

# In the Mess

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## WHERE IS GOD?

I watched a film the other day with Lisa: 'Safe House'. It's a film about the safe house used to keep a criminal while he's awaiting trial. The story was of a criminal who suddenly and unexpectedly gives himself up. No-one understands why, but they have to keep him safe until they are able to find out. So they take him to the safe house – to keep him safe until they get the truth! Of course it's not that simple, there are lots of twists and turns and the safe house turns out not to be very safe! All the way through the film though, I was confident that the good guys would win. The excitement of the film it seems is figuring out how they will win. There are many parts of the film where it looks like the good guys will lose but, somehow, you know they'll come through in the end. And mostly that's true in films – isn't it? The baddies don't prosper; the good guys always win!

### *Job 20*

Zophar

<sup>1</sup> Then Zophar the Naamathite replied:

<sup>2</sup> "My troubled thoughts prompt me to answer  
because I am greatly disturbed.

<sup>3</sup> I hear a rebuke that dishonors me,  
and my understanding inspires me to reply.

<sup>4</sup> "Surely you know how it has been from of old,  
ever since mankind was placed on the earth,

<sup>5</sup> that the mirth of the wicked is brief,  
the joy of the godless lasts but a moment.

<sup>6</sup> Though the pride of the godless person reaches to the heavens  
and his head touches the clouds,

<sup>7</sup> he will perish forever, like his own dung;  
those who have seen him will say, 'Where is he?'

Here Zophar speaks again and says what he's said before. His point: the wicked always suffer in this life and their prosperity and happiness are brief and elusive! What do you think? Is Zophar right? Is that the evidence you see around you in the world today? Job thinks differently.

### *Job 21*

Job

<sup>1</sup> Then Job replied:

<sup>2</sup> "Listen carefully to my words;  
let this be the consolation you give me.

<sup>3</sup> Bear with me while I speak,  
and after I have spoken, mock on.

<sup>4</sup> "Is my complaint directed to a human being?  
Why should I not be impatient?

<sup>5</sup> Look at me and be appalled;  
clap your hand over your mouth.

<sup>6</sup> When I think about this, I am terrified;  
trembling seizes my body.

Job appeals to his friends again: "just be quiet for a moment and be with me, at least let me make my point before you mock me! Anyway Zophar my issue is not with you but with God, and when I tell you what my problem is in all this, you will be horrified. Actually what I'm thinking makes me tremble too!" Job's problem is that life and experience, and his own experience now, tell him that the wicked actually seem to prosper and not suffer in this life. Far from choosing to judge them, God allows them to get away with what they do and have a fine life, thank you!

### *Job 21*

Why do the wicked live on,  
growing old and increasing in power?

<sup>8</sup> They see their children established around them,  
their offspring before their eyes.

<sup>9</sup> Their homes are safe and free from fear;  
the rod of God is not on them.

- <sup>10</sup> Their bulls never fail to breed;  
their cows calve and do not miscarry.
- <sup>11</sup> They send forth their children as a flock;  
their little ones dance about.
- <sup>12</sup> They sing to the music of timbrel and lyre;  
they make merry to the sound of the pipe.
- <sup>13</sup> They spend their years in prosperity  
and go down to the grave in peace.
- <sup>14</sup> Yet they say to God, 'Leave us alone!  
We have no desire to know your ways.
- <sup>15</sup> Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him?  
What would we gain by praying to him?'

Job sees the wicked say, "we don't need God, we're doing fine without him!" By the end of the chapter Job says that Zophar's view of the world is, in fact, nonsense! "So can you console me with your nonsense? Nothing is left of your answers but falsehood?" (Job 21 v34)

So... What do you think? Job looks at the world and says, "the wicked often prosper while the innocent suffer!" Zophar says, "you suffer because you sin, and the wicked always suffer in the end!" When you look at the world, what do you think? When you examine your own life...what do you think? Doesn't it ever cross you mind to ask the question: "Ok, so where is God in all this?"

Maybe some of us are in that place right now, today. For some of us, what we see around us, or what is happening to us, is almost enough for us to lose our faith. Some of us, right now, truth be told, like Job, are only holding on by the skin of our teeth, and the part that troubles us the most is, where is God?

I want to take a moment to remind you of something we talked about at the beginning of this series. God created because he wanted to share what he, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit share together: love. God is love (1 John 4 v 8) so he created a world where love is possible. Love, by its nature must be freely chosen. It cannot be forced, manipulated or coerced. Only if love is freely chosen is it love because to love is a choice. It is possible to choose not to love and to choose not to love means evil becomes possible. In a world where love is possible, it is by nature a world where evil is possible, and the greater the possibility of love, the greater the possibility of evil.

“God demonstrates his love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5v8) At the heart of the universe is self-giving, self sacrificial love, but love does not demand or impose its own way. This is a world where we can sometimes feel God’s love and power and sometimes experience suffering. The truth revealed in the story of Job is that freedom really does exist with true loving. God always looks for the best and delights when he sees a righteous person. Satan does not choose the way of love, and when he sees evil in the hearts of men and women he has grounds for operation there which God does not take away. Satan roams the earth looking to kill, steal and destroy and chooses to reject the way of love, and he is always looking for opportunities to entice people away from love. Sometimes evil seems to prosper while good people suffer, people who choose the way of love. This is a battle that is real and rages now, probably in all of us or somewhere in our lives.

Sometimes we suffer because God uses our suffering to vindicate his love before the heavenly realm and before Satan. Sometimes we suffer while others prosper because God shows Satan he was wrong about people and wrong about love, and in those times we declare to Satan and his minions that God is worth loving anyway, and we declare that love wins!

Eliphaz wades in again!

### *Job 22*

#### Eliphaz

<sup>1</sup> Then Eliphaz the Temanite replied:

<sup>2</sup> “Can a man be of benefit to God?

Can even a wise person benefit him?

<sup>3</sup> What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous?

What would he gain if your ways were blameless?

<sup>4</sup> “Is it for your piety that he rebukes you  
and brings charges against you?

<sup>5</sup> Is not your wickedness great?

Are not your sins endless?

Basically Eliphaz returns to his old argument of which the point is: God is indifferent both to Job and mankind in general! Because God is God, all sufficient,

he doesn't in any way need people and so we give absolutely nothing to God. The only reason God takes any interest in Job at all, and therefore in anyone at all, is because of his wickedness, and if he does notice us it will result in his wrath!

Now we know that is not true for Job. We know that God was, in fact delighted in Job and confident that he would vindicate God in the eyes of Satan and his minions! Friends, we too know how much we matter to God because of the price he was willing to pay to put sacrificial love at the centre of the universe!

It cost everything!

- The frailty of becoming a human baby.
- The shame of illegitimacy.
- The terror of being a refugee.
- The experience of an oppressive occupying power.
- The learning of a trade.
- The grief at the loss of an earthly father.
- The direct confrontation with Satan.
- The hunger from fasting.
- The disappointment of unbelief in his home town.
- The humility of washing dusty feet.
- The weariness of constant ministry.
- The frustration with his disciples.
- The misappropriation of money by a follower.
- The scorn and criticism as he:
  - Befriended prostitutes
  - Chose terrorists as disciples
  - Had meals with corrupt businessmen
  - Cared for lepers
  - Did good on the Sabbath
  - Ministered to non-Jews
- The hatred and opposition of the religious leaders.
- The fickle nature of the masses.
- The ingratitude of so many he ministered to.
- The treachery of the betrayal by Judas.
- The agony in the garden.
- The temptation to avoid the cross.
- The loneliness as his followers desert him.

The heartbreak of denial by his key leader.  
The injustice of an illegal trial.  
The lies and slander in front of Pilate.  
The mockery of Herod.  
The manipulation of the mob at his trial.  
The physical pain as hair was pulled from his face.  
The agony of the beating.  
The disgrace of human spittle tricking down his face.  
The anguish and shame of crucifixion.  
The curses of the soldiers.  
The insults of the onlookers.  
The gloating of his enemies.  
The revulsion of being made sin.  
The horror of death.  
The forsaking by his Father – the shattering of the Trinity.  
The permanent alteration to the Trinity now – Christ has a resurrected body in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Eliphaz, like most of us, is a bit of a paradox and at the end of his speech he urges Job to find peace with God. “Submit to God and be at peace with him; in this way prosperity will come to you.” (Job 22 v 21) That’s not bad advice. In fact it’s the best advice any friend could give, and through Jesus it is entirely possible. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5 v 1)

How about you friends...peace with God...the greatest treasure of all...it yours?

Job is still wrestling with where God is and what he’s doing.

### **Job 23**

Job

<sup>1</sup> Then Job replied:

<sup>2</sup> “Even today my complaint is bitter;  
his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.

<sup>3</sup> If only I knew where to find him;

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<sup>1</sup> Hathaway B, “*Living Below With The Saints We Know.*” Eagle 1995 pages 23-24.

- if only I could go to his dwelling!
- <sup>4</sup> I would state my case before him  
and fill my mouth with arguments.
- <sup>5</sup> I would find out what he would answer me,  
and consider what he would say to me.
- <sup>6</sup> Would he vigorously oppose me?  
No, he would not press charges against me.
- <sup>7</sup> There the upright can establish their innocence before him,  
and there I would be delivered forever from my judge.
- <sup>8</sup> “But if I go to the east, he is not there;  
if I go to the west, I do not find him.
- <sup>9</sup> When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;  
when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

God, it seems, is hiding from Job. Ever felt like God is hiding? Sometimes it is like that because this is a world where love is possible. But perhaps sometimes it is because it is the only way we will grow and mature in our faith. I remember teaching Zac to swim. He loved his arm bands and wasn't confident in the water but to learn to swim properly, he had to take the arm bands off. He didn't like that idea at all. I would get him onto his back in the water and I would have one hand under his head and one under his back to make sure he was safe. Almost without him noticing I took my hand away from supporting his back, and then his head. At first he would panic if he thought I wasn't there...but my hands were always there. He just couldn't see or feel them. As soon as I sensed he was struggling, I would support his head to stop him going under! The only way to grow his confidence and for him to swim on his own was for me to take away the support! Sometimes it feels like God hides, but Psalm 139 reminds us that there is no place we can go where God is not with us.

Maybe sometimes we need to get to the end of ourselves for God to be able to give us real treasure that only comes in the mess.

*The cheerful girl with bouncy curls was almost five. With her mother at the checkout stand, she saw them: a circle of glistening white pearls in a pink foil box. “Oh please, Mummy. Can I have them? Please Mummy, please!”*

*Quickly the mother checked the back of the little foil box and then looked back into the pleading blue eyes of her little girl's upturned face. "A dollar ninety-five. That's almost £2.00 if you really want them, I'll think of some extra chores for you and in no time you can save enough money to buy them for yourself. Your birthday's only a week away and you might get another pound coin from Grandma."*

*As soon as Jenny got home, she emptied her penny bank and counted out 17 pennies. After dinner, she did more than her share of chores and she went to the neighbour and asked Mrs. McJames if she could pick dandelions for ten pence. On her birthday, Grandma did give her another pound coin and at last she had enough money to buy the necklace.*

*Jenny loved her pearls. They made her feel dressed up and grown up. She wore them everywhere – Sunday school, nursery school, even to bed. The only time she took them off was when she went swimming or had a bubble bath. Mother said if they got wet, they might turn her neck green.*

*Jenny had a very loving daddy and every night when she was ready for bed, he would stop whatever he was doing and come upstairs to read her a story. One night when he finished the story, he asked Jenny, "Do you love me?"*

*"Oh yes, Daddy. You know that I do."*

*"Then give me your pearls."*

*"Oh Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have Princess – the white horse from my collection. The one with the pink tail. Remember Daddy? The one you gave me. She's my favourite."*

*"That's ok, Honey. Daddy loves you. Good night." And he brushed her cheek with a kiss.*

*About a week later, after the story time, Jenny's daddy asked again, "Do you love me?"*

*"Daddy you know I love you."*

*“Then give me your pearls.”*

*“Oh Daddy, not my pearls. But you can have my baby doll. The brand new one I got for my birthday. She is so beautiful and you can have the yellow blanket that matches her sleeper.”*

*“That’s okay. Sleep well. God bless you, little one. Daddy loves you.” And as always, he brushed her cheek with a gentle kiss.*

*A few nights later when her daddy came in, Jenny was sitting on her bed with her legs crossed Indian – style. As he came close, he noticed her chin was trembling and one silent tear rolled down her cheek. “What is it, Jenny? What’s the matter?” Jenny didn’t say anything but lifted her little hand up to her daddy. And when she opened it, there was her little pearl necklace. With a little quiver, she finally said, “Here Daddy. It’s for you.” With tears gathering in his own eyes, Jenny’s kind daddy reached out with one hand to take the cheap necklace, and with the other hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a blue velvet case with a strand of genuine pearls and gave them to Jenny. He had had them all the time. He was just waiting for her to give up the cheap stuff so he could give her genuine treasure.<sup>2</sup>*

In chapter 24 Job is wrestling again with why the wicked prosper and God seems to do nothing. Bildad has hardly anything to say in chapter 25 but that God is great (true) and people are worthless (not true!) In chapter 26 Job responds to Bildad by looking to the greatness of God. He ends by asking: “who can understand the thunder of his power?” (Job 26v14) And Job is right! In all his anguish and distress, in the mess that he sees all around him and feels so deeply in his heart, he knows he cannot fully understand God. God is too big and too awesome for him or anyone to figure out! Friends, that is true and we would do well to remember it. Sometimes the mistake we make is to try to bring God down to our level, so that we can manipulate him and in doing that make the world appear to work as we would like!

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<sup>2</sup> Source unknown

Friends, sometimes living in the mess causes us to ask: “Where is God?” We will never fully understand what God is, or is not doing: the battle for the way of love rages daily. Every time we choose the way of love, hang onto faith by the skin of our teeth, choose to exchange our cheap treasure for God’s genuine treasure, choose to believe that God is worth loving even if we get nothing back we deal a blow to Satan and we extend the kingdom of God.

Where is God in the mess? Right here, right now, watching, waiting, loving, hoping, supporting, carrying, holding, delighting in those who choose the way of love and declaring that love wins!

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2012 by Rev. Ian Phillips.