

Job's Suffering

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. Well, as we've mentioned a couple of times, we're beginning a new series this morning, looking through the book of Job. Before we dig in and look at the first chapter and a bit of that this morning, this incredible and this really unique, I think, book. It's good to think for a moment why, you know, why Job? I think Job kind of can put this right out at the beginning. I think Job is going to be one of the hardest books that we have looked at together as a church. Job is not an easy or a straightforward book. There's going to be lots to wrestle with. And yet I think it's a book that is vital for us as a church because perhaps first and foremost, is it a book that deals with suffering? It is a book that speaks about God and suffering. And the fact is that all of us here in this room are in one of two camps. Either you're going through suffering, you're wading through that. It's hard. It doesn't seem to make any sense. It seems like it'll never come to an end.

Or if that's not you at the moment, the fact is at some point that will be you. At some point, to some extent, you will meet that hardship. That is awaiting you. I don't want to be kind of overly gloomy at the start of our time together, but whether we're suffering now or we're suffering in the future, suffering is a part of life in a fallen world. And beyond that, not just for ourselves, but all of us will know people who are suffering as well. And so it's important, it's essential that we're able to think biblically about that. Suffering brings with it huge kind of why questions. If we're Christians, then suffering, either our own or other people's, can really shake our faith. For Christians, or perhaps even people just considering Christianity, thinking about Christianity, wondering what it's all about. Again, suffering can bring huge doubts, which can sometimes seem unsurmountable. And yet it's great that we're able to turn to the Bible and see that the Bible doesn't hide away from suffering. The Bible is not surprised about suffering, but the Bible addresses suffering head on and nowhere more fully than in these 42 chapters of the book of Job. We're going to spend the next two months, really, the next eight weeks or so moving through this book, sitting and listening to Job, this man who suffers incredibly. We're going to do that over quite a long period of time because the Bible does that. You know, the Bible doesn't just give us a kind of a short tract or just a little paragraph here or there on suffering and say, look, that's going to answer all your questions.

You don't need to worry about that anymore. I know the Bible gives it the time and the duration that it deserves. In the book of Job, the Bible takes us through suffering and not to find easy answers, not to try and give us a neat formula, not to kind of hand out nice sounding platitudes or tweets that we can kind of fire off from a distance. This book is certainly not going to give us a trick to get rid of suffering. It's not going to give us handy hints to make suffering not seem so bad or encourage us just to put on a brave face. Next week in particular, we'll just see that the depth of suffering and sorrow that people, that Christians go through. And yet our goal in going through all this in the book of Job is that ultimately we would gain wisdom, that we might see suffering in light of who God is. That's why we've called this series Knowing God in Suffering, because that's what the wisdom books in the Bible do. They bring God into the picture. They help us see the challenges of our life in light of the God who created us. That we would turn to him, know him, trust him, love him.

We would, as the Bible says, fear him. That kind of encompasses all of those things, even in the darkest of times. So there's a bit of an introduction to the book of Job as a whole. While though Job might be a challenging book, although Job will be a book that kind of stretches us, might face us up with uncomfortable truths, uncomfortable passages, it's not going to tie everything up kind of neatly in a bow. But ultimately, it is something given to us by God in his word, the Bible, for our good, so that we can know God, love God, trust God, even or perhaps especially when suffering comes.

So we're going to begin by reading from chapter 1, verse 1, through to chapter 2, verse 10. It's a fairly longish reading, but it's going to lay the foundations for the rest of the book of Job.

[4 : 32] You'll find that on page 417 in your church Bibles, and I think Julie is going to come and read that. Thanks, Julie. Quite a lot going on in this opening passage that we'll look at together now. We've thought a bit about the book of Job as a whole, why it is that we're looking at this book over the next couple of months. Let's get straight into these first couple of chapters that we're looking at this morning. Job is actually a huge poem. If you've got a Bible in front of you, you can see that how from chapter 3 onwards, how it's laid out, it shows that this is poetry that we're going to be dealing with. But actually, it begins with this kind of narrative introduction that we've just read, and then it has a kind of a narrative conclusion as well at the end in chapter 42. But these verses that we're looking at this morning really kind of set the scene for this epic poem that we're going to be working our way through. There are some truths here that we need to know and grasp and hold on to if we're going to make sense of this book of Job. And actually truths that we need to know and we need to hold on to as well ourselves as we try and make sense of and act wisely in suffering. And so we're going to look at two kind of key foundations in the opening of this book. And the first is this, the first is this, Job's righteous suffering. Job's righteous suffering. Have a look at how this book begins. It begins by introducing us to Job. Verse 1, there was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.

And what is the first thing we're told about Job? What is his primary characteristic? Well, verse 1 continues, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. This is not saying that Job is perfect. Nobody is. Job himself later on will say that in this book. But what we are presented with here is a man striving after God. Job is a man of integrity.

Job is a man who treats others how they should be treated. Job is a man who treats God how he should be treated. He's not a man with hidden secrets. We're given this picture of a good, good man. And he's a man also who we read on has been blessed. Verse 2, he has this great family, seven sons and three daughters who get together regularly. We see later on enjoying each other's company. There's real kind of family harmony there. Verse 3, he's got great wealth, seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, very many servants, so that it says, this man was the greatest of all the people of the east. And these blessings haven't made him arrogant. They've not led him away from God. Instead, verse 5, we see how he is so concerned about being right with God that he makes sacrifices for his family just in case. Just in case, he says, they've sinned and cursed God in their heart. There's no suggestion that they have, that there's anything untoward going on. But Job is so concerned that they, like he, would be blameless, upright, pure, right with God. So Job is a good, good man. Job is a righteous man who wants every aspect of his life to be in line with God's will.

Job feared the Lord, it says. And that's a huge theme in these wisdom books in the Bible, the fear of the Lord. And really what it means is this. It means knowing the greatness, knowing the perfection, knowing the power, knowing the holiness of God, and responding rightly to that, living in light of that. And that's what Job did. Job was a righteous man. And it's important that we hold onto that, the nature of what Job was like. Because actually that fact is going to be challenged. People are going to doubt that throughout this book of Job. Maybe we'll even start to wonder, is Job really that good?

But we want to hold onto that truth that we're given here in this opening chapter, because it's vital for understanding this book. Now, why is it so important? Well, it is because it is this man, Job, this righteous man, who suffers horribly, who suffers almost unimaginably. All of the blessings that Job has received that we've just seen are undone, are stripped away. Have a look down to verse 13 onwards. A messenger comes to Job. His oxen and his donkeys have been stolen, his servants murdered.

[9 : 27] Another messenger, hot on his heels, a natural disaster, has killed his sheep and those looking after them while he's still speaking. Another comes. Enemies have taken his camels and killed the remaining servants. All his possessions gone. Perhaps you could imagine, try and imagine, coming back from a holiday and finding that your home has just been burnt to the ground. There's absolutely nothing left. Or trying to access a bank account, check up on your pension, your life savings, whatever it might be, and it has been cleared out by fraudsters. And you have no protection against that. It's gone. Job loses everything. And yet I'm sure even that paled into insignificance compared to the fourth and final messenger to arrive with those words that no parent should ever have to hear. The messenger comes like a police officer might knock on a door late at night to say that Job's children too have died. I don't know if any of us who have not experienced that can really come close to understanding how that would feel. And then finally later on, chapter 2, verse 7, the last step down from being the greatest of the men of the East to being at the bottom of a pit of despair and destitution. Job's health fails him. Sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head, constant and complete pain, verse 8, and he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in ashes. Just that picture there of the scale and the depth and the sheer all-encompassing nature of Job's suffering. That is how this book begins.

This tidal wave of suffering from Job, the man who had everything and who loses it all. And that start is really important for two reasons I want us to think about that we need to hold on to that for two reasons. Firstly, it's important because there will be people we know and there will be people in this room who are suffering in all sorts of different ways. Whether that is ongoing chronic health issues, whether that is loss of loved ones, whether that is family difficulties, whether that is financial worries in the kind of most difficult sense of the word in terms of providing for children or eating rather than having to delay a new kitchen, whether that is mental health struggles, whether it is depression, whether it is despair. People are suffering in all sorts of ways.

And one thing that I am not going to do, I am not able to do, is to stand at the front here and say, oh well, I know how you feel. Or I know how hard that is. Because I don't.

None of us know what each other is going through. None of us can fully identify with each other's situation. And yet this chapter of Job gives confidence that actually I am able to stand here and say that whatever you're going through, the book of Job is sufficient for you. That actually the Bible's understanding of suffering, it encompasses what you're going through. That's not going to make it easier.

It's absolutely not going to take that suffering away. But it is to say that whatever is happening and whatever will happen in the future, that you are not outside of the Bible's grasp of suffering.

[13 : 18] So please do stick with us as we make our way through this book of Job. Please do know that God understands. And that's the first thing that's so important for us to grasp. Secondly as well, the scale of this suffering is so important as we remember who this happened to. And that this suffering came upon a righteous man.

And that Job was blameless, upright, feared God, turned away from evil, and he lost everything. The sheer kind of dissonance of that, the kind of the how, the why, the what's the point, the anger, and the confusion perhaps that we think when we hear that, that is what we're going to be wrestling through throughout the rest of the book of Job. But here and now it shows us one thing so clearly, which is this, the reality of righteous suffering.

That the bad things, truly bad things, can happen to truly good people. The book of Job is about a righteous sufferer, someone who gets what he doesn't deserve, and how to begin to make sense of that, how to deal with that, how to come to God in light of that.

Now that doesn't mean that there aren't times when hardship comes because of our actions. You know, if you drive recklessly and you crash, if you gamble all your money away, that there are times when our foolishness bears bad fruits, where we bear the consequences.

But the book of Job is here showing us that things are not just black and white. That is not always the case. We see Job's righteous suffering. And ultimately in that, Job is going to be pointing us forward to the ultimate righteous sufferer at the very heart of the Bible, who is, of course, Jesus Christ.

[15 : 11] The one man ever who truly was perfect and yet went through the ultimate in suffering, deeper even than what we read of Job. suffering on a cross, suffering separation from his heavenly father, suffering the consequences of our sin.

And that's how we know that our suffering is not a punishment from God. It's just an easy kind of assumption to sink into that. But our suffering can never be a punishment from God because on the cross, Jesus has taken our punishment.

There is an ultimate righteous sufferer, Jesus Christ, who transforms how we see suffering. And yet that doesn't take away suffering. Job and Jesus himself show us the reality of righteous suffering and how that continues to be part of the broken worlds that we live in.

So there's the first kind of big foundational block that this opening chapter puts in place, Job's righteous suffering, the reality of righteous suffering.

Two things before we move on to the second kind of foundational block, two consequences of this first foundation. Firstly, how we deal with our own suffering.

[16 : 27] You know, when suffering comes, and it will, as we've said, it's so easy for us to just automatically think, well, where have we gone wrong? Where have I gone wrong? Where have we somehow stepped out of God's plan?

Or why is God angry with us? Or does God not love us anymore? Or has God just forgotten all about us? It's so easy for us to think in the darkest and the hardest of times that we must have done something terrible.

We must be a big disappointment. And the book of Job is going to show us that while suffering is real and it is hard, it does not mean that God is not for us.

It does not mean that God doesn't love us. The reality of righteous suffering means that we can cling all the more tightly to God at the hardest of times rather than run from him, rather than think that he has turned his back on us.

That's the first kind of consequence of that, how we deal with our suffering. Secondly, as well, it shapes our attitude, I think, toward others who are suffering. You know, that we don't come alongside people to interrogate them, to grill them, to give them some sort of tips on how if they could just put this and this and this right, well, then their life would be sweet.

[17 : 45] Later on in the book, Job says, in the thought of one who is at ease, there is contempt for misfortune. An incredible verse. You know, when things are going well for us, when our kind of family picture is all looking rosy, it's so easy for us to think that those who are suffering, well, they must have made some kind of mistake.

You know, they've gone wrong somewhere. If they were just a bit more like us, then things would be better for them. And yet Job is the best man in this book, that this suffering comes.

When we draw alongside suffering people, whatever form, whatever shape that that suffering might take, we need to remind them, as we've just said, this doesn't mean God doesn't care. And this doesn't mean God doesn't, that God has forgotten them.

And instead, we need to point them back to God's great love for them, to be slow to give advice, but to be quick, as we were saying a few weeks ago, quick to speak that gospel truth in love, pointing to Jesus as the ultimate righteous sufferer who has taken away our punishment and who has displayed God's perfect love for us, our love that will never leave us.

And so there's the first foundation for this book, Job's righteous suffering, the reality of righteous suffering, something for us to hold on to as we move forward.

[19 : 07] Okay, well, the second thing, and again, this is gonna be a key point, and I think as well, this is gonna be a really challenging thing for us to get our heads around, just to kind of highlight, we're not gonna answer all of our questions in this first session in Job.

We might not answer all of them by the time we get to the end, but please do stick with us as we go through it together, that the second foundational block that we see in these opening verses is this, God's sovereignty over suffering.

God's sovereignty over suffering. This takes us back to verse six, and we get this kind of insight into this heavenly scene. We get really an insight into the spiritual realities that govern our world, and this actually might raise all sorts of questions, and we could chat more about all these things afterwards, but for now, we'll try and keep a focus on the main point here, which is really to do with the source of Job's suffering.

Verse six, now there came a day when the sons of God, that word is often translated angels elsewhere, these are kind of divine beings, the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them.

This picture here shows God as sovereign and in complete control, above everything else, he is the one these divine figures have to present themselves before, but there is, within that kind of divine council, the presence of spiritual evil, of supernatural evil, Satan present among them, not as God's equal, but as his subject.

[20 : 42] And here's the point, and here's perhaps what might seem like a hard thing to hear, but something that we'll try and make sense of. God doesn't cause Job's suffering, but God does allow Satan to bring this suffering on Job.

Let me say that again, God doesn't cause Job's suffering, but God does allow Satan to bring this suffering on Job. In fact, you see, it's actually God who brings Job's name into the equation.

Verse eight, And the Lord said to Satan, 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?

Again, God knows Job's righteousness, as we've been saying, and yet he allows Satan to bring all of this suffering up. Why does God allow that?

Why does God allow that to happen to this good man? You know, we see God's sovereignty. He sets the limits to this suffering.

[21 : 44] First verse 12, Behold, all he has is in your hand, only against him. Do not stretch out your hand. And that's what happens. Job has everything taken from him, but he himself isn't touched, isn't harmed.

Later, chapter two, verse six, Behold, he is in your hand, only spare his life, God says. And that's what happened. Incredible physical suffering, yet Job's life is spared.

Satan cannot step beyond that boundary that God sets. God is sovereign over suffering. God sets the limits on suffering. But that doesn't answer our question, does it?

In some ways, that actually makes our question seem more difficult, more serious. If God is sovereign over suffering, if this isn't just something that Satan managed to do while God wasn't looking, if actually God has set these limits, then we might well ask, well, why not just stop the whole thing?

Why not just set the limit to say, no, you can't touch him at all. Job is my servant. He's blameless. He's upright. Leave him alone. If God is in control, and if God loves Job, why does he allow him to suffer?

[22 : 56] That's a huge question, isn't it? That's still a very kind of current question people ask. How can a good God allow suffering? It's often framed in that way. We're not going to give a really tidy answer to that in the next five or ten minutes, but we can see here at the beginning of this book why Job suffers.

We can see something of the reason behind suffering, and we see that in verses 9 through to 11. After God has highlighted Job's uprightness, his goodness, it says this, Then Satan answered the Lord and said, Does Job fear God for no reason?

Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land, but stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.

Again, down in chapter 2, verse 4, before the second round of suffering, Then Satan answered the Lord and said, Skin for skin, all that a man has he will give for his life, but stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.

And the point here is this, that Satan cannot believe that anyone would worship God, would fear him, would live for him, simply because of who God is.

[24 : 20] But the people just want God for the stuff that he gives them, for the possessions he's able to provide, for the health he's able to sustain. Satan says to God, Take that stuff away.

Take away those blessings you have poured out on Job, and he'll want nothing to do with you. Now the question is this, Is God alone worthy of worship, simply because of who he is, or is it because of the stuff that he gives?

Why does God allow Job's suffering? It's complicated, and suffering is a complex issue, but one reason that we see here, why does God allow this? It is to prove to Satan himself, that God is to be worshipped, God is worthy of worship, simply for who he is, not just the stuff he gives.

I don't know if we can say that that is what is behind all suffering, but I think it's the same idea, in the New Testament, the apostle Peter says, You have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith may be found to result in praise, and glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

But the big point is that God allows suffering under his sovereign control, because that suffering has a purpose. God allows that suffering to happen to Job, because it has a purpose, because it is going to prove that actually God alone is worthy of worship.

[25 : 57] God allows suffering because it has a purpose. Now that absolutely doesn't mean that when people are going through hard times, we can come alongside and say things like, Oh, one day it will all make sense.

One day you'll look back and see what was going on, or look for the positives in the situation. God is doing stuff. It's not so bad. Any of the other cheap ways that we try and make people feel better, because we don't really know what to say.

Job at no point, not even at the very end of this book, has any clue about what happens in chapters 1 and 2. He never hears this conversation, never understands God's reasoning. But this suffering has a purpose that is far beyond anything he could comprehend, far beyond anything he sees.

And actually, although he doesn't know why it's happening, Job passes this test, if you like. He proves God's worthiness. He demonstrates that there are true worshippers of God who love him, who serve him, who honour him simply for who he is, that God is worth that.

After he loses everything, verse 21 of chapter 1, Job says, Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return.

[27 : 10] The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. After his body starts to fail him, after his health is attacked, after he's sitting, despairing in ashes, with even his own wife, encouraging him to curse God and die, chapter 2, verse 10, Job's response, shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?

And that final line in our passage, in all this, Job did not sin with his lips. From the opening of chapter 1, to the end of chapter 2, Job has lost everything.

Job has suffered in every way, and yet he refuses to turn on God. And in doing so, although he doesn't really know it, although he doesn't see it, he doesn't get to see behind the scenes, he vindicates, in the heavenly places, God's worthiness, God's honour, God's holiness.

That God himself, for who he is, not the things he gives us, deserves our ultimate allegiance, deserves our whole lives, to be given to him.

Now just in case, as we kind of read that, you're sort of worried, it almost seems in Job's response, it almost seems too good to be true, doesn't it? As if Job is kind of brushing it off, his response seems a little bit, too sort of cool, and detached.

[28 : 31] Please remember, this is not the end of the story, we're going to see, particularly next week, but throughout this book, just the raw depth of emotion, that Job goes through. He's not a kind of a passive, emotionless, robotic figure.

Please do stick with us, as we work, through those emotions together. But the thing to remember here, to get hold of it, is that God is sovereign over suffering.

And that in ways, we often can't comprehend, that there is a purpose behind suffering. That God uses it for his glory. That there is honor, that there is victory, that there is glory to God in the heavenly places, when we don't pretend, we're not bothered by suffering.

We don't pretend, we're not afflicted, we're not afflicted, by suffering. We don't just kind of, grin and bear it, and say it's fine. But rather, God is glorified, when we hold onto him, through that suffering.

Recognizing that he, himself, is worth it. And again, we can finish there, by seeing how Job, in that, points us forward to Jesus, the ultimate, righteous sufferer.

[29 : 37] Again, one, whom God was sovereign, over the suffering, that Jesus went through. Although it looked like, senseless, although it looked like, defeat at the time, we're told so clearly, that the cross, was God's eternal plan.

And Jesus' death there, fulfilled that ultimate purpose, of proving God's glory. Of achieving God's victory, over sin and death, of enabling forgiveness, so that a holy God, could gather in sinful people, that those sinful people, could be cleansed, to worship him.

The cross is the, the ultimate demonstration, that God is worthy of worship, not because of the stuff, that he gives us, but because of who he is, that he is a God, rich in mercy, he is a God, who loves perfectly, he is a God, who understands suffering, and has suffered, in order that he might gather, his people, for eternity, in order that we might live, in anticipation, for that day, when there will be, no more suffering.

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name, of the Lord. How do we even get close, to that kind of, model response, that we hear, on Job's lips?

How do we even get close, to responding in that way, where we live in a world, of suffering, that so often seems like, more than we can bear, or more than people, we know, and love can bear? How can we respond, in that way, ultimately, only through knowing, that God, in suffering himself, God in his sovereignty, over suffering, that God in Jesus's, perfectly righteous suffering, has fulfilled his purposes, of rescuing his people, and promising them, eternal life, with him, with no suffering.

[31 : 28] That is what God, has done for us, that the final word, in suffering, is that one day, it will be no more. And yet the Bible, is so clear, so upfront, so raw, about the fact, that in the meantime, it will be present, with us.

That good people, will suffer. That there isn't, a kind of a fairness, there isn't, a kind of a karma, there isn't, a tit for tat, in that. That there is, righteous suffering. That ultimately, God is sovereign, over that suffering.

And that ultimately, through that, God's glory, will be seen. That God's purposes, will be carried out. And so we're able, to strive to live, in his strength, to follow Job's example. Knowing God's love for us, through Jesus, even in that, that suffering, that we go through, here and now.

And we're able to do that, for God, and his glory alone. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we do thank you, for this book of Job. Lord, we recognize, that this morning, we've hardly, scratched the surface, of the complexity, and the pain of suffering.

And yet, we thank you, that you are a God, who has plumbed, the depths of suffering. In order that you might, redeem us, for your people. Lord, I pray particularly, this morning, for those in the midst, of suffering, of pain, of loss, in any of the forms, that these take.

[32 : 50] Lord, I pray more than, more than anything, that I've said, that your presence, would be a comfort to them. That they might know your love. That Jesus' righteous suffering, and the purposes you fulfilled in that, might be enough for them, this morning, this week, and beyond.

Lord, we pray that you'd help us, as we move through, this book of Job, to continue to gain wisdom, and to continue to, to know you in suffering, and to live for your glory, because you yourself, are worth giving our whole lives to.

And we can know that even, in the darkest of times, even in the valley, of the shadow of death, Lord, wherever we are, that you will never leave us. And we thank you, for that encouragement, and we pray that through your Holy Spirit, you would be strengthening us, and sustaining us, as we go through these, difficult times together, and as we look to encourage, one another, and those around us, by pointing to the good news of the gospel.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.