

What is God really like?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 October 2022

Preacher: Ali Sewell

[0 : 0 0] Thanks, Ross. And if you've got a Bible with you, it'd be worth keeping that open, chapter 9, as we go through that together. We mentioned a couple of weeks ago the book, *A Grief Observed*, written by C.S. Lewis, his raw emotional reflections on suffering following the death of his wife.

Let me read a section of that book as a way into this chapter of Job. C.S. Lewis thinks about God and the nature of God in that time of great pain that he was going through.

He writes this, Not that I am, I think, in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him.

The conclusion I dread is not so there's no God after all, but rather, so this is what God's really like. Again, the honesty of that book, as Lewis, such a committed Christian, asks these questions, wrestles with the character of God.

What kind of God really is he? That's a similar question to what Job is asking in chapter 9 that we've just read. That's a similar idea as to what we'll be thinking about as we look through that chapter together this morning.

[1 : 2 4] Perhaps you've had thoughts about God's character yourself when you experience suffering, or when you've seen that in the world around us, or when those close to us have gone through that.

Is God really good? Does God really care? If he did, well, why would these things be happening?

Some real, honest, stark questions raised by this chapter. Just before we dig into that, a quick look at some of the big ideas in Job, which we need to make sense of this chapter.

A quick recap. We've seen how Job is suffering, even though he is righteous, that he is a good man. We saw in chapter 3 that just the depth of his sorrow and despair.

We saw last week his supposed friends began trying to comfort him. And as Angus showed us last time, they basically had this very simple formula which said, if you've been good, well, then good things will happen to you.

[2 : 2 9] If you've been bad, then bad things will happen to you. You've sinned, therefore you're suffering. It is their fairly heartless counsel to Job.

And yet we know that that is not what's happening to Job. That was made clear to us in chapter 1, where God himself describes Job as blameless and upright.

Job knows that he hasn't some kind of secret sins that means he somehow deserves all this. And so, as Ross mentioned, after each time his friends come at him, we're really with this kind of accusation, this must be your fault, Job.

Well, Job doesn't just take that lying down. Each time he responds, chapter 9 is one of those responses. And just finally, to really understand what Job says here, we also need to look forward as well to the end of this book.

We've mentioned before, kind of the direction we're heading, that Job is not going to get all the answers. Everything is not going to be kind of wrapped up in a neat little bow. But Job will show, sorry, God will show that Job is right and his friends are in the wrong.

[3 : 40] Chapter 42, verse 7, God says to these friends, you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has. And so Job and what Job says gets God's kind of overall seal of approval.

And yet also toward the end of the book, as God appears on the scene, he says this to Job, who is this that darkens my counsel by words without knowledge? Job responds to God saying, I've uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

Job says, I repent in dust and ashes. And so the point is that, yes, Job is in the right, and yet not every word that he speaks about God or his situation is accurate.

One commentator puts it this way, that Job says things that are wrong, but from a heart that is deeply right. Job, we could almost think in some ways, is kind of verbally processing what he's going through, trying to make sense of that.

And we're listening in to this developing thought process. So here in chapter 9, we see Job wrestling with who God is, his desire to be right with God, but also that question, is this what God is really like?

[4 : 57] Is God really good? And as we look at that, we're going to see what Job does get right. We'll also see what Job gets wrong, and we'll ultimately see what Job needs most of all.

So let's look at those, trying to get to grips with God's character in difficult times as we continue through this book. First up, what Job gets right. What Job gets right, what Job speaks correctly about God, which is that Job declares God's power.

Job declares God's power. This is mainly kind of the first half of the chapter, although it's not a kind of hard and fast boundary. This is sort of poetry, remember. But Job declares God's power.

One thing that Job is certain of and that he is right about is that God is powerful. And Job speaks about that with regards to creation, that he is the God who removes mountains, verse five, who shakes the earth out of place, verse six, who commands the sun and it doesn't rise, who seals up the stars, verse seven.

Note there's a kind of a negative spin on all of those things. These are not what we expect. This is not the world as we kind of expect it to be, the sun not rising, the earth's shaking.

[6 : 11] The idea there that God can sovereignly do what he wants with his creation. Actually, that can be a scary thing. But there's also the sheer scale of what God has created that again demonstrates his power.

Verse eight, he alone stretched out the heavens. He has authority over the wildness of the seas, it says. Verse nine, these great stellar constellations of the night sky, the bear, Orion, the Pleiades.

Job states that, well, God is the maker of these things. The Bible tells us that the universe we live in gives us a glimpse of God's power because God is the one who made it and Job here recognizes exactly that.

It leads up to verse 10, this brilliant description of God. He does great things beyond searching out and marvelous things beyond number. Job declares God's power.

Job gets it right in terms of God's majesty, his authority, his ability, his supremacy, that God is simply orders of magnitude beyond where Job stands, really beyond what any of us can comprehend.

[7 : 21] In all that Job goes through throughout this book, he never once doubts the raw power of God. Job gets that right. And it's good for us to recognize that as well.

And we need to remember that too. And we need to remember God's power in all situations. An incredibly trivial example of this compared to a lot of the suffering that we've been talking about.

We've been having car trouble at home and I know absolutely nothing about cars, so I'm like instantly out of my depths. But at times that has been looming large on my mind, the inconvenience, the cost, the uncertainty, all these things can seem very big and God can seem very small.

But actually I need to remember that God is big, God is powerful. There is no situation outside of his control. We want to affirm what Job says, that yes, God is powerful.

And actually I think in really hard times, proper suffering, we sometimes think actually if we forget that, if we make God small, that somehow we can let God off the hook as it were.

[8 : 30] And we say things like, well, you know, God's not really in control of that. Or well, there are just evil, wicked people and there's nothing that God can do about that. That's just human's choices. That suffering is somehow outside of God's jurisdiction.

So many of the answers to the question of kind of God and suffering really actually boil down to that, boil down to a very small God who can't really do anything about it. But God and the rest of the Bible will not allow that.

Job won't allow that. God is powerful. God can do what he wants in his creation. Job is right as he affirms that. And it actually, we see here, that doesn't give Job any comfort.

He's right. He declares God's power. And yet all that does is put God out of his reach. And verse 11, behold, he passes by and I see him not.

He moves on, but I don't perceive him. Verse 19, if it is a contest of strength, behold, he is mighty. Job can't lay a glove on or get hold of this mighty God.

[9 : 39] He is simply beyond what Job can grasp. And so we want to, and we need to hold on to the fact of God's power, even in the hardest of times.

We don't want to make God small. And yet we also need to remember that simply a big, powerful God isn't enough. One of the things we'll hopefully be getting better at as we go through this series is encouraging and comforting those who are going through the darkest of times.

And one of the ways that we can sometimes try and do that, and it can be very easy to do, is simply to say, well, look, it's okay, God's in control. God is powerful. And that is absolutely true.

And yet I'm sure that all around the world there are people who live under the authority of rulers or dictators of absolute power, and that that is very little comfort to them.

And what we also need to know is that God is good, that this absolute power is held by someone who at the same time is absolutely just, absolutely fair.

[10 : 50] And actually we see as we move on, that is what Job had started to question here. We see what Job gets right. He declares God's power. But second here, we see what Job gets wrong as Job questions God's justice.

Yes, God is big, and he is powerful, he is in control, but he doesn't seem to Job to care about right or wrong. Job questions God's justice.

Verse 17, it says, he crushes me with a tempest and multiplies my wounds without cause, Job says about God. God is doing this to me, and it's not fair. Verse 20, though I'm in the right, my own mouth would condemn me, though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.

You know, he'll make it seem like I'm wrong at whatever happens, Job says, it's not fair. Now verses 22 to 24, really this kind of summary of Job questioning God's justice.

He says, it is all one. Therefore I say, he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.

[11 : 56] The earth is given into the hand of the wicked. He covers the faces of its judges. If it is not he, who then is it? It's a pretty monstrous description of God, isn't it?

He doesn't care about good or evil, Job says. They're all one. They're all the same to him. He mocks innocent suffering. He actively stops, works against justice, covers the eyes of the judges.

Job is not holding back here in expressing how it appears to him that God's character must be, yes, God is powerful, but no, God does not care.

Now we're going to see in just a minute why I think Job gets this wrong. That this is one of the times when, as he says later in the book, he is uttering things that he did not understand.

But it is worth, again, just stopping and pausing and recognising that good, godly people, upright and just, just as Job was, can be tempted to think this way.

[13 : 03] That suffering can raise these kind of questions. It can be easy to think that God is not being fair, that God doesn't care, that God is giving some people more than they can deal with.

That question, I'm sure, resonates with a number of us. And it's actually great that this question, this kind of question, is raised in the Bible itself. This isn't something the Bible is trying to hide away, but that it itself brings to the surface.

And certainly the idea of God not being good, of suffering, somehow showing God as some kind of monster is something that people opposed to the church have picked up on and used as an argument or as a weapon against the God of the Bible.

You might remember seeing this a number of years ago now, but there was a quite a famous TV clip from Stephen Fry that was doing the rounds where he says, the question he would ask God is, how dare you?

He said, how dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? And it went on to speak of God as capricious, mean-minded, evil. And it's worth making a note to say, it's really important to recognize, there is a huge difference between a believer in God like Job in the midst of huge suffering, struggling with his understanding of how God can be good in the midst of that.

[14 : 27] And there is a difference between that genuine believer asking genuine questions in the midst of struggle and someone like Stephen Fry, an atheist, and yet seeking to somehow prove his point by co-opting this emotional language.

There's a huge difference there and yet perhaps both of them can leave us with the same question and the question we ask is, well, are they right? Is that accurate?

Is Job right about a God who doesn't distinguish between right and wrong, who doesn't care about justice? Well, actually, the book of Job itself is something that helps answer that question.

It takes us right back, if you remember, to those foundations in chapter one and two. We saw that, yes, God is sovereign, he is in control, and yet actually this isn't God himself inflicting this suffering upon Job.

This isn't God causing this. As Job begins to think, we actually see in chapters one and two that this is the work of Satan. Job himself asked that question at the end of verse 24, if not he, who then is it?

[15 : 35] Job hasn't seen behind the scenes in chapter one and two where we have where the answer to his question, who then is it, has been revealed. The reality of supernatural evil.

Satan himself who is bringing this upon Job. Now, even with that in place, we can still ask, well, why is God allowing that? It's a question we spoke about back in our first week looking at Job.

You could go back online and have a look at that. We spoke about that in a bit more detail, but really, the summary is to say that God allows this suffering to come upon Job, that through that, God is proving that good, upright people like Job will worship God not just for what they get, but because of who God is.

That's the kind of the rationale behind it, but actually, Job hasn't seen, as we said, behind the scenes. Job is actually attributing the actions of Satan to God.

God. And obviously, through that, coming to the wrong conclusion that God does not care about right or wrong. God does not care about justice. And incidentally, that's what people like Stephen Fry are doing as well, observing suffering, which is the impact of Satan, of sin, of the fall, and saying, look, this is what God is doing.

[16 : 56] Well, the Bible is clear that that is not the case. It's a view that comes from an ignorance of what God has said about himself in the Bible, but it's understandable from God's position, from Job's position, that he doesn't know what's going on.

And so he gets this wrong. He questions God's justice. And just before we move on, look at the consequences of that, that Job realizes. Verse 27, Job says, if I say, I will forget my complaint, I will put off my sad face, and be of good cheer, I become afraid of all my suffering, for I know you will not hold me innocent.

I shall be condemned. Why then do I labor in vain? Job says, no, I can't just grin and bear this. I can't just pretend it's all fine, which is so often the only kind of advice that the world has to offer us, because actually, he says, if there's no good of justice at the center of creation, well then, life is a horror.

He says, anything I'm going through now will only be worse in the end. Life is hopeless. Now verse 30, he says, if I wash myself with snow and cleanse my hands with lye, yet you will plunge me into a pit, and my own clothes will abhor me.

Even if I do my very best, Job says, even if I am righteous, well it doesn't matter anyway, because God doesn't care about right or wrong. He'll punish me anyway.

[18 : 25] Now one of the things this passage leaves us in no doubt about is actually to say that God is not fair, to say that God doesn't care about justice, well actually, that is no solution whatsoever.

That doesn't help in the slightest. Even if we pretend that to be true, it actually, all it just brings us to is despair, as it leaves us with no hope. Now there's no way that what is wrong, that the suffering we or others go through will ever be put right.

If God is not just, we're simply left in a world that makes no sense, has no direction, and offers no hope. Now thankfully, as we've seen, Job's analysis, Job's questioning God's justice here isn't correct.

Job doesn't have the full story. And I think there's a sense that Job himself knows that as well, and that leads us to our final point here, which is what Job needs.

What Job needs. And we see that here in verse 33, still Job speaking, he says, there is no arbiter between us who might lay his hand on us both.

[19 : 40] That can also be translated, and a lot of versions will have that, if only there were an arbiter between us. Job has been emphasizing this gulf between him and God, that God is too powerful for him to approach, that God doesn't seem bothered about what's going on, not even interested in justice.

In the face of his suffering, Job is questioning, is that what God is really like? Job recognizes what he needs is someone to connect him with God, to stand between them, to span the gap, to have a hand on us both, he says, and to mediate between them.

How can a man be in the right before God? Job begins this chapter by asking, and at the close he sees that actually the only way what he really needs is this arbiter between them, this link between man and God.

And at this point, in the book of Job, really this is just a kind of a seed of an idea as we trace Job's thought through the book. Last time we heard Job speak, he was simply in despair in chapter 3.

Since that, we've skipped over chapters 6 and 7. Job speaks again, but still showing very little hope. The arrows of the Almighty are in me, he says, chapter 6. I will complain in the bitterness of my soul, he says, chapter 7.

[21 : 07] But here it's as if we get this glimmer of light, this if only. And actually this idea and this confidence will grow throughout Job's speeches and we'll see that in particular in display next week, in the chapter that we look at next week.

And as we're able this morning to look at the book of Job as it takes its place in the completed Bible, as we look at the book of Job taking its place in the completed story of God's plan of salvation, then we can know that there is this orbiter between man and God.

That there is this mediator who has come. There is one with a hand on God and a hand on man who connects us both. And of course, that is Jesus. Now looking into the New Testament, that's part of the Bible written after Jesus has come.

A letter called 1 Timothy says this, for there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all.

How can man be in the right before God? How can any of us be right with God, our creator, this powerful creator beyond our control as Job has been emphasizing?

[22 : 30] Well, only through the work of the arbiter, of that mediator, Jesus Christ, the one who could connect us to God because he himself is fully God and yet also became fully human.

And that he gave himself as a ransom, that he dealt with the punishment for our sins that we deserved. We now know that Jesus is this mediator who is able to make us right with God.

And it's only really where we stand, it's only as we're able to look at Jesus that we can get that proper understanding of the character of God which has been one of the huge questions through this chapter, one of the huge questions that we often ask, particularly in the hardest of times.

We said earlier how Job rightly declares the power of God and yet isn't able to take comfort from that because it simply made God unreachable. And yet when we see that Jesus the mediator has come from heaven to us, we know that we can be connected to God.

That yes, he is unreachable but that he has reached down to us. And we said that power is only good news if that powerful God is also good.

[23 : 50] What we see is God sends Jesus not only as a mediator but also as Timothy said, as Paul says to Timothy as a ransom for all that God gave his very best to redeem us, to purchase us back that he is good.

He is loving. He does care for his people. God is not powerful but detached. Instead, he is intimately committed to and gracious toward his people.

As Job even questions God's justice. Well, as we look to Jesus, as we look to the cross, we see he is not a God who turns a blind eye to evil and not a God who perverts justice, not a God who won't distinguish between right and wrong but that Jesus came, that justice might be done, that the cross itself shows us the character of God, that he is so concerned about what is right, he is so concerned about justice, that he would send Jesus to die as this ransom, that our sin and the sins of anyone who would turn to Jesus would be dealt with once and for all, not kind of brushed under the carpet, but that justice would be satisfied, that he himself would suffer, that this justice could be done.

We have a far, far fuller picture of that than Job did. One of the hardest things for Job in the midst of his suffering is his questioning, is his concern about what God God is.

In hard times that can be a struggle for us as well, that can be a struggle for those that we know and love going through suffering. Again, remember those words of C.S. Lewis, not that I am, I think, in much danger of ceasing to believe in God.

[25 : 43] The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. Again, just looking through this book of Job together doesn't make it simple, doesn't make it simple, but it does show us that when, like Job, we or our friends or our loved ones struggle through suffering and ask some big questions, that we can keep on looking to Jesus and the cross and see the goodness of God's character.

And that even in the hardest of times, we can have confidence in him because of who he is. We can worship him because of who he is. The Christian life doesn't take away suffering.

If you're a Christian here, you will suffer. If you're here and you're not a Christian, you will suffer. And yet the gospel, the work of Jesus, does promise that for those who are Christians, that they go through suffering knowing that they remain in the hands of a good God that can be hard to see at the time and yet it remains true.

If you're not suffering at the moment, now is the time to be building up our understanding of God's good character in order that it might sustain us when those times of suffering come.

If you are going through deep suffering at the moment, that is the challenge, that in the midst of that darkness, to keep on looking to Christ, keep on remembering the gospel and trying to grab hold of that character of God that it reveals to us.

[27 : 17] The gospel then also helps us to wisely, lovingly, gently be able to hold out that God, be able to hold out a relationship with that God to others who are suffering because the good news is there is an arbiter, there is a mediator, there is the one who connects us to God, Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for us all.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we recognise that we live in a fallen world, that creation is no longer in the perfect state in which you created it, that we suffer, those we love suffer, some suffer more than we could ever imagine and it just seems so unfair.

Lord, in these times it's easy to question you, who you are and what you're doing. Lord, we thank you that the Bible shows that you take those questions seriously, that we can cry out to you, that we don't have to just pretend that everything's fine.

But we do pray that in those times you would help us to look to Jesus, the mediator that we need to be made right with you, the Holy God. We thank you for the gospel that reveals your character, that you are all-powerful with victory even over death itself, but that you also have great love for your people and that you will ensure that justice is done.

Lord, help us to have a true picture of you that will sustain us in hard times, which will encourage those around us within the church as they go through hard times and that will be a light to those who don't yet know you, pointing to the power and the love, the justice and the care that you show to all those who turn to you.

[29 : 14] We pray all these things in the precious name of Jesus Christ. Amen.