

In The Mess

Presence in Pain?

Job 2

¹ On another day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him. ² And the LORD said to Satan, “Where have you come from?”

Satan answered the LORD, “From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.”

³ Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason.”

⁴ “Skin for skin!” Satan replied. “A man will give all he has for his own life. ⁵ But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.”

⁶ The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.”

⁷ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. ⁸ Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes.

⁹ His wife said to him, “Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!”

¹⁰ He replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?”

In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.

¹¹ When Job’s three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. ¹² When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. ¹³ Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Today I am going to give three mini sermons!

Sermon number 1

Here's a question we've asked before: Why did God create anything at all? The answer I've given in the past and the one I suggest now is that God created because he wanted to share and for us to participate in, what God himself, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit experiences. God did not create because he is in some way lacking something, but he did it because he wanted the people he created to be able to share and experience what he already experienced.

Since God is love, he created a world where love is possible. Love, by its nature, must be freely chosen. You cannot force or make someone love. To love is a choice and a choice that must be freely chosen. Are you with me?

The nature of love is this: I can say to Lisa, "I love you!" What I cannot say to Lisa is, "You love me." To love me must be her choice! It must be free choice, one that is not coerced or manipulated, or it is not love! Now, if love has to be freely chosen, it is also possible to choose not to love, which means, that if it is possible not to choose love, then evil is possible. In a world where love is possible, evil is possible, and the greater the possibility of love, the greater the possibility of evil.

At the core of the universe is self-giving, self-sacrificial love that we see most perfectly demonstrated in Christ at Calvary. But by the nature of love, this is a world where evil is possible. The first couple of chapters of Job take us behind the scenes of the universe and give us a picture of what is going on in a world where love is possible. The picture we have in Job is that of a council – the council of God. It is of course a picture, but a picture that speaks of something real. This picture helps us to understand the sometimes conflicting experiences we have in this world. It is a world where we can sometimes feel God's love and power and sometimes experience suffering. The picture shows us – or rather God reveals to us – a bit about the reality of how God runs the world.

The truth revealed here is that God does not run the world entirely on his own – love always shares and gives. That is part of love: God is community.

The truth revealed here is that freedom really does exist with true loving.

The truth revealed here is that God is genuinely excited when he sees a righteous and blameless person because he looks for the best in others.

The truth revealed here is that God loves the world and is always looking for the best in it.

The truth revealed here is that God wants us to experience the best – which is love, freely chosen.

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. The truth revealed here is that there is a battle for the hearts of men and women. It is the battle for them to choose the way of love or for them to choose to reject the way of love.

The truth revealed here is that this is a real battle and an ongoing, daily battle.

Satan roams the earth waiting to kill, steal and destroy for he chooses to reject the way of love. And he is looking for opportunities to entice people away from the way of love. The truth revealed here is that sometimes good people, people who choose the way of love, suffer, and suffer greatly. The battle is real and rages even now!

It would probably be bad news if it stopped there, but the truth revealed here is that Satan is not all powerful, he can only do what God allows. Most of the time we suffer because of our own wilfulness or mistakes or decisions, because we choose to live our way and not God's way – the way of love. But sometimes we suffer because God uses our suffering to vindicate his love before the heavenly realm – and before Satan. Sometimes we suffer because God shows Satan he was wrong about Job, wrong about love and wrong about people like you and me who choose the way of love! When that happens, we can declare to Satan and his minions that God is worth loving anyway, no matter what we are going through.

We declare that love wins, and can still win today!

Sermon 2

There is a myth that we sometimes choose to believe that says if we follow God closely, and if we have a strong personal relationship with God, and if we do our quite times conscientiously and pray regularly and read the Bible daily, things will go well for us. Friends, that is simply untrue. The story of Job and what happens in chapters 1 & 2 makes that abundantly clear. Job was a good man, the best man of his day; he was a righteous man, one who was careful to do all he knew to be right. He made sacrifices for his children just in case they had sinned in any way. You couldn't live a better life in working out your relationship with God than Job did.

Friends, if we buy into the myth that if we have a good relationship with God things will go well, we will find ourselves inadvertently making Satan's claim for him. Because to buy into the myth, is to make love less, and ultimately selfish. I love God because life will go well – it is about what I will get from God!

The challenge of his immense loss is: what will be left of his relationship with God when he has everything stripped away? In chapter one the challenge is what will be left if you take all the material benefits away from Job? How about you? Will Job worship God even if he has nothing? How about you?

In chapter two the challenge is: what will be left if you take away Job's health? How about you? Perhaps some of us have had to face the reality of that question more honestly than others. Satan reasons that if he can hurt Job deeply enough Job will give up on God. How about You? If Satan can hurt you deeply enough, possessions, health, in your spirit, how will you respond? It may depend on how much you've bought into the myth. Is God really worth loving?

Satan is still confident that in the absence of blessing, material possessions, health, emotional well being, we will fail to worship God for who he is. How will we respond: is God really worth loving? Friends, I think this is a question we would do well to ask ourselves continually.

What gets in the way of worshipping God? What about on a Sunday? And what is that really to do with? How much of it is to do with who God is, and how much

of it is about you and me? Are we able to get through what is in truth, superfluous and truly worship God because of who he is?

Sermon 3

At the end of the tragedy that befalls Job his wife speaks. What she says is not helpful – actually it encourages Job to do exactly what Satan is hoping Job will do. A couple of comments to both wives and husbands especially, but also to those who value the friendship of others. First, we could give Job's wife a hard time here but she too has lost her children, her possessions, her status and arguably her husband. When we suffer, we never do it alone and those close to us suffer too!

A couple of comments to wives!

Always guard your tongue when your husband is going through a tough time. It maybe true that hard times strengthen most women, but men find it extremely difficult to cope. Most men become very vulnerable in affliction – although they would never admit it! What men need in those times is the encouragement of their wives. We need you to pray for us and stand strong for us! Please – never suggest that a man compromise his integrity even if that would provide some kind of temporary relief from a problem. What Job needed his wife to say was: "this is really tough, but whatever happens I'm with you and will stand with you through it all. Let's walk together with God."

Couple of comments to husbands!

First thing – listen to your wife. Guys, how many things do we mess up because we stubbornly refuse to listen to what is being said! So listen first – but then speak the truth! Job's wife gave advice that wasn't wise. Job gently confronted her with the truth. There will be times guys when our wives will be right, then our response must be to acknowledge that and thank her!

Friends, how many marriages or significant relationships struggle because we do not speak the truth! Sometimes we must be big enough to say: "I was wrong!"

Sometimes we must be big enough to challenge our partners, but a marriage, indeed any relationship will be much healthier if it is one where the truth is spoken.

Guys, we must also teach what we know about God! Job says: "Shall we accept good from God and not troubles?" That is Job teaching great theology! Guys we have to take responsibility for spiritual authority but we also should be careful how we speak! "In all this Job did not sin in what he said!" There's a challenge for us – how we speak to our wives is significant. Go think about it! If we choose the way of love, friends, we will love our wives unconditionally! We can help her fulfil her full redemptive potential if we choose the way of love!

So, as the title of this talk asks: Is there presence in pain? Absolutely there is. When we choose the way of love and choose to love God whatever our circumstances, we know our struggle has eternal value and God is with us. He loves you because he loves you because he loves you and he is always present in love in our pain. Love always gives and always gives to those who are suffering.

Even in our pain we are surrounded by God's love and perhaps it is through suffering and in our pain that we most closely know and experience God's divine presence... because perhaps only then is everything else stripped away and we are thrown onto God himself.

Presence in pain – could it be the greatest blessing we will know?

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 29th January 2012 by Rev. Ian Phillips.