greedy, or selfish. Job is also presented as a good, righteous man. Even though he's not in Israel, he offers the right sacrifices to God. He is so diligent that he offers sacrifice on behalf of his children, just in case they had done or said something wrong. This is a picture of a man of deep integrity and piety.

**And then, a very strange encounter in the heavenly courtroom.** Job knows nothing of this conversation. As the angels come to present themselves to God, Satan- the accuser (*see the note at the bottom*) also came with them. The text doesn't tell us a huge amount about who this accuser is. Certainly a malicious figure... beyond that the book doesn't say too much. Satan makes a case to God- that Job is only faithful and good because he is blessed; in other words, Job is only really in it for himself. For all his good works, sacrifices and prayer, Job is in it for Job. Of course he worships you- he has the perfect life! Satan says 'let me hurt all the things he loves- then we'll see if he really loves you!' What is at stake here? Job's happiness and God's glory.

Verse 12, we see God's response- very well, everything he has in is in your hands, but don't hurt him'. Satan acts immediately- the news of tragedies come in, thick and fast- violence, theft, natural disaster, leaves Job bereft of his family and his wealth. Let's see Job's response- *Job responds 'the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away- may the name of the Lord be praised. In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing'*. Job passes the test. The second test- similar pattern, but this time, Satan is allowed to give Job a skin disease, and it is in his misery that the rest of the book is set.

What are we to make of this dynamic? The court room, the presence of the accuser, God's terrible permissions- this is an ancient version one of the oldest questions around. **If God is all-powerful, and all-loving, why do bad things happen?** The rest of the book centres on this question, and over the next few weeks, we'll look at some of the answers Job's friends come up with, some of the ways Job responds, and finally we'll hear God's voice. But what can we say from these passages in Job 1&2?

Firstly, this passage shows us **that reality is greater than what we can see and understand**. Notice that Job doesn't have a clue about any of the courtroom scene. He's not told about it anywhere in the book. But we see it. And so is the case for us- behind the reality of this world is an almighty struggle. Whilst Job's struggles seem meaningless at the time, his response matters, because . One response to human suffering is to collapse into meaninglessness- everything is absurd, there is no rhyme or reason; *'life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'*. Job's suffering is not meaningless. God will use it for his own glory, and Job's good.

Secondly, **this passage shows us that God's sovereignty is not in doubt.** God doesn't look on helplessly as Satan sets to with Job- the accuser may be a lion, but he is a lion on a leash. Whilst this feels incredibly simplistic, there is some profound theology going on under there. Good and evil are not dualistic. The light and the dark are not evenly balanced. God is in charge. This passage also shows us that God doesn't actively will Job's harm. He allows it, but he doesn't hurt Job himself.

There are ways we could be tempted to fold the problem of suffering away neatly, to solve the problem. And the book of Job refuses all of them. Suffering is real, and awful, and God is perfectly good and perfectly in control. We can read Job and still say, along with the Psalmist, '*our God is in the heavens, he does whatever he pleases*'. Will you let God's sovereignty be your joy in suffering? Will you rejoice that he isn't looking on helplessly, hoping the medicine works, or the peace talks end with resolution?

**Thirdly,** we can **see Jesus Christ in Job 1&2.** Like the rest of the Old Testament, the book of Job needs Christ to find its fulfilment. We'll see that in a number of ways over the next few weeks. Whatever Job's suffering, and whatever Job's obedience, Jesus' suffering on the cross was greater, and his obedience infinite. Golgotha shows us that at the heart of our faith there is underserved suffering and defeat that in turn leads to undeserved joy and victory- because an innocent man suffered, guilty people like us can experience God's mercy and grace.

Through Christ, we can rest in the truth that our lives are not meaningless, that God is in charge of his universe, and that in all things, whatever storms life throws at us, we can know that '*in all things, God works for the good of those who love him*'.

*Let's pray... gracious God, we ask that as we approach Job, as we survey the reality of suffering and the reality of your mighty power, that you would enlarge our hearts with a larger vision of you. We ask that we would not be satisfied with easy answers, but that through authentic and honest trust in your Son Christ, that our joy in you- for you- would increase. Amen.*

