

Job 1-2 'when bad things happen to good people'

When we think about Job, there's a couple of things which usually spring to mind: **first**, here's a true story of one man who had it all, and then, out of the blue, within minutes, it was all gone - his family, his farm, his fortune - he lost it all; a catastrophic loss. **Second**, we often hear people talk in conversation about the patience of Job! If we're honest, most of us are amazed at Job's perseverance in the worst of times. We admire him for his stickability, his endurance. Unknown to a lot of folks, who stand on the sidelines and clap for Job, that wee phrase pops up in the Bible in James 5:11.

This is the oldest book in the Bible and it may be one of the oldest books ever written - it's a very ancient book - so much of what we read of in Genesis and Exodus isn't there in any shape or form; it predates Abraham and it was probably penned somewhere between the Tower of Babel and the call of Abraham.

When you read the book of Job you discover that here is a broken man with a broken heart - a man who is suffering ... and that suffering is immense and intense. This book is full of realism because all of us suffer at one time or another and in one way or another. If you live long enough, you will suffer for life is fragile, and as the years roll by, we all begin to creak and the cracks appear!

The story is well worth reading - in fact, this was Martin Luther's favourite book for he said it was

'magnificent and sublime.' That said, the more you get into it, the more questions you have! Questions like: Where is God when life goes pear-shaped and it really hurts? How can we possibly worship God in tough times of trial and trouble? Does a God of love and tender mercy find pleasure in seeing his children hit rock bottom? When trials come, can I love God? Can I trust God? Can I build my life on God when he seems to have kicked away all the props in my life? When the chips are down, can I really adore the Lord?

Ah, my friend, there's no doubt in my mind that the book of Job is truly profound, it's most provocative, and it's puzzling.

It seems to me that Job is on a journey, a journey into the inscrutable ways of God. No wonder Paul wrote in Romans 11, 'How unsearchable [are] his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out.'

William Cowper was one of the greatest hymn writers the church has ever known, he was a man who suffered greatly. He penned his last hymn in 1774, and this is what he wrote: *God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.* He goes on to say that *God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.*

You see, God doesn't always explain why he does what he does, when and where he does it, and with whom he does it - there again, when you're God, you don't have to, you don't need to ... that

is what our friend Job found so frustrating, so nerve-racking, so exhausting - he was banging his head against a brick wall - the wall was ok, but Job had a sore head!

The brutal truth is that God was on mute for most of the drama! When all hell broke loose, the heavens were as brass, heaven was silent!

Indeed, that's one of the take-home lessons from the book that Job needed to learn, as do you and I, that God *is* God! He will do as he pleases, when he pleases, and with whom he pleases, without consulting any one of us; he will do so for his own glory and for the ultimate good of his people.

God does what he does because he is who he is!

In this short series of 5 studies on Job, the words of Bishop J C Ryle of Liverpool seem so apt and pertinent; he said that 'the grace of God exempts no one from trouble.'

What we have recorded here in God's word is an inspired ancient story where grief and grace intersect; so, today, we shine the torchlight on, 'when bad things happen to good people.'

Next time, we'll ask the leading question: 'What happens when we reach breaking point?' In our middle study, we'll probe a little deeper when we grapple with the question: 'With friends like that, who needs ...?' In our penultimate study we will look at one man with a message entitled: 'The learning curve of life.' And in our final study together, we'll explore the wonderful truth at the end of the book that 'God is bigger than all our problems!'

So turn back with me to Job chapter 1 ... there are 4 main lines of thought in our study this evening - they're easy to remember as they all begin with the letter C.

1. Job's character (1:1-5)

The chapter begins much like the opening line that scrolls across the screen of *Star Wars*: 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.' So we read here in verse 1 a classic one-liner: 'In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job.'

Bearing in mind all that follows in a 42-chapter biography, that opener is a huge understatement! At least it tells us who the man is and where he's from ...

The man at the centre of the story is Job - he was around a long time ago; indeed, a very long time ago ... most evangelical scholars believe that he lived before the time of the patriarchs, that is, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That goes back to the dim and distant past of 2,000 BC. In the timeline, in the grand scheme of things, that's 4,000+ years ago!

The land of Uz embraced a large geographical area east of the Jordan River, southeast of the Dead Sea, near modern-day Jordan. That tells us, Job is a real person living in the real world!

Then, in a pair of couplets in verse 1, we catch a glimpse of his character - first, he was 'blameless and upright' ... then, 'he feared God and shunned evil.' That's quite a testimonial by any stretch of the imagination. One commentator noted that his 'without' was the same as his 'within.'

Here is a man of unimpeachable integrity - that's the meaning of the word 'blameless' ... no one could pin anything on him, there was no mud stuck on his back, he was devoid of all kinds of sleaze in a murky world - the tabloids of the day would've gone bust as there were no salacious, front-page stories about Job! He wasn't sinless, he wasn't perfect - but he was above and beyond reproach.

To say he was 'upright' means he was as straight as a die ... his life and lifestyle, both in public and private, were on a level that pleased the Lord. His motivations were pure, and his personal dealings in the community were fair and honest. He's a man who could be trusted, a man whose word was his bond ... in fact, Ezekiel lists Job along with Noah and Daniel as the most righteous men of all times (Ezekiel 14:14, 20). For my friends across the pond, Job is carved on the wall of the biblical Mount Rushmore!

Job also 'feared God.' He was filled with holy awe, reverence, and respect for God. He took God seriously, and was careful to live in a God-honouring manner. He was a spiritual man. He was a wise man, a man whose worship was right, whose thinking was right, and whose conduct was right.

He also 'shunned evil.' That phrase appears many times in the Psalms and Proverbs. In other words, he turned away from evil - when faced with temptation, as he must've been, he ran away from it as fast as his wee legs would carry him.

It's important for us to realise that verse 1 was not a eulogy spoken at a kind-of memorial service for Job - you know what I mean ... for that's when people say nice things about you when you're gone. No, Job is very much alive at this point - it's vital for us to grasp that he was a good man and a godly man! We need to keep that in the front of our minds - it's essential.

Job is also a family man - we know from verse 2 that he and his wife had been blessed with seven sons and three daughters. In the Bible, seven and three are numbers of perfection - so he had a model family, if you like. Ten kids ... that's a lot of mouths to feed - you can imagine the banter as they were growing up on the farm.

In verse 3 we have some idea of his phenomenal wealth - I mean, he was no Johnny-come-lately ... he was a big-time farmer and land owner! The numbers recorded here are staggering - 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, and the list goes on. This guy was a hugely successful businessman with a glowing reputation far and wide. He is hailed as 'the greatest man among all the people of the East' - that's between the Nile and the Euphrates.

We have quite an insight into their family life in verses 4 and 5 ... there was nothing dysfunctional about this family. They obviously enjoyed each other's company and so, when it came birthday time, they all met together for a right old party! That says something, doesn't it - they were a close-knit family ... it seems to me that Job's faith made an impact on the lives of his kids.

Job comes across as a good dad to each of his 10 children - he's also a spiritual leader in the home. Building a strong family was one of his priorities. See what he did for them ... he was fulfilling the role of a family priest. Sure, he prayed for them, he advised them, he led by example, but he did more ...

he was the first one to show up at the altar at the crack of dawn, ready to offer a sacrifice for each of them just in case they had sinned during their big celebratory bash! That's the calibre of man we're talking about here - rather than holding his family with a clenched fist, Job offered them up to God with an open hand.

We read these first five verses and we come away riding on the crest of a wave - it's a feel good scene, we're on top of the world, life is hunky-dory; it won't last, for the dark storm clouds are gathering. If these verses say anything to us, it seems that Job sinned himself in the unclouded favour of God.

2. Job's colluders (1:6-12)

Things change quickly in verse 6 ... angels were doing what angels do as the servants of God - they were reporting back having been out on some mission for God. Or they may have been awaiting orders for their next assignment. It's like when the colonels meet with the general to discuss tactics and receive their final directions. But they're not alone! See who appears alongside them ... 'the' Satan! For Satan isn't his name, it's his title - the name means one who

accuses, one who attacks - he is the antagonist, the slanderer.

When you read that you think, what's going on here? He's the one, you'll recall, who was kicked out of heaven - at one time, he was number one in the angelic pecking order, then he got too big for his boots, he had his heart set on being God - he was banished from heaven for his wanton rebellion to be known as 'the prince of the power of the air.'

He's no friend to the people of God - never has been, never will be. He is our adversary. He's no fool, he knows his way around - we see that in his honest answer to the Lord's question in verse 7, 'Where have you come from?'

For once in his life, the 'father of lies,' as Jesus called him, actually told the truth - 'from roaming throughout the earth and going back and forth in it.'

We read of him doing just that in 1 Peter 5:8 ... he's a world traveller and a seasoned campaigner. He's pacing the earth and he's preying upon unsuspecting victims. And he's out to get us. It's time for us to wake up to the fact that Satan is the vulture who claims to be a mockingbird.

Satan probably couldn't believe his luck when the Lord said to him in verse 8, 'Ever thought about going after Job? He's a man of integrity.' Guess what, he had, for he reckoned that Job was only in it for what he could get out of it: so long as God blessed him, all was ok and Job would shout hallelujah ... if Job was reduced to zero, stripped

of everything, then Satan reckoned it would be an all too different story.

That's when the sovereign Lord gave Satan the green light to pursue Job. He could do anything he wanted but he had to keep his fingers off the man himself. And the timely lesson is that Satan can go so far and no further - he can do so much and no more. The parameters are set - true then, true today! The great news for Job, and for you and me, is that Satan can't touch a hair upon the back of a single camel that belongs to Job, until he has divine permission. God is sovereign!

3. Job's calamities (1:13-19)

There's a chilling, blood-curdling statement at the end of verse 12 where we read that 'Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.' He sure did! He has a licence to wreak havoc stuffed in his back pocket. He was like a teenager who'd just got his driving licence ... and within a single day, all hell broke loose ...

In the space of a few hours we have a catalogue of catastrophes - it went from bad to worse, and still some. A litany of disasters ... it snowballed like an avalanche of woe cascading over Job. It was blow, after blow, after blow - he was reeling. First, all his oxen and donkeys were destroyed; then all his sheep were destroyed; then, the final straw, all his camels were destroyed - all his livestock, along with all his servants, all gone! All, that is, except for three traumatised individuals who ran off to inform Job and break the tragic news to him.

And when you thought it couldn't get any worse, another servant rushed in and broke the news to Job that every parent dreads - his entire family of ten children were struck down by some kind of tornado ... the building they were in collapsed like a pack of cards, snuffing out their lives like an extinguished candle. I can tell you, nothing and no one can ever prepare you for such devastating news as this.

Some of us know what it's like to experience the loss of one child, but even that pales when we see what happened to Job. His grievous sense of loss is impossible to fathom, and it all happened within 24 hours. Tragic.

In one fell swoop, Job was stripped of fortune and family - his faith was T-boned ... he was left in an emotional whirl. He was the richest man around when the sun came up and dawn broke that day, but before the sun sank in the west, he was wiped out - left with nothing, but memories and ten freshly dug graves.

And, remember, he was a good man - a man with an impeccable track record ... a reminder to us that there are times when bad things do happen to good people. Godly people suffer! It gets a million times worse in chapter 2 though when Satan goes on the attack again - and Job's health is severely impacted with sores 'from the top of his head to the sole of his feet' (verse 7). The man's in agony. He's crushed. He is dazed and disoriented.

To add fuel to the fire, his wife then turns against him when she tells him to 'curse God, and die!' That's tough - it's bad enough when others turn against you, but you don't want it, and you don't need it, from your nearest and dearest. My heart goes out to him ... poor man.

OK, before we criticise her too much, let's not forget that she was grieving too - she was the mother of those ten children, she's seen their entire livelihood go down the drain ... and one of the lessons we have here is that different people grieve in different ways at different times! When it comes to grief, it's not a case of one size fits all.

4. Job's confidence (1:20-22)

We see something of Job's intense sorrow and distress when he shaves his head and tears his robe - his heart was in turmoil and his mind was in shock with all that was happening to him ... he received what he didn't want, and he wished for that which he didn't get. That's suffering in one line.

The most amazing thing happens next when he falls to the ground 'in worship.' I mean, that is nothing short of amazing ... he spans the years from the womb to the tomb - he came into this world empty-handed, and he'll leave it in the same way! Naked.

He acknowledged the sovereignty of God in all the affairs of life - he knew that God was in full control ... his providential dealings with him ... 'God gave and God has taken away' ... and then we see his heartfelt aspiration for the name of

the Lord to be praised. Even in this tough trial, he wanted the Lord to be glorified. So we have moved from accusation, to agony, to adoration! It's worth noting in the final verse that at no time did Job blame God for this horrendously terrible calamity ... you know, we can still worship God even when we don't understand what's going on, or even when we can't make sense of it all. You can still have faith even when you're floundering! It would've been so easy for Job to point the finger at his God - but he didn't ... he was tested like none of us ever will be - yes, bad things do happen to good people ... but, then, think about what happened to Jesus - who was faultless, and blameless, and sinless - when he went all the way to Calvary on our behalf.

For you and I, this book teaches us that a good man isn't given immunity from life's hiccups and hurdles; there's no guarantee that we will have a smooth crossing on the sea of life - the chances are, it'll be a stormy crossing at times - at least, we'll have a safe landing on the other shore!

Remember this: in all the changing scenes in your life and mine, there will be times for reasons best known to him, and only known to him, when he allows some features to be bent out of shape. Ah, there is, in each of our lives, to quote the Scottish preacher, Thomas Boston, 'a crook in our lot.'

So, my friend, when life disintegrates around you, and all you have are shattered dreams and a mix of bent and broken pieces - trust him, he will hold you fast!