

God's sovereignty and suffering

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[0 : 00] So the reading is Job chapter 1 on page 498. Job chapter 1.

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all, the people of the East.

His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them.

And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all.

[1 : 12] For Job said, It may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts. Thus Job did continually. Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them.

The Lord said to Satan, From where have you come? Satan answered the Lord and said, From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.

And the Lord said to Satan, Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?

Then Satan answered the Lord and said, Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house, and all that he has on every side?

You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.

[2 : 20] And the Lord said to Satan, Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand. So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house. And there came a messenger to Job and said, The oxen were ploughing, and the donkeys feeding beside them.

And the Sabians fell upon them, and took them, and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword. And I alone have escaped to tell you. While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them.

And I alone have escaped to tell you. While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels, and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword.

And I alone have escaped to tell you. While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house.

[3 : 41] And behold, a great wind came across the wilderness, and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people. And they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you.

Then Job arose and tore his robe, and 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, Job did not sin, or charge God with wrong. Let's pray.

My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul.

Father, we do want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts, that because of Jesus, in Jesus, through Jesus, and his death on the cross for us, it is well with our soul.

[5 : 02] Whatever we're going through, however difficult life is, we thank you that it is well with our soul today, and we look forward to the certain hope of that day when our faith shall be sight in your glorious presence.

And so, Father, as we come to your word, we pray that you would revive our souls, that you would make wise the simple, that you would rejoice our hearts, and that you would enlighten our eyes. Please be with Andy as he speaks to us, and please enable us to listen with humble hearts, and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, Peter's going to come and read, and then Andy's going to speak for us. So it's Romans, chapter 8, page 1137.

Amen. As Phil says, we're on page 1137.

[6 : 16] That's Romans, chapter 8, and we're going to start at verse 18. For I, that's the Apostle Paul speaking, consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subject to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

[7 : 50] And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified.

Thank you, Peter. Hi, my name's Andy, Assistant Minister here at Grace Church.

It's great to see you. Do keep a finger in Romans 8 and turn back to Job chapter 1, because we'll start there, and then we'll come to Romans 8 later on. You should have a handout as well.

[8 : 55] Again, there's lots of Bible passages on there. We're not going to look at all of them, but do feel free, please, to look them up and think about those verses throughout the week.

Job chapter 1. Well, this is our last talk this morning on the topic of God's sovereignty. We've seen that God is in control over everything, the world, human history, human lives.

And then last week, we saw that God is ultimately in control of our salvation. Who is saved? And yet, both weeks, we saw how we make real choices and we are responsible for them.

Well, this week, we approach perhaps the most difficult topic, emotionally speaking anyway, God's sovereignty and suffering and evil. The hard reality is that all we need to do to suffer is to live long enough.

And Christians know that is true as much as anyone else. Poor physical health, poor mental health, unemployment, family tragedy, bereavement, and everything else.

[10 : 02] What we're going to see this morning is not just a dilemma for the armchair philosopher. This is both a universal issue and a personal one. And it raises the question, is God really sovereign?

Is he all-powerful? And if so, is he actually good? Is he good? Is he good all the time? That's the issue, isn't it, really? Maybe that is for us right now as we grapple through this issue.

And we're going to think mainly about two passages. As I said, we're going to look at Job 1 and then Romans 8, which tackle this issue head on. And they give us a vital framework for approaching suffering and evil in the world and in our lives.

So Job, he's a believer, an Old Testament believer. He's upright and blameless. He fears God. He is godly. He is wise. He's a follower of God.

And yet by the end of chapter 2, he's lost everything. He's lost his wealth, his livelihood, his children, his physical and mental health.

[11 : 11] And yet firstly, the story of Job shows us our first point that God is in control. of evil and suffering. God is in control of evil and suffering. In verse 6 of Job 1, we're introduced to what we could call the world's spiritual government.

So we look down at verse 6. Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord and Satan also came among them. So in this meeting of what we might call the heavenly cabinet, and it shows us that God is sovereign in his world.

Because, verse 7, the Lord said to Satan, from where have you come? Satan answered the Lord and said, from going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it.

And notice God is the one who takes initiative in asking Satan what he's been doing. Satan in turn is incountable to God. And then in verse 12, we see how God sets the limits on Satan's power and activity.

So verse 12, And the Lord said to Satan, Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.

[12 : 28] Now there's a lot of dog lovers in the church, so I'm treading carefully here. But when you see people walking dogs, you can often ask, or I find myself asking the question, who's actually in charge?

It can look like the dog, can't it? The dog is always out in front. If it wants to sniff other dogs, the walker has to wait. If the dog does his business, the walker has to pick it up and carry it around in a bag.

Feels quite demeaning, doesn't it? But from another perspective, well it's the walker in charge. They decide when and where they go for a walk and they have the dog on the lead, setting the limits of the dog's activity.

The dog can only go so far and then no further. And that's what God does with Satan. He's essentially saying to him, you may go this far, but no further.

God has got Satan on a lead and he never lets him off for a run around. And you see, God and Satan are not equal and opposite forces. We thought about that in week one.

[13 : 39] God is in charge all the time. And yet, in all this, Job is convinced that God cannot be charged with evil. And so all the things that have happened to Job, we read about them.

he's lost everything. But look how he responds in chapter 1, verse 20 to 22. Then Job arose and tore his robes and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshipped.

And he said, naked I have come 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.

It's interesting, isn't it? Job does half of what we might expect him to do. He tore his clothes, a sign of a deep sorrow and anguish.

And he shaves his head, a biblical sign of mourning and pain. Both expected. He falls on the ground, well you would, wouldn't you? And yet, he worshipped.

[14 : 46] That's not expected really, is it? Although Job, he may have struggled to understand his current situation, well he continued because of his overwhelming belief that God is good all the time.

You see, whilst none of the things would have happened to Job had God not given permission, but that is not the same as saying God directly brings evil and suffering because he doesn't.

God is completely good all the time. That is the consistent message of the book of Job. That is Job's testimony. That is the testimony of the whole Bible as well.

Ecclesiastes 7, 14 says this, in the day of prosperity be joyful and in the day of adversity consider God has made the one as well as the other. Yes, God is in control of the good days and the bad days.

And yet he is 100% good. In Deuteronomy 32, 4, Moses says, the rock, his work is perfect for all his ways are justice, a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

[16 : 08] That is a bit of a head scratcher, I understand that. But the Bible never shows God directly doing evil or taking pleasure in evil.

And because he doesn't stand behind good and evil in the same way, he brings blessing and good, but evil is always a direct cause of someone other than God.

Theologians call this proximate causation, if you want to write that down and do a deep dive into that when you get home. So directly, Judas' betrayal of Jesus is because of his evil heart, not directly the result of God's work, but yet God is in control.

In the story of Joseph that we touched on in week one, God does not sell Joseph into slavery. And the brothers do that directly because of their evil hearts, yet indirectly, God is in control of the whole thing.

Genesis 50, 20, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. Again, this is hard. And as we grapple with this and the presence of suffering and evil in the world and our lives, well, the Bible gives us permission to cry out to God.

[17 : 28] In the Bible, we see people suffering. I was thinking about this. If you look at all the books in the Bible, suffering is everywhere. It's in Genesis, it's in Exodus, people in slavery.

It comes in a lot of Paul's writings, famously in the Gospels with the Lord Jesus. And in the Bible, we see people suffering and looking on at suffering and evil and crying out to God, why?

How long, O Lord? Again, that's the experience of King David in the Psalms. And also the prophet Habakkuk in the Old Testament. He saw evil and injustice and pain all around him and he cried out to God.

Chapter 1, verse 13 on the screen, you who are purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you hardly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

Now it's interesting though, he says the prayer that only someone who believes that God is in control can pray. It's because God is indeed in control of evil and suffering that we can cry out, why Lord?

[18 : 39] If he wasn't, we could cry out and he'd be like, well I'm sorry, I can't do anything about it. I would love to, but my hands are tied. No, we can cry, Lord, I know you hate evil, why aren't you doing something about it?

The Bible gives us permission to cry out to Lord in pain. And God's answer to Habakkuk is partly, wait, I will sort things out in the end. And likewise Christians today, we can wait knowing that God has promised an end to evil and suffering.

At the end of Job, in chapter 42, Job's fortunes are reversed. God gives him twice as many animals as before, and he has more children, and he lives to see his great-grandchildren.

And now God may not provide the same relief to our suffering in this life. But there will come a time when God says he will end all suffering and evil, with Satan destroyed once for all.

Revelation chapter 20 verse 10, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sold for where the beast and the false prophet were, and they were tormented day and night forever and ever.

[20 : 00] Christians, we can rejoice that God is in charge over evil and it will not win. Satan is under control now and he will be utterly defeated and then God will bring in his perfect new world.

That is the big storyline of the Bible. A new perfect world without any evil or suffering. Famous words from Revelation 21, he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. So as we begin to grapple with this issue of God's sovereignty and respond to suffering and evil in our lives and in the world, we can learn from Habakkuk and Job.

We can cry out to God, we can bring our pain to him because he is in control. And yet we are not to blame him for our suffering but trust him and his goodness as we look to the future.

And yet the Bible's answer to this issue of God's control and suffering and evil isn't just bear it and wait. It's not the, well that could be the British stiff upper lip response, can't it?

[21 : 21] Instead the Bible tells us not only that God is in control over evil and suffering, he has a purpose for evil and suffering in the world now.

And that is what we're going to see next. God uses evil and suffering for his good purposes. God uses evil and suffering for his good purposes.

Please turn to Romans 8, 1, 1, 3, 7. Romans 8, verse 28.

And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. For those who are called according to his purpose, for those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

The Bible wants us to see that God's caring, sovereign hand is always at work for the good of his children, even in the midst of suffering.

[22 : 38] And now we don't get a full commentary on what's going on like we'll get in the England game tonight, but we're told that God uses suffering to shape his children. verse 29, to conform us to the image of his son.

And Christians in every generation have found that seasons of hardship tend to be seasons of growth. Perhaps that's been your experience or experience of people close to you. But what kind of growth are we talking about? How does God use the pain? Well, for one thing, God sovereignly uses pain for our good to grow our humility.

To grow our humility. Scan back to verse 23 of Romans 8. And not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit grown inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Nobody likes people who are full of themselves and proud. people who are going to do it. But deep down, don't we all know there's some of that in each of us? Quite often at least.

[23 : 54] Approaching life feeling self-sufficient and not needing God really all that much. And sometimes the only thing that will bring us down to size is real personal suffering.

It doesn't take long for our bodies to go downhill. I did some research and the brain starts aging at 20, muscles at 30, bones start to get worse at 35, and our eyes and heart at 40.

That is not great, is it? As one person close to me says, managing a decline is what life is about. Our bodies are fragile, our muscles strain, our bones break, organs become infected, we suffer physically and mentally.

And the point is not simply that God is still there, even when things are tough. It's also that God uses the pain of suffering, so that we're not full of ourselves, and that we would keep looking to him for strength.

As Paul puts it, that we would carry on groaning inwardly, waiting for the redemption of our bodies. humility is not the only area we need growth in.

[25 : 10] God uses pain to grow our holiness. As we saw that in Romans 8 verse 29, God is conforming us to the image of his son, and perhaps pain is his most effective tool at his disposal.

1 Peter 1 6 and 7 says this, in this you rejoice. Though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes though is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Christ. Well, I think most of us know we have a long way to go when it comes to our holiness. And God says he refines us using suffering.

He chips away at the imperfections to make us more like Jesus. Michelangelo began work on his famous sculpture of David when he was 26.

That puts us to shame, doesn't it? At 26. His raw material was not promising, I read. The block of marble had already been rejected by Donatello, who I thought was another teenage turtle, but he's not.

[26 : 31] They're sculptors. Apparently, they had too many imperfections. But Michelangelo saw what he could make of it, so he set to work.

And for three years, he hammered and chiseled away at this block of marble. And on the 25th of January, 1504, the veil was dropped, to reveal a sculpture that would take away the breath of millions of viewers.

But it could not have been done, could it, without the hard chiseling, that cutting edge of the chisel. And it is the same with God's work on us.

When life is painful, God is using it to sculpt us into the spiritual works of art he plans to make of us, making us more like Jesus.

And then thirdly, in this suffering, it's also God's way of growing us in hope. Romans 8, 23 again, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who are the first fruits of the spirit, grown inwardly as we await eagerly for adoptions of sons, the redemption of our bodies.

[27 : 42] For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes what he sees? But if we hope what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

21st century life is, in the West at least, is perhaps so comfortable that for so many, in so many ways, that we perhaps lost the need, even the ability, to look forward in hope.

But that is not a case of the people around the world in the past. African slaves working in the cotton fields of the American South hadn't lost that hope. They got through each day by reminding each other of the future deliverance.

And in the songs that they sang, for example, swing low, sweet chariot, coming forward to carry me home, sung, looking for that future deliverance.

And suffering Christian believers in every generation have had their focus thrown forward to the future. in the same way, thrown forward to the certain hope of our adoption of sons and daughters in its fullness when Jesus returns and all evil is gone, a complete overthrow, God's perfect new world with perfect new bodies.

[29 : 02] God grows us in hope, in looking to that future through our pain. And lastly, suffering has a crucial part to play in God's good purposes for drawing people to Jesus in the first place.

God uses suffering in people hearing the gospel message. In Luke chapter 13, Jesus speaks to a crowd after a terrible tragedy.

A tower has collapsed, people have died. What does he say about those who have died? Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

No. I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Jesus says that suffering is there to warn us that all is not right in the world.

You may have heard the C.S. Lewis quote about suffering. God whispers to us in our pleasures, he speaks to us in our conscience, but he shouts to us in our pain.

[30 : 05] Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. I think that is the experience of many people. when life is going well, they feel invincible and self-assured.

And it takes things going wrong in life to make people realise just how fragile life is and just how shallow their ambitions are.

Suffering is the acid, as it were, which dissolves some of that armour of invincibility. It's what it takes for many people to wake up to the truth of God's claim upon their lives and their claims of the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps that is some here this morning, if you wouldn't call yourselves a Christian. And we can see something in this, in the war in Ukraine, without doubt an evil action that has had disastrous effects.

And yet baptisms are happening up and down the UK for Ukrainians who have come to faith as refugees. Isn't that amazing? God uses suffering for good, enabling people to hear the gospel.

[31 : 17] So in summary then, where have we been? Well, God is in control of suffering and evil. We can cry out to him. He will end it one day.

And he uses it in our lives as part of his good purposes to make us more like Jesus. And so while we do cry out to him in our pain, when we see evil and suffering in the world, we are to trust that he's using it for good.

And we can show that in how we pray, can't we? It's right that we pray for healing. It's right that we pray for an end to suffering. And yet still through it all, we can still pray that God is in control and he would use it for good.

And to grow our humility, our holiness, our hope for the future, or for people hearing the gospel.

Well, as we close then, our experience of pain is perhaps the most life impacting and gut-wrenching issue to work through in the light of a sovereign God.

We won't always understand it, nor should we be expected to. Because our relationship to God is a little bit like my relationship to my young children.

[32 : 32] often times I'll ask them to do things or to go through things with me that they don't fully understand, that they don't like, or they don't really want to.

And I ask them to do those things, not because I hate them or want a tough time for them, because I love them and I want what's best for them. And I have a level of understanding and knowledge that is above theirs.

And in those moments, I effectively ask them to trust me and to keep going. And on Father's Day, we can look to our Heavenly Father and that great relationship to us as he exercise his sovereignty.

Whilst we might not know all that God is doing when life is hard for us or the people that we love, we can have full confidence that he does, that he is able to get us to that perfect new creation.

He is sovereign, using control of everything and he governs everything for his good, ultimate purpose and for the good of his people.

[33 : 43] Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, as we think about evil and suffering in the world and in our lives, please help us to lean on you, to cry out to you, to trust you.

We won't always know what you are doing, Father, but please help us to trust that you are good all the time. Please help us to grow in our humility, our holiness and our hope for the future, at longing for that day when Jesus returns, evil is overthrown and we can enjoy eternity in your presence as your people in your perfect world.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.