

In the Mess

WHY GO ON?

So, your worst nightmare becomes reality. How do you respond? Job has been plunged into the middle of his worst nightmare and there seems to be no rhyme or reason to it. What he now believes about God will become absolutely critical. It will determine how he finds his way through the next tortuous days.

Friends, what you believe about God is absolutely critical to the way you will live and be able to live in all that does or doesn't happen to you, for you and around you. Another way of making the point would be to say: who you believe God is, is absolutely critical.

So... who is the God you believe in?

It seems to me that this is something Job wrestles with big time, and we see it first in chapter three. Now just before we read the text, a word of explanation about the form and structure of the next part of the book of Job. Chapters 1 and 2 are what's called narrative – that's story, so in chapter 1 and 2 we have the story told of the tragedy that befell Job. From chapter 3 to chapter 42 the form of the writing is poetry!

Poetry is often repetitious, mysterious and not easy to understand in all its detail, but we are able to get the big picture of what is being said and as we plunge into these chapters we would do well to bear this in mind. What also begins in chapter 3 is a cycle of conversations. They start off as conversation and then they become intense debates between Job and his friends. There are essentially three rounds of debates between Job and his friends. Job's friends Eliphaz and Bildad take part in all three rounds, Zophar doesn't appear in the third round and his place is taken briefly by a young man named Elihu who has some strong things to say from chapters 31 to chapter 37. Finally, in chapter 38 God speaks – still part

of the poetry of the book. The book ends with the narrative of the story of the rest of Job's life.

Job 3

Job Speaks

- ¹ After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. ² He said:
- ³ "May the day of my birth perish,
and the night that said, 'A boy is conceived!'
- ⁴ That day—may it turn to darkness;
may God above not care about it;
may no light shine on it.
- ⁵ May gloom and utter darkness claim it once more;
may a cloud settle over it;
may blackness overwhelm it.
- ⁶ That night—may thick darkness seize it;
may it not be included among the days of the year
nor be entered in any of the months.
- ⁷ May that night be barren;
may no shout of joy be heard in it.
- ⁸ May those who curse days curse that day,
those who are ready to rouse Leviathan.
- ⁹ May its morning stars become dark;
may it wait for daylight in vain
and not see the first rays of dawn,
- ¹⁰ for it did not shut the doors of the womb on me
to hide trouble from my eyes.

That's a bit of a shock isn't it! That's not what we would have expected from what we know of Job so far. He was upright and blameless and even in the aftermath of the tragedy of chapter 1 and 2, he did not sin with his lips. But now, suddenly, he wishes he'd never been born! If you read the rest of chapter three he asks, if he had to be born – why couldn't he have died at birth? And then, if he

had to live at all, why can't he just die now? He is in a really dark place, in which he seems to see no hope at all.

Some of us know what that's like don't we? Life has dealt us a crushing blow, a tragedy we don't understand. For some of us it is a number of events that have left us reeling. However hard we have tried we have been able to make no sense out of it whatsoever. Events seem to be completely arbitrary, without purpose or reason. Some of us know the darkness that these kinds of experiences bring.

Sometimes life brings us to the place where we find ourselves asking: what is the point of all this? Why go on? You don't need me to tell you if you've been there, or if you are there now, that this is a very hard place to be. Perhaps one of the most difficult things to come to terms with in these dark times, is that we also seem to have lost God! When we experience a time when we feel like God has abandoned us too it causes more pain. And if friends, we have bought into this myth that if I follow God closely, things will go well, we will have big questions to ask and wrestle with in times of tragedy. And, probably, those questions will serve to increase our pain.

There is a huge challenge here for us friends, and I think it is this: in the most difficult, darkest times in our lives, we may well find we have lost the God we thought we knew and we must ask ourselves the question – who is the God I think I've lost? And we must do that in order to find the God who loves us because he loves us because he loves us...

From chapter 4, Job's friends are going to speak to him of the God who is punishing Job because he has sinned. That is essentially what all four of them say in different ways whenever they speak, but we know from chapter 1 & 2 that it is simply not true. God is not punishing Job. What is happening to Job is happening because God created a world where love is possible, and so is evil. It is a complex world in which tragedy strikes to those who are good and those who are bad. It is a world where God loves and loves and loves.

Most of Job's wrestling is with the God his friends are telling him about, which Job cannot reconcile with the God he thought he once knew. Holding onto who God

really is, and not how he might appear in the darkest and hardest times of life, is what Job ultimately is able to do. He shines as an example to us and invites us to do the same in the hardest and darkest times in our lives.

A point here about honesty before God. Whilst we might at first glance look at what Job says here in Chapter 3 and think it is shocking, it's in the text of the bible. I think one important thing this teaches is that it is ok to be absolutely, gut wrenchingly honest about what is going on for us, before God! Perhaps it is a mistake not to be honest with God! I do believe it is true that God is big enough to take all that we throw at him. I don't think God has a problem with that, even if we do.

An important point to note here, is that, as Job continues to be honest with his words throughout the book, what he rails against is the "God" his friends keep telling him about. He was honest about what he began to realize was a wrong view of God. Perhaps one of the things that can happen for us in our darkest and hardest times in life, is that we come closer to knowing who God really is.

In chapter 4 Eliphaz speaks. Until now Job's friends have remained silent, and so far they have done well! Friends, we can be too quick to speak and give advice and when we do we must be very careful what we say.

Job 4

¹² "A word was secretly brought to me,
my ears caught a whisper of it.

¹³ Amid disquieting dreams in the night,
when deep sleep falls on people,

¹⁴ fear and trembling seized me
and made all my bones shake.

¹⁵ A spirit glided past my face,
and the hair on my body stood on end.

¹⁶ It stopped,
but I could not tell what it was.

A form stood before my eyes,
and I heard a hushed voice:

¹⁷ 'Can a mortal be more righteous than God?
Can even a strong man be more pure than his Maker?
¹⁸ If God places no trust in his servants,
if he charges his angels with error,
¹⁹ how much more those who live in houses of clay,
whose foundations are in the dust,
who are crushed more readily than a moth!
²⁰ Between dawn and dusk they are broken to pieces;
unnoticed, they perish forever.
²¹ Are not the cords of their tent pulled up,
so that they die without wisdom?'

Eliphaz speaks on the basis of his experience. This experience comes in the form of a dream. He assumes that because he had a spiritual experience, what he dreamt must be of God. Essentially what he was saying is that Job is a sinner and God is therefore punishing him. If Job would only admit he had done wrong and repent! Innocent people do not suffer, so what is happening to Job must be because Job is hiding some sin.

A couple of important points to note here. First, Eliphaz assumes it is an angel (he calls it a spirit) who visits him in his dream so the message is from God. But when angels turn up in the bible the first thing they say is: "Fear not!" The spirit in Eliphaz dream does not such thing, suggesting the spirit in truth, does not speak for God. We need also to note the content of the dream and message. The thrust of these words is that humans are insignificant to God because they are made of dust. Human beings are worthless, so human righteousness is worthless. Job is sinful and worthless, and because no-one is innocent before God, Job's claim to be innocent is also worthless. So God is punishing Job for being a worthless sinner.

The best lies contain some truth! It is true that all of us have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3 v 23) and it is true that true repentance brings us fully into relationship with God! But it is not true that God considers humans worthless sinners! Most importantly for Job, what Eliphaz says is not true of him

or his situation! What Job is experiencing is not happening because Job has sinned! This is a case of dubious theology, some of which is true, wrongly applied!

Friends, we must be very careful with our theology. Just because you have a dream or experience of God and feel confident that he has given you something to say to someone, doesn't mean you are right! More and more I think God gave us leaders (most of us don't ask or seek to be leaders – it's a God given gift) and others, to help us test what God might be saying. It's why we have a prayer ministry team!

Wise counsel is precious and life-giving: "Listen to counsel and accept discipline that you may be wise the rest of your days." (Proverbs 19 v 20) Counsel based solely on experience can be hugely damaging, especially to those in dark times. Job's response in chapter 6 is that he acknowledges he's not perfect, but if he's sinned what is it that he has done? He urges his friends to tell him if they know. His struggle is clear: he recognizes that calamity has come and that God has not stopped it, but he cannot figure out why! He knows his own heart and he knows he is innocent before God and he's not claiming to be sinless, yet he is experiencing the most terrible suffering.

In chapter 7 Job speaks to God.

Job 7

¹ "Do not mortals have hard service on earth?

Are not their days like those of hired laborers?

² Like a slave longing for the evening shadows,
or a hired laborer waiting to be paid,

³ so I have been allotted months of futility,
and nights of misery have been assigned to me.

⁴ When I lie down I think, 'How long before I get up?'
The night drags on, and I toss and turn until dawn.

⁵ My body is clothed with worms and scabs,
my skin is broken and festering.

⁶ “My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle,
and they come to an end without hope.

²⁰ If I have sinned, what have I done to you,
you who see everything we do?

Why have you made me your target?

Have I become a burden to you?

²¹ Why do you not pardon my offenses
and forgive my sins?

For I will soon lie down in the dust;

you will search for me, but I will be no more.”

By now Job has pretty much given up, he can’t see what we can see; he doesn’t know what we know. Yet sometimes we find ourselves echoing the same thing Job says. “God I’ve had enough! I can’t take anymore!”

So here’s what I would urge you to remember. There is a battle going on behind the scenes. Satan wants to entice you away, and suffering is one way he can do it. He thinks we will give up on love and give up on God, because God isn’t worth loving if times are tough and we get nothing from God. Whenever we choose to love God anyway, we grow the Kingdom of God and deal a blow to Satan and his strategy.

Friends, God loves you because he loves you because he loves you...God has promised he will never leave us for forsake us and as we are battered and scarred in the cosmic war that rages over human hearts, we can be assured that we are building the Kingdom of God one bit at a time! Love wins! That’s why we go!