

Job 1.1 - 2.10

Who's in charge here?

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 4 June 2023

Job: Out of the Storm [1]

Series introduction

Today we begin a new series reading the book of Job, which will take us up to the end of August. The series is *not* on suffering – it is on the book of Job *which raises questions about suffering*. It's important that it's that way round. We tend to see things as questions that need answering, problems that need solving – but we won't get very far with the Bible or Job if that's our way of reading it. Job's friends are rebuked by God for that attitude.

Of course we come to the Bible with questions, concerns, hopes and fears – some of which we will find God answers directly. But our main attitude needs to be *listening*, listening to what God is actually saying to us through Scripture, rather than what we might want or wish him to say. That means reading the Bible is an act of faith, trusting that God tells us what we need to hear.

In fact we will find God *doesn't* answer Job's questions, at least not in the way we usually understand 'answers'. You may find that incredibly frustrating. But I hope the next few weeks help all of us move towards where Job ended up: a place of trust and worship *despite* not having neat answers to his questions.

So what are those questions?

Many of them are 'why': why does God allow these things? Why does he do nothing to put them right? Why do people who could not care less about God thrive and prosper?

Then there are others: what kind of God runs a world like *this*? *Is* he in charge? Where was God in << *insert disaster here* >>? What about war or the suffering of children? Why does he heal one person's illness and not another? When things go wrong, is God punishing me? And the big one: can God be trusted and does he deserve our worship? You may have other questions, whether intellectual or from a place of experience and deep pain.

To set some expectations: Job is *long*. It can't be summarised on a postcard or distilled down. I believe that is part of the way God responds to our questions. Stick with it, and I encourage you to read and re-read the relevant sections each week.

Another thing about Job is that it's 95% poetry. It speaks not only to our heads but to our hearts, to people who are involved in the mess and the pain and the challenges of life. We need to let and listen to God speak to our heads *and* hearts.

One great thing about Job is it's real; he refuses to pretend things are alright when everything feels all wrong. His understanding of the truth is confronted and challenged by his experience, and that is uncomfortable for him; we need to let it be uncomfortable for us, too. Some of the things the book of Job says might not fit with our idea of who God is, or what the world is like. When that happens we mustn't dismiss it but learn to let God change and teach us by his Spirit, through the words of Scripture.

Ultimately the book of Job tells us that we need to learn to trust God, despite only seeing a fragment of reality. The reasons why things happen or don't happen are usually hidden from view, as they were for Job – so the question is, will Job find comfort and prove to be a true believer... and will we?

For what Job saw glimpses of, but we are blessed to know, is the Father's ultimate response to the problems posed by this broken world: his Son willingly hanging on a Roman cross in our place, an empty tomb, and his Spirit lavished on a dry and weary people.

Is it real?

J Has anyone watched any of *The Crown* on Netflix? I watched the first couple of series, but haven't seen much since then – largely because we cancelled our Netflix subscription! Much like all historical fiction and drama, it takes real people and real events, and imagines what things were like 'behind the scenes' – conversations are concocted, reactions invented, often to create dramatic tension. We call that poetic licence.

Sometimes with the Bible it's hard to tell the history from the poetry. Job is one of those books. For starters there's **the land of Uz** (1.1). No-one knows exactly where that is, other than it's not part of Israel. Then there's the date – when is all this supposed to have happened? Most think that although it was likely written down after 580BC (because it directly quotes other parts of the Bible), the setting feels like the time of Abraham.

Did Job really exist? Did the events happen as they are described? Or is this an extended parable? The references to Job in J Ezekiel (14.14 & 20) and James (5.11) suggest there was a righteous man named Job who persevered in faith. But the book's main teaching still stands whether it happened as described, or it is a parable.

Job the wise (1.1-5)

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.

Job 1.1 (NIV)

This doesn't mean Job was perfect. He was a man of integrity: he lived out what he spoke, he was loyal to God and straight with others. And he was wise: ¶ Job 28.28 mirrors verse 1: **'The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.'**

If ever there was a good man, it was Job. And that showed in his wealth, too. In Hebrew thought wealth was a sign of blessing or approval from God – which is why the disciples were so surprised when Jesus taught them how hard it is *even for the rich* to enter the kingdom of heaven (e.g. Mark 10.23-26).

¶ [Job] had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.

Job 1.2-3 (NIV)

He even made **regular** sacrifices on behalf of **each of** his children in case they had **sinned** (1.5). Christopher Ash, who wrote the book this series is based on – *Out of the Storm* – puts it like this **¶**:

Here before us at the start of the story is the true believer *par excellence*, a man who walks before God with a clear conscience, his sins confessed and forgiven, his life showing all the marks of a worshipper.

Christopher Ash, Out of the Storm, 17

In an ordered world there should be no surprise that such a man received such blessing from God – he deserved it!

But then the curtain is drawn back and we get a glimpse into the spiritual reality that is going to affect Job's world in terrible ways. Look out for these **¶** four key points or markers – both today and as we journey through the book together:

1. **¶** Job really is blameless
2. **¶** Satan has real influence
3. **¶** The Lord is absolutely supreme
4. **¶** The Lord gives terrible permissions

And as things turn ugly remember the key question: **¶** will Job prove to be a true believer?

Strike everything he has (1.6-12)

Some of you will already know this, but I am extremely forgetful. That's one of the main reasons I asked Amanda to gather together photos of you all for a prayer calendar two years ago, which Jess and I used as we were preparing to come here – it was great to be praying for you and it also made a huge difference to us learning your names.

But my forgetfulness extends beyond learning names. I put things down and forget where they are – so when I look in the place they're supposed to be, *they've been moved...* and of course it's never my fault, **§** it's always *someone else* – and Jess has learned that the joy of being married to me means it's always *her* fault. 'What have you done with...' or 'Where have you put...' is a common accusation in our home.

We are ever so good at accusing others of things, and a lot less ready to accept responsibility ourselves.

That is one of the roles of Satan – the word isn't really a name, it's a title and it means *adversary* or *accuser*. In verse 6 **§** he enters God's court, and we are given a glimpse behind the scenes of the spiritual reality that Job doesn't know about.

Satan has been **‘roaming throughout the world, going to and fro on it’** (1.7) – a disconcertingly vague answer to God’s question. The implication is he’s been out causing trouble for God’s people.

‘Have you considered my servant Job?’ God said, **‘There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil’** (1.8). We’ve heard those words before, in chapter 1 verse 1 – and they come again in chapter 2 verse 3 . This is the first of the four markers: **J** Job *really is* **blameless and upright** – not perfect but a man of integrity and wisdom. God also describes Job as **‘my servant’**, a mark of honour given only to a few in the Old Testament.

At this, Satan scoffs (verse 9, from *The Message*):

J ‘So do you think Job does all that out of the sheer goodness of his heart? Why, no-one ever had it so good! You pamper him like a pet, make sure nothing bad ever happens to him or his family or his possessions, bless everything he does – he can’t lose! But what do you think would happen if you reached down and took away everything that is his? He’d curse you right to your face, that’s what.’

Job 1.9-11 (MSG)

Satan taunts God: ‘Your world is totally ruined. The only reason Job worships you is because of what’s in it for himself. Take all that away and then you’d see the *real* truth.’

Unless you happen to have fields of donkeys and camels hidden away I don’t think any of us here is as wealthy as Job, but for all of us Satan’s words bite: if we had *nothing*, if *everything* were stripped away, would we still have faith? Then comes verse 12:

¶ The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.’

Job 1.12 (NIV)

In that verse we see three of our four markers. ¶ Satan is given real influence by God. But he has to ask first – there is no dualism at play here, no sense that good and evil are equal and opposite: ¶ God is absolutely supreme, ¶ and he gives terrible permissions.

We mustn’t skip over this. We should be shocked that God gives Satan permission to make the blameless Job suffer. We can’t let God off the hook. He isn’t ‘doing his best’ but can’t quite control Satan. No, the Bible is clear: Satan is on a chain, he is limited, but he *is* given terrible permission to make Job suffer. **It’s not the story behind *all* suffering, but it is why *Job* suffered.**

Job the worshipper (1.13-22)

This is the point at which normally I would tell a story or a joke to release some of the tension – but we need to see what happens next. Satan went out (1.12) – and in four sharp episodes takes away Job’s oxen and donkeys (1.14), his flocks of sheep (1.16), his camels (1.17), the servants who had been looking after them, and finally his children (1.19). Sticking to the limits set by God, Satan takes away everything from Job in a four-fold disaster.

¶ At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head.

Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I shall depart.

The Lord gave 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 1.20-22 (NIV)

Those words of Job are famous: ¶ **‘The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised.’** But how could Job speak those words after the unspeakable things that had happened? How could Job praise God?

For praise him he does – and in so doing he threatens Satan’s whole project of hostility and opposition to God. Job’s worship proves that although the world is not the ‘very good’ world of Genesis 2, neither is it the total ruin Satan would have us believe.

In Job’s words I see echoes of **J** another man in agony, praying and begging God, **‘Take this cup away from me; yet not my will, but yours be done’** (Luke 22.41-44). Somehow in the midst of their agony, both Job and Jesus worshipped – and as they did that, they defeated Satan who wants us to give in to despair.

There was a time in my life when I lost almost everything: house, job, marriage, friends, and I had glandular fever so was unable to work. Were it not for my parents taking their 25-year-old son back in I don’t know what would have happened to me. For months I was unable to set foot inside a church building. I remember once being halfway down the path to my dad’s church, and I turned round and went back. For a long time I gave in to the despair. I was so angry.

Over the past year and a half I’ve come close to that with my health. Lying on the sofa, room spinning, unable to move or even watch TV, no end in sight, unable to do the very thing I believe God has called me to do. Why, God, why?

When I face situations like that I often turn into the petulant child that lives inside many of us: I throw a spiritual tantrum, pout my spiritual lips, cross my spiritual arms and turn my spiritual face away from God. Sometimes I do not have the faith to follow the example of Job and worship despite it all.

That's a feeling I suspect many of us share. But I believe part of the journey of faith is helping that inner child to grow up and mature as a woman or man of God – recognising that faith does not require understanding, that God is God and worthy of our praise, no matter what happens. Job knew that, Paul taught that and the psalms can help us express it.

I think one of the reasons Job is long and goes round and round in circles, chapter after chapter, is because that maturing in faith is not something that happens quickly or easily.

Strike his flesh and bones (2.1-8)

Things get worse for Job in chapter 2. God points out that Satan was wrong: Job has remained faithful despite Satan's best efforts (2.3). 'Ah,' Satan replies, **But if you took away his health – then he'd curse you to your face**' (2.4, MSG). As before, Satan has real influence, God is supreme, but gives terrible permission.

The boundary God sets this time is that Satan **'must spare [Job's] life'** (2.6) – it's **a condition that many today wish, and Job himself wishes, had not been imposed... Job's suffering is so intense he longs for death, but cannot find it.**¹

Job the worshipper (2.9-10)

¶ The picture of Job in chapter 2 verses 7-8 is a pathetic, almost funny if it weren't so tragic, picture of a man sitting in the dust, scraping his skin with a **piece of broken pottery**. If you've ever been bitten head-to-toe by mosquitoes or had a condition where you itch all over, you'll know the agony he was in. Scratching helps in the moment but doesn't make it go away and often makes it worse – perhaps that is a metaphor for the next 37 chapters.

¶ Maybe Job's wife hates to see him like this. Maybe she's so angry with God she can't stand the way Job refuses to curse him.

Verse 9 (MSG): **'Still holding on to your precious integrity, are you? ¶ Curse God and be done with it!'** she says. But Job replies (2.10, MSG), **'You're talking like an empty-headed fool. We take the good days from God – why not also the bad days?'**

¹ Ash, *Out of the Storm*, 21.

The NIV ends the section with these words: **¶ In all this, Job did not sin in what he said** (10).

In case you're thinking that makes Job some kind of unreal, ice-cold, emotionless robot – come back in two weeks when we'll get a glimpse into how he feels, and we meet his so-called 'friends', including the shortest man in the Bible. Job was a great and wise man, blameless and upright – he suffered terribly and didn't ever know why, but he stayed a true worshipper despite it all.

His journey, from chapter 2 to chapter 42, cannot be skipped or shortened or bypassed or summarised or written on a postcard: life is complicated, faith is perplexing; so Job is long.

But there is hope. Even in all his troubles Job did not sin but stayed a true worshipper – and so can we. It is possible to defeat Satan by not giving in to despair. It is possible to lift our eyes to see and praise God when we don't understand. Unlike Job – **¶** we *know* there is a life stronger than death, that God's love is greater than *anything* Satan or this world can do *to* us or throw *at* us. Ultimately God's response to his bruised and broken world was to send his Son willingly to suffer as we do, to die in our place, to break the bonds and power of death – and to offer new life, life *though* suffering and death, to all who put their trust in him.