

## **JOB - AN OVERVIEW**

For the next three weeks, the Old Testament readings give us excerpts from the book of Job. It's a fascinating story beginning with a conversation between God and Satan. Rather than look at this story in parts over the next three weeks, I thought an overview would give us a better handle on the theme of the book.

There has always been discussion about whether this book fact or fiction. But the majority of scholars view the book of Job as an Old Testament parable.

Why is it in the Bible? It's because it addresses the universal tension between faith and suffering. Those times we cry out to God in the face of tragedy, and say, "God, this is not FAIR!" or "WHY has this happened?" or "What have I done to deserve this?"

The story of Job is one that addresses experiences we all seem to face, - personal tragedy, loss, disillusionment, & grief.

So for those of you who are not so familiar with this book in the Bible, let me give you a quick summary of the story...

The action takes place in a land called Uz - a place that no one seems to know much about, and the story was written some 2000 years before Christ. Job - the central character - had it all! He was a wealthy grazer with 7 sons, 3 daughters, and many servants. He was upright, faithful to God and he was greatly respected. To top it all off, he was an altogether great guy! And God was proud of him! What more could you want?

But then...all hell broke loose - literally!

In the opening chapters of Job, we're given a glimpse into the spiritual realm, and it's as if we become witnesses to a strange wager between God and Satan.

Satan, true to his nature, accuses Job before God. He reckons Job's godliness is a front. "What do you expect? You've blessed him! He's only faithful to you because it PAYS," he sneers. "Take away his wealth, and watch him curse you!" God gives Satan permission to test Job.

Satan goes to work and in rapid succession, all Job's flocks are driven away by his enemies, his sons and daughters are killed, and he becomes destitute. Finally, Job himself is stricken with painful boils from head to toe. He sits totally depressed on an ash heap, scraping his sores with a piece of pottery mourning over his misfortune.

He doesn't know why this has happened to him. Only the reader knows that God is allowing this to prove to Satan that Job's faith is genuine. The book of Job has 42 chapters - and this all happens in the first 2.

What happens in the rest of the book? It's all about Job's spiritual journey through all this.

Job has 3 friends who come along and try to console him. They apply to Job the understanding of their day

- 1) God is almighty and in control of everything
- 2) That God's justice cannot be questioned
- 3) That no-one is completely innocent in God's sight

Therefore, the conclusion that they draw is that Job was being punished for sins he has committed. He was being paid out for the bad things he's done.

It's a common conclusion. I have a friend who's done it tough - I won't go into her sad circumstances - but she has somehow embraced this reasoning, and has decided that she must have done something to displease God, and that God is punishing her. I know that's not the case - but she's hard to convince.

Initially, Job wasn't buying this. "NO!" he protests. "It's not like that. I haven't done anything!" But then his continued suffering starts to wear down his most cherished beliefs. How can God possibly be on his side? Is God unfair? As he looks around, he sees other examples of unfairness - evil people sometimes do prosper - and they don't get punished! Others live happy, fruitful lives and never give God a thought. Job begins to experience a crisis of faith.

And it's not uncommon, is it? We expect God to act in a certain way in our lives - or the lives of those we love - and sometimes it doesn't happen. A loved one has an accident, or gets terminal cancer. We lose our job or our health, or our children break our hearts. And we feel we don't deserve it. Some people may begin to question God's justice, his power, or even his love for them. Some may even question his very existence. Ultimately, there are those who may lose their faith altogether.

I remember speaking to a man after a funeral at St Paul's. He wasn't the widower, but as we got into conversation, we began speaking about faith. He told me he couldn't believe in God anymore, because too many things were wrong in the world and in his own life. What faith he'd had, was in crisis.

Job also faced a crisis of faith. He cried out to God in his pain. For a while, God remained silent, and Job was in despair. But finally God spoke! In ch 38, he says:

"Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!" - And God continues in that vein for two chapters!

God reminds Job in no uncertain terms that He is God, and Job is the creature. God is the master designer - the mighty creator. God has created wonders beyond Job's comprehension - without any help from Job! Job is in no position to question or correct almighty God.

Job is blown away by his encounter with the living God. He responds by acknowledging his unworthiness, acknowledging God's might and power, and confesses contritely that he has spoken without knowledge. He surrenders to God. (In the end, God restored Job's fortunes, giving him twice as much as he had before)

Think back to the wager between God and Satan for a moment - Job had no idea of what had transpired in the heavenly realms. He had no idea that God placed such confidence in him - and valued his faithfulness so much - that he allowed Satan to test him. Job was only aware of his own misery.

Now I don't think we can conclude that when we are in the midst of tragedy and suffering, that there is some great cosmic battle going on between God and Satan, but what we can learn from this is that there is a far bigger picture than the one we are aware of, and God remains in control.

But how can we trust God when we somehow can't help thinking that life just isn't fair - and we see God as somehow responsible?

What we need to remember is that Scripture teaches us that the world we live in is fallen, and corrupted by man's rebellion against God - the Bible calls this sin - and the world is suffering under at the hand of Satan. Until Jesus returns to bring this world to a close, many things happen in life that are not as God wishes them to be. They do not appear to us as "fair" because Satan has a hand in it. They do not appear to us as "fair", because we do not have the same complete picture that God has.

Yet God can use every circumstance in this world for our benefit. Satan may seem to have dominion in the world, but God has the final word. We all know Romans 8:28 which tells us that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Life certainly wasn't "fair" for Jesus - the perfect Son of God, who lived his life for others, and met his death unjustly in agony on a Roman cross. And yet - out of that horrifying and unjust event, God turned the universe upside down! Satan was defeated, and those who trust in Christ are pardoned and granted eternal life. God turned it to good all right! And had the last word.

In this physical world, wracked with pain and suffering, we need to be aware that there are two realities. One is physical - here and now, and one is spiritual. We need to acknowledge the physical realities, and not deny them. It's okay to feel pain and grief and discouragement. It's okay to cry. It's even okay to get angry with God - he

can cope. And he understands our pain more than we will ever know. Yet at the same time, we need to be very much aware of the spiritual realities. The physical realities are often overwhelming, yet if we will put our trust unreservedly in Jesus, the spiritual realities are these:

- 1) God promises that he will never leave us or forsake us. He is with us always, even if we don't feel Him.
- 2) We can be confident that justice will be done in the end.
- 3) We know there will be an end to all suffering and pain when Jesus returns.

Many of us bear scars from this life. Yet we can find peace and direction, if, like Job, we come to the realisation that though life may not be fair, and we may not get the answers to our questions this side of heaven, God is in charge, he loves us deeply and can be trusted completely.

Julian of Norwich, a 14th century mystic, had her own job-like experience. In the midst of her suffering, she had a vision of Jesus. Among the many things he showed her, one thing has resonated with Christians down through the ages. It was Jesus' tender words to her as she grieved, "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

Let's pray