

Where was God?

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[0 : 00] Let us now turn again to the passage which we read, the book of Job on chapter 23. And we may read again at verse 8.

Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive him. On the left hand where he doth walk, but I cannot behold him.

He hideth himself on the right hand that I cannot see him, but he knoweth the way that I take. When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

I'd like to thank you for the privilege of being invited to conduct this service this morning.

Do I have any special qualifications for doing so? The short answer is a resounding no. If you ask me, did I have relatives on the Iolaire?

[1 : 11] Yes, I did. My grandfather's brother and my granny's brother and two cousins.

Both of my granduncles survived, but died a few years afterwards. One in 1924, aged 35, and the other in 1926, aged 51.

Both of my cousins were drowned. It would be an understatement on my part to say that the loss of the Iolaire caused years of suffering in our island and beyond.

It is not always easy to interpret or understand the problem or even the causes of suffering.

That is why I took my text from this book this morning. We try to analyze suffering.

[2 : 22] But I think the book of Job teaches us how difficult it is for us as humans to analyze the problems of suffering.

For in this book we are told something of the mysterious nature of suffering in the life of this man Job. And in my view, it is especially about the mysteriousness of suffering in the lives of God's people that is the particular focus of the book of Job.

It is not a biblical manual on suffering in general. But despite that, I believe that this book is contemporary and speaks to those who may be brokenhearted in every generation.

If you believe in a sovereign God, which I hope you do, He does things and brings things to pass. He intervenes in the course of our lives in a way that completely and utterly bamboozles us and takes our breath away.

And we can't understand it. And so we are faced with the problem of God's ways. God's ways are much higher than our ways.

[3 : 57] I wonder how many that are here today who are just there. Things have happened. Things have occurred in your home, in your life, in your marriage, in your family, in your business, in the circle of friends that you move in.

And it just doesn't make any sense. And you're asking, why? The perplexity of God's ways.

The unfolding of providence is not something that we can easily explain. So much in our world that is deeply puzzling and intensely perplexing.

Today, on the centenary of the foundering of the Iolaire with such tragic loss of life, as we look back, we are confronted with the perplexity of God's ways.

In the passage, we read here how hugely difficult Job's providence was, and how very perplexing it was for him to understand and explain his unfolding providence.

[5 : 24] He was in the dark. He was perplexed about the invisibility of God in all of his providence. That was the cause of deep anguish for this man of God.

If only I knew. It's the anguished cry of the perplexed man of God. Oh, that I knew. Where I might find him.

Note the usage of the pronoun him. His language is very similar to that of the distraught, grieving woman by the empty grave spoken of in the New Testament scriptures.

She sees a man whom she supposes to be the gardener. And she goes up to speak to him, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away. When grieving the loss of a dear one, it is as if everyone should know whom you are grieving over. There is no need to mention names.

[6 : 45] And here the invisibility of God for Job, I believe, is exacerbating his suffering. So I'd like to set four thoughts before you.

First of all, the grace of God in the life of this man. His belief, secondly, in the justice of God. His comfort from the omniscience of God.

And his belief in the sovereignty of God. First of all, the grace of God. When you examine some of the biographical detail from the life of this man, you discover that he was clearly prospered by God in an unusual way.

His life was filled with prosperity materially, financially, and spiritually. He is a man who is held up by God to Satan as an example of righteousness.

Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth? A blameless, blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.

[8 : 06] And then, in mysterious fashion, the life that was calm, serene, righteous, consistent, and obedient, is suddenly, without warning, it becomes like a battlefield.

The powers of darkness are let loose. And behind the powers of darkness, God himself is at work, as these powers break forth in the life of this man, Job.

From Job's standpoint, there is absolutely no explanation, no apparent reason why it all happens.

A catalogue of disasters unfolds. A catalogue of disasters unfolds. And there is financial and commercial collapse. His family wiped out by death.

Personal bereavement in the middle of financial wipeout. You know, it is one thing to bear a sudden tragedy.

[9 : 14] It is quite another to suffer its pain for weeks and months, and even years afterward. In one afternoon, Job had lost his ten children and all his wealth.

And shortly afterwards, he was afflicted by a hard skin disease. In both these tragedies, the grace of God shines true in keeping his faith, and in his reverencing the sovereign hand of God.

In chapter 1, we find these words, Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. And he said, Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return.

The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this, we are told Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.

In chapter 2, Shall we receive good at the hand of the God? And shall we not receive evil? He affirmed the absoluteness of God's control over all things.

[10 : 41] And he bowed in submission to these heavy blows. His reaction, I think, ought to fill us with a sense of awe at how the grace of God shines through such obvious, deep adversity.

And then you find him praising God. Now, this is not the reaction of a stoic or a cold, detached, unfeeling parent, if such a parent exists.

Note the torn robe, the shaven head, the prostration on the ground. These are all indicators of his distraught emotions and the intensity of his grief.

He acknowledges the sovereignty of God in giving and in taking. Yes, but he does more than that. He praises the very God who has given and taken.

Many of us might recognize God's sovereignty in giving and in taking. But it's an altogether different thing to rise up in praise of the God who gives and takes when we are experiencing particularly the pain of his taking.

[12 : 12] And yet, that is what this man, that is what this man does. He has such a high regard for the sovereign Lord that not even the sore events of this most severe and trying providence could dent his view of God.

But above all of these sore providences, there is a factor that exacerbates the mysterious depths of his suffering.

As he speaks in the chapter we have read, he does not see God or what he is doing. You know, we have to remember that Job didn't hear the conversation between Satan and God.

There is an ongoing struggle in the life of Job between God and Satan. The life of Job is like a battlefield between the superior forces of light and the inferior powers of darkness.

He was not aware of this only that he experienced being shorn of all his possessions and family. His own assessment of his life until then.

[13 : 35] My foot has held fast to his steps. I have kept his way and have not turned aside. In other words, he lived to please God. He treasured the teaching of God.

I have treasured the words of his mouth more than the person than my portion of food. How pleasant the words of God were to this man.

He treasured them more. More precious than his daily bread. But he is sitting in darkness. Where is God? Is the cry of this man. I go forward. He is not there. Backward, I do not perceive him. On the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him. on the right hand, I do not see him. There is no simple answer to the degree and level of suffering permitted by God.

[14 : 36] A hundred years ago, this island was traumatized by the events that took place within almost touching distance of the shore.

world. It was to be a celebrated homecoming for so many service personnel. The homecoming of all homecomings.

How could it be anything else as the returning servicemen looked forward to being united with families, having come safely through the hazards of brutal war?

some of their companions had been killed. Some of them had even escaped shipwreck on an earlier occasion.

Many families in the island had already received the dreaded death telegram. but nothing, but nothing could prepare them for this when hostilities were over.

[15 : 44] I heard one elderly lady who had already lost a brother during the earlier years of the war speak movingly of the events.

She recalled how as a family, they had hired a horse and cart to meet the returning surviving brother. How they laid out fresh clothing and warmed it by the open fire as they waited for the sound of the returning cart.

They had worked out an approximate arrival time. It came and passed and no cart arrived until eventually a broken hearted cart driver returned to break the sad news that this brother had also been lost.

That story multiplied countless times as families were traumatized by the loss of loved ones, literally plucked from them on their home shore.

Some 250 children left without a father. Wives took to their bed never to rise. Some suffered prolonged mental trauma.

[17 : 15] Some even died as a direct consequence of the tragedy. How do you explain it? I'm not even going to try.

For I do not know the whole purpose of the Lord in this matter. I don't have an insight into the secret will of God in this matter.

And Job too faced his difficult providence. He wanted God who appeared hidden to him. Could I suggest that the grace of God shines through in the language that he uses.

Oh that I might know where I might find him that I might come even to his seat. I would lay my kiss before him and fill my mouth with arguments. Wasn't his friends or relatives that he sought?

You know how we turn to family and friends in time of sorrow and perplexing providence. This man does not do that. The situation is far far too perplexing for the understanding of family and friends.

[18 : 24] He seeks God. And this is a further indication if we needed it of the spiritual state of this man. For what lay behind his express desire oh that I knew that I might come to him.

It's surely the very opposite of the reaction of our first parents in the garden seeking to run from God. Here is this man running to God. He wants to hear God.

And his prayer is I believe indicative of the grace of God at work in the soul of this man. He wants to hear from God.

He longs to hear God speaking to him in the upheaval and the trauma and the turmoil of his current providence. there are many when afflictions and suffering and trial come who ask the question how can a good God permit this?

Was this the question? Was this question was it voiced in the perplexing providence that took so many into the eternal realm a hundred years ago?

[19 : 47] Think of how many homes and lives were disrupted by this unexpected additional level of loss. Do you not think that some too were asking the question where is God in your own

providence?

When your providence is extremely difficult and you are upset and there is darkness on every side and there is no light what do you seek?

What longing is uppermost in your heart? Is it that God make you happy again? Is that all? You know people without grace share that aspiration when they are suffering for no one wants to suffer. If the only interest we have in God is that he is employed in delivering us from present suffering then our desire is no evidence of the grace of God in our life.

This man Job wasn't just deliverance from his providence he wanted he wanted to be in fellowship with God he was desirous of hearing God speak to him because that had been the pattern of his life I have not departed he says from the commandment of his lips I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food that is the language of a man who has known and experienced the grace of God in his life I have treasured the words of his mouth he is like the psalmist who could say how sweet are your words to my taste sweeter than honey to my mouth is that a we look on the word of God at the beginning of a new year you know when

[22 : 01] I don't know if you are partial to honey but when you have honey the taste remains in your mouth long after you swallowed the honey it remains there and there is something of that in the language that the psalmist uses when he speaks of the word of God being sweeter than honey to his mouth the grace of God operative in the life of this man but his conviction of the justice of God in the second place we see the conviction that lies at the heart of Job's life although he is asking the question where is God and not understanding what is going on he is not asking where is God in a mocking way like some did in difficult and dark days and the life of the psalmist and some still do as we read and sung today my tears have been my constant fruit both in the night and in the day while all day long insistently where is this

God of yours they say this man had confidence in the justice of God I would lay where do we find that I would lay my case before him fill my mouth with arguments I would know that he would answer me and understand what he would say to me would he contend with me in the greatness of his power no he would pay attention to me there an upright man could argue with him and I would be acquitted forever by my judge despite all that he does not understand there may be even much that he is unsure about but of this there is no doubt in the mind of Job God is absolutely just psalmist echoes this to the Lord is just in his ways all and holy in his works each one this man walked with God before tragedy struck in his life he had learned as did others who are set before us in the

Bible that the judge of all the earth will do right and it is important that we grasp this we come to a just God he is a righteous God and a saviour the God who fulfills his covenantal promises and only he can do that so despite the lack of understanding Job is sure that God is just he is a righteous God and it is like a rock on which he stands a sure foundation in a fast moving providence often often when we are going through the mill when you believe that you are suffering an injustice you may be tempted to say as others of old the Lord has forsaken me my Lord has forgotten and you remember the counter argument that the Lord puts as is enunciated for us by the prophet can a woman forget her nursing child that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb even these may forget yet

I will not forget you behold I have engraven you on the palms of my hands and God displays the very strength of the bond that exists between him and his people stronger than the strongest human bond that of her mother with her nursing child and even that bond says God may be broken yet he says I will not forget you how very personal and encouraging that is even those closest to you in life may forget but not a covenant keeping God the comfort of this trust made path to it into all our lives today and if you are afflicted and storm tossed may these words afford you comfort and to further emphasize this behold

I have engraven you on the palms of my hands no God is a spirit he doesn't have hands physically it's metaphorical language but the sense is that you are tattooed on that it is an indelible mark not easily erased so this is the foundation on which he rests when the storm of affliction is at its very height there is the danger that we become bitter in times of hard providence but this God who keeps his covenantal promises is able even to make the bitter sweet oh that's not easy to understand when you are in the gall of bitterness and yet that is his promise to bring sweetness out of bitterness God is just and it is an important principle when we are in danger of being swept away and that brings me to my next point when asking the question where is

[27 : 39] God and finding a rock on which to stand and face the onslaught of the buffeting by the storm of tribulation where does he find comfort it is in the omniscience of God not again what he has been saying I go forward he is not there backward I do not perceive him the left hand when he is working I do not behold him he turns to the right hand I do not see Job's knowledge of the purpose and the plan of God might be in total darkness but his testimony is this you do not need to understand the purpose and the plan of God for you in order to trust him absolutely he he is all knowing he knows every detail of every moment in your life from beginning to end this is the testimony of Job he knows the way that I take this is

Job's tribute to the omniscience of God he knows remember when when the Lord was instructing his disciples in the upper room prior to his crucifixion he is seeking to prepare his distraught disciples for the hour of party and do you remember the conclusion that they come to in their confusion and lack of understanding now we know that you know all things this was the banner under which the disciples sought shelter in their days of lack of understanding and darkness we know that you know and is there not tremendous comfort there my friends we may not know but can we make this a certain on this new year's day we know that

God knows and derive comfort from that as you begin a new year with so much hidden from our vision do you find it comforting that he knows in every storm of trial and tribulation here is a pillow on which to place your head we know that you know that is where Job found comfort it is where Peter found consolation too under the searching scrutiny of the Lord Jesus Christ Lord you know all things you know that I love you Job at this stage he's not looking for answers he is content to rest in the omniscience of God he knows the way that I take I do not know the way Job is saying but he knows my way we may be riddle even to ourselves but we are no riddle to this omniscient Lord and Savior there are mysteries in your life you cannot explain he has the clue to every maze and the key to every secret he knows how to get into the hidden springs of your spirit he knows the trouble that you cannot tell even to your dearest friends the closest to you in life the grief that you do not dare whisper in any human ear he knows oh have you come to the place where you are content to rest in this we know that you know and finally the sovereignty of God the reign of God over all our life he is unchangeable who can turn him back what he desires that he does for he will complete what he appoints for me when he has tried me I shall come out as gold the sovereign God is unchangeable in his character in his ways in his purposes in his truth and

Job comforts himself that he manages all things that his present distresses are a trial by which God is testing him but at the end of the day he shall come forth as gold without any impurities this is the result of all the testings the trials and tribulation the end result of the sanctifying process of the work of the Holy Spirit and the lives of those who are indwelt by him I wish to in conclusion to relate something told to me 50 years ago it is anecdotal and I must stress that it is anecdotal but this is how it was told to me a man from this very community from one of the villages of this community believed that the

[32 : 55] Lord had made known to him that he would not return home from war service he was a seaman when others were rejoicing that the war had come to an end he was perplexed and the cause of his perplexion was this if as he believed the Lord had made known that he would not return home why was he on the journey to home if wrong about his understanding of God's promise that he would not return could he not therefore have been wrong about his understanding of conversion these apparently were his thoughts on arrival at Kyle he was allocated a place on the lolaire when the ship foundered and men were seeking to save themselves he was heard to say and

I'll say it in Gaelic and give a translation in English praise to your name Lord that you are fulfilling your word to your servant his body was amongst those that were not recovered he left a young family despite the strength of family ties and the bonds that united him to the family the fulfilling of the truth of God was of supreme importance in the eyes of this man now as I say I have no means today of authenticating that story I merely tell it as it was told in my hearing 50 years ago who brought the story to the village I can't say but there were survivors from the same village to which he belonged all

I can say is that when I heard the story I never for one moment questioned the veracity of it and I am telling you today as I heard it I don't think there are any who heard it 50 years ago who were still living apart from myself who would not wish to be brought forth as gold reflecting the glory of the land on this new year morn is the grace of God at work in our lives do we believe in the justice of

God are we assured that he knows the way that we take do we accept that the purpose of God is that those in whom he works come forth as gold even though we cannot see the next step let alone the end of the road and

I'm going to conclude with a verse of Bardach if thou but suffer God to guide thee and hope in him through all thy ways he'll give thee strength whate'er betide thee and bear thee through the evil days who trusts in God's unchanging love builds on the rock that not can move sing pray keep his ways unswerving so do thine own part faithfully and trust his word though undeserving though yet shall find it true for thee God never yet forsook at need the soul that trusted him indeed may our hope and confidence and trust today be found in the Christ of God and may we go forward into the new year looking unto him for he alone is the hope of salvation amen let us pray