

The Testimony of Faith

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[0 : 0 0] You please turn back with me this morning to the passage that we read together in the Old Testament, the book of Job. And we'll hope to spend a few moments just thinking about the end of the book.

I feel I'm kind of cheating you a bit by just doing the very end of the book because it's such a great book. There's so much in it and it's sometimes difficult to put it all in its context quickly.

But I hope as we look at Job's experiences, we can apply these experiences to our own walk of faith with the living God and our need for experiencing some of what Job experienced, even though his experiences were pretty unique, yet they have much to teach us about our relationship with God.

And I think sometimes when we come maybe to a passage like this, to these words towards the end of the book, it does sometimes feel that the page is just a bit flat.

And it's as if mere words, as we know mere words, can't convey the spiritual realities that they seek to speak about.

[1 : 1 9] We need God. We need God's Holy Spirit to bring these words alive. And no more so in a passage like this. We can read this quickly. Sometimes you would get a passage like this as part of a daily reading out of its context.

And there would be this call from it to repentance. And it can seem, unless we think about and consider the extremity of the situation and the remarkable change in Job's response, then it can seem quite maybe ordinary for us.

It can seem like something that loses the searing power that is revealed in what was happening between Job and his so-called comforters and the living God.

There's a huge change in Job as it's recorded in these verses. And there's a great power, almost intangible power, that is revealed in his experiences here with the living God.

And sometimes when you come, it's great to look through the book of Job. It's actually a really great book to read all in one. Because you really get a flavor of what's happening.

[2 : 4 8] It's quite a difficult book in many ways. But it's a marvelous book to read through in one, especially the previous chapters to this one, where God reveals himself in a way that he doesn't anywhere else in Scripture.

And it's a most remarkable revelation. But when we come to this, even some of the commentators, some of the writers who write on these passages, give little extra insight into the experiences of Job here.

Yes, Job saw God, Job repented, and Job went home. And it's almost, it's quite plain and quite ordinary.

But it's a remarkable truth we have here, and one that I hope that we can just, by God's grace and with his spirit, look at for a moment this morning.

I want to notice two things in particular about this situation and where it is in the book and what has happened.

[3 : 57] Because we notice two things. The first thing is that at this point, at this point, there is no change in Job's circumstances. There is nothing different about what Job is experiencing in his life.

And you know all he's experienced. He's lost everything. He's lost his family. He's lost his position. He's lost his health. He's lost his wealth.

There's nothing left. His wife has said to him, curse God and die. Get out of this situation. God has abandoned you. And there are many, many chapters where he speaks and questions and shouts and deals with God and argues with his three comforters.

But when we come to this last stage of the book, Job's circumstances are no different. He is still sitting in the gutter. He has still lost everything.

But there is a remarkable change in his attitude. There is a huge change in his outlook. His heart has been completely transformed.

[5 : 05] Even though his circumstances are exactly the same. He's still in dust and ashes. And not simply the dust and ashes that were a symbol and a sign of repentance, but dust and ashes physically because of his situation and because of his lostness through what had happened as Satan sought to destroy him and to mock his God and faith in his God.

So there's no change in his circumstance. And what we determine from that surely is... Well, we can look a little bit more at what we determine from that.

But what we see also along with that is that as you go through the book, you recognize and you realize that his situation has been changed more by God's presence than by persuasion.

So it's God's presence that's made the huge difference in Job's outlook and Job's response to the living God here.

There has been in this book 33 chapters of arguments where his three friends, initially having been silent before him, and probably that was their best seven days with him when they were silent, then went on to try and correct him and try and...

[6 : 39] In many ways, as you read through them and what they say, there's many times we read and say, well, they seem to be speaking a lot of sense there. Maybe they're right.

But of course, we come to the end of the book and we see God's reaction and God's judgment or God's determination of what they've been doing. But they have been trying to argue on God's behalf, as it were, and argued Job into that position of repentance.

You must have done something wrong. You have to have been doing something against God for God to judge you in this way. And he determinedly maintained his innocence before them.

And none of their arguments changed him. What we do find is, interestingly, it becomes more and more... they become more and more aggressive, as it were, towards each other.

And he becomes more and more frustrated by them and them by him. But it is changed. Everything is changed, not by their persuasiveness or otherwise, not even by their company or by their silence, but when he meets with God in this remarkable way.

[7 : 52] I've heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. And he receives this communication from God.

These previous chapters, these are remarkable chapters that speak about the created universe and the animal kingdom and all the different things that God has created.

Interestingly, God never answers his questions. God doesn't deal in any immediate sense with his complaints and with his situation.

but he reveals himself and he reveals who he is. And it's... it's these living words in the context of the person who speaks them, the living God.

And it's meeting with God that changes Job's situation and his attitude and his response to his circumstances completely.

[8 : 51] And we see that variously in Scripture, different places. We see it with Peter in Luke chapter 5. When Peter saw this, speaking of the large catch of fish, he fell at Jesus' feet and said, Go away from me, Lord, but I'm a sinful man.

You know, as Jesus revealed himself in that fairly simple way, as it were, for Jesus to do and allowing the fish to be caught, Peter recognizes who he is and feels sinful in his presence.

Or Daniel in his great vision. In Daniel chapter 10, So I was left alone gazing at this great vision. I had no strength left. My face turned deathly pale and I was helpless.

As he's confronted with the reality, the person, the words, the vision of the living God. Or John in Revelation. A great picture we have of John when he is given his great revelation.

When I saw this, I fell at his feet as though dead. And so what makes the difference with these biblical characters and with Job here is that he meets with and recognizes the living God.

[10 : 08] And that is what is transforming. He senses God as God. Someone of great glory, of remarkable power because it's, in these chapters, God reveals himself mainly in his creative power and knowledge and creativity and genius.

And he senses this great God and he understands that this God is glorious and yet also in some way close.

there's an intensity of personal response here between the living God. He, maybe theologians would call it or sometimes theologians use the term the transcendence of God is made clear to him but also the eminence, the closeness.

So he grasps both these things. This is a great God but he's also a God who's close to him. the inexplicable presence of this living God.

The God who subsumes the universe, who breathes out his voice of creative authority and power and who sustains that universe yet who comes and speaks to him and comes beside him.

[11 : 34] It's God who creates but who walks in the garden with those that he created. This Christ who we became to see was transfigured on the mountain whose glory was revealed in that point but yet who touched the lives of individual people.

The Christ who on the cross in all the darkness in all the bleakness of the hours of darkness in his cosmic battle as he fought against the powers of darkness and still has time in that huge moment to say mother woman behold your son son behold your mother so that the great paradox of the revelation of a God who is glorious and powerful and majestic yet also who is hugely personal and interested in Job who speaks to Job who personally responds to his questions not with the answer maybe Job expected but nonetheless addresses him very personally and very individually and so we recognise that Job here he has sensed and seen God for who he is and I think more than that that he understands

God's voice if you read these four chapters previously it sometimes feels quite thunderous it feels quite frightening this revelation of God but that doesn't seem to be the kind of response that Job gives to what God has said he gets what God has revealed and there's an intangibility within his response sometimes that maybe we miss that this is not a response of abject fear that we have here he recognises that God is speaking to him certainly answering him in a marvellous and in many ways transcendent way but yet with great mercy we can't and I'm not sure and I hope I'm not speaking irreverently here but we can't judge the tone of God's voice to Job because we don't have that we just have the written word but clearly there's something in the tone and however it was revealed to Job that Job understood that this was God speaking to him in mercy you know that it's almost unwritten in God's response is Job don't be afraid don't be afraid

I am the great God and I know what you've gone through I've created all things I know what you're experiencing you know I understand I see everything that happens and I know and that unspoken communication seems to come through to Job that this is a God of great mercy speaking in all his power and in all his creativity and all his justice understands and says I now Job didn't know what we knew we knew that there was a spiritual there's an unseen spiritual battle that is happening here that there's a deal between a communication at the beginning of Job between Satan and God hugely mysterious and difficult communication but that spiritual battle that I mentioned we were speaking about briefly last night was something that Job was unaware of certainly at this point but nonetheless it is clearly he clearly understands that God knows and God is sovereign and God is in control and God is a God of merciful

Job I know don't be afraid I am with you and that's a great a great theme of scripture there are 365 do not be afraid or fear not in the bible one for every day because that is our condition isn't it we are so often afraid we are so often struggling we are so often battling and he doesn't say be confident he doesn't say be great people he says because he knows us don't be afraid and that very much seems to be the undercurrent of this remarkable powerful and glorious revelation to Job here it is one of mercy and so we see Job's response here and in seeing his response we will then maybe conclude with our great need as we consider our own lives and our own relationship with the living

[16 : 56] God but Job here responds to God's remarkable communication and revelation by confessing that he has come to his senses I will no longer question I will no longer doubt I have heard of you by hearing of the ear now my eye see you therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes and it's as if he's saying I see now clearly when he says my eye now sees you it's a metaphor for faith he sees how God communicated with him we don't know it's not told us and yet what he is seeing and it's a metaphor that's often used in scripture that we're no longer blind when we come to faith but we see and he now sees not only has he heard of

God but he now he understands who God is and his spiritual blindness that he was thrashing around in the previous experiences throughout the whole of the book has gone his deception has gone and he now sees by faith clearly who the living God is and what has happened and remember his circumstances at this point are completely unchanged nothing has changed for him outwardly he is seeing exactly the same things he is seeing the same dust and the same ashes and the same brokenness and the same loss but he is looking now with the eye of faith and what he realizes is that the vision of God that he has been given is greater than his need to know what God is doing with him simply the vision of who God is is enough for him simply knowing that God is sovereign is enough for him so that he doesn't need to ask what God's purpose and plan is through what is happening his desperation for answers has dissolved because he now trusts in the one who he knows has got the answers even if he chooses in his sovereignty not to reveal these answers to him he comes to his senses and he returns to God therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes that great biblical word that we know so well and maybe sometimes treat so lightly but he is returning to God sometimes repentance for us has a negative implication negative undertones shouldn't have that at all it's not a negative word whatsoever it is it means turning around it means no longer having our back turned to God but facing

God and in grace it's a recognition of the same of coming to know the same God of mercy who is wanting to receive us it's a remarkable turnaround for Job what he has seen of God doesn't cause him to have a fear of God that recoils from God you know what it was like in the garden when they heard God they recoiled they feared him because they knew they were guilty and they hid Adam and Eve they hid that's not what we have here we have a recognition and a revelation of God that is so merciful and great that he won't it's an awesomeness that is attractive attractional it turns him towards God not away from God he is confident that as he repents as he turns back to God and recognizes in a sense that he despises his own ignorance of almost demanding and yeah simply demanding

God to be accountable to him he recognizes that but he he comes back to God recognizing God will be merciful he's the prodigal returning at one level and he sees and he knows and he understands who God is and he's free to confess his own words careless some of them may have been his own ignorance of who God is and of what God was doing and he was confident he was confident of being safe as he returned he turns to him to this loving and good God even though he's still in dust and ashes now that may be taken maybe interpreted two ways it may be that he repented and used the common physical outworking of repentance which was to throw dust in your head and sit in ashes almost as a recognition that who we are and from dust we came and dust we will return humility there's a humbling recognition within that but it may also be that he just simply saying

I repent as I sit physically still in dust and ashes I haven't been lifted up my circumstances haven't changed I'm still in the gutter and it's from that place that he's repentant and yet he finds there God's company that's what transforms it God's company is with him in that circumstance and as this great end to the book reminds us that a huge victory has been won here there's the challenge maybe we should go back to the challenge of the first chapter of Job and in verse nine then Satan answered the Lord and said does Job fear God for no reason Job only follows you God because you have given him a great life you've given him wealth and security and family riches all these things he doesn't fear you for nothing he doesn't follow you genuinely you let me test him you let me take away all these crutches from him and I'll show you how much he will despise you so that's the test that's the challenge that is set out in chapter one and in chapter two and verse nine not only is there this unseen challenge but there is this challenge from his own wife closest to him do you still hold fast your integrity curse God and die and so there's two challenges laid out at the beginning of the book that help to put it in its context and here we have the beginnings of the victory not Job's victory but God's victory because there's a bigger picture because Satan is not really challenging

[24 : 25] Job Satan is challenging God and he's saying you can't instill the gift of faith in people that will enable them to persevere and to sustain in the bleakest of circumstances because humanity is broken and lost and rebellious and they can't be saved they can't be saved you see with Job they can't be saved and this this is one of although it's kind of in the middle of the Old Testament it's probably the earliest of all the books an early book written and a huge and early test as it were of God from the evil one and God is reminding Satan and he's reminding us I will keep them my gift of faith to them will be what will keep them and what my son will do and the faith that even the

Old Testament believers have will be secure because of what Jesus wins on the cross and there's a pointing forward even within that that Job and his faith at the beginning of the Old Testament as an early believer as it were it overcame and it prevailed because Christ would prevail that is what makes this book so great and that's what makes this reality so important and that's what ties it into our lives the same faith that Job had in its almost prototypical form before Christ he still trusted in God as his saviour and his redeemer to whom he could repent even though he couldn't see the Christ as we see him yet his faith is secure because of what Christ achieved on the cross just as it was for Moses Moses could see the glory of Christ rather than the pleasures of Egypt

Christ's victory is our guarantee of victory of faith as we rely on trust in him and his transcendent victory on the cross has personal implications for this congregation and for your individual life in all our ordinariness in all our lack of significance in the wider world this great story reminds us that Christ died once for all Old Testament believers and new and the faith that is God's gift is guaranteed to be victorious as it was for Job because of what Christ Jesus has done and we recognize that that's where our hope lies in the grace and in the goodness of God and in the gift of faith that he pours out to all who cry out in repentance and in trust to him so can I conclude briefly with two things as we apply it to our own lives the first is a recognition today and every day

I think one of the great reasons for the Lord's Supper and one of the great reasons that God has given us the Lord's Supper is that our greatest need is not a change in our circumstances we often think that don't we well if only my circumstances were different if only God would give me this if only I could know that if only the pain would go if only whatever it happens to be and we say if only these things outwardly would change then I would be a better Christian and I would be more faithful God is saying our greatest need is not our circumstances to change but rather that each of us can see my eyes have seen you that we want and we seek and we look for more than anything the living God in our lives Moses as I said earlier was the one who regarded his grace for the sake of Christ because he was looking ahead or in

John chapter 8 we have the great truth Jesus says your father rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day he saw it and was glad Christ is the core of everything even in the Old Testament and we know that Satan's great work is to blind us to blind us from loving one another but more significantly to blind us from loving and seeing God the God of this age we're reminded 2 Corinthians 4 has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel and we know that in our sinful remaining sinful nature there is that darkness there's that blindness we sometimes are only looking through a glass darkly and our greatest need is to see the living God and to understand him the church in Laodicea didn't get it you say you're rich but you do not realize that you are poor blind and naked blind and so our greatest need is is not intellectual understanding important though that is not even theological understanding however great and significant that must be it is taking that and meeting with and recognizing the living

[30 : 19] God when we read scripture it's not a flat book it's not a mere doctrine it is a revelation of the living God everything doctrine matters not because doctrine matters doctrine matters because it reveals a living God and we are seek that awesome God who is attractational who we don't recoil from in fear but who we come to for mercy because he knows us he understands us and he knows that we were made to be in relationship with him and I absolutely believe that that is part of the significance and importance of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that he has given us that it's not a mere remembrance for us it's not simply an act of memory that we recall because we tend to forget which it is but we meet with

Christ we are to meet with Christ in the sacrament it is more than a bare remembrance and it is not a funeral service it is meeting with the living God that mixes both awe and joy and reverence and hope it recalls his incarnation it reminds us of his death because he couldn't have been he couldn't have died had he not been incarnate but it also speaks of his resurrection because there was no salvation without that and it's a glorious reality for us and in the sacrament we should look and pray for and seek transcendence but yet intimacy no one else can eat for you it's the most intimate and personal of actions isn't it eating and drinking that's why the two come together in the sacrament and we can only pray for that we can only look for that presence of

God and seek that presence of God as we come in repentance so don't come harboring sin don't come in your own strength don't come thinking sin doesn't matter don't come thinking repentance is simply ritualistic he asks us to examine ourselves so that we recognize who he is never come with hypocrisy that of all things is what Christ would have exposed and would have recognized but come humbly and come honestly that's what the dust and the ashes speak of just an honesty and a humility and a freedom that we come to the living God who knows us and yet who gloriously has redeemed us there is no alternative for us this is the only God that there is and this is the

God who as you look at an examined job it's a wonderful apology a wonderful outworking of our understanding of suffering because it doesn't give us any answers it simply points us to the living God and so often we are enslaved by looking for answers in our suffering and that's not in any way to belittle them or to make them insignificant we know from job that's not the case and simply don't have time to look at the great restoration that God brings into Job's life but it is to free us up to experience the living God which is more important even than having our questions answered so our great need is to see the living God and also I think to recognise that in our lives where there is suffering and you have suffered greatly as a people and you have seen much tragedy recently there's a great spiritual fruit that comes from

Job's experience that we're reminded of in James chapter 5 which speaks about the patient where we get the phrase from the patience of Job and that great chapter speaks of his patience but also speaks of the compassion and the mercy of God and I think that's hugely significant as we think about him as well James chapter 5 and verse 10 you've heard of the steadfastness or the patience of Job and you have seen the purpose of the Lord how the Lord is compassionate and merciful so the end game of Job is to expose the compassion and mercy of the living God and the patience that he gave Job to overcome his most trying of circumstances and patience and suffering is the great watchword of Job in many ways it's the willingness to come to the place where we trust

[36 : 01] God despite our circumstances when we are asking no harm in asking the questions why but we take it to the living God we don't grumble at God but we trust him because we know who he is and we're willing to come off the throne of our own lives where we demand to know and we demand to be in control which is one of our biggest challenges isn't it that we want to be in control and we come off the throne and we go on to the altar we become living sacrifices for God and we seek to obey and in obedience and patience faith and patience so often go together don't they because faith requires us to trust in God when we don't understand and we don't necessarily even understand ourselves as we ought but to know that he loves and to know that because of what he has done that we will remember tomorrow personally for each of us

Dorothy Greenwell says these words I am not skilled to understand what God has willed what God has planned I only know at his right hand stands one who is my savior amen let's pray