

God's sovereignty and suffering

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[0 : 00] Our first reading this morning is Job chapter 1, which can be found on page 498 in the Church Bibles. 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.

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.

[1 : 31] 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.

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.

[2 : 37] 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 Sabaeans 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, 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.

[4 : 09] 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.

Our second reading is carrying on in Job. So we're on page 499, Job chapter 2, starting at verse 1. Again, there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. And 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? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason. Then Satan answered the Lord and said, Skin for skin, all that a man has he will give for his life. [5 : 30] But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face. And the Lord said to Satan, Behold, he is in your hand, only spare his life.

So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. Then his wife said to him, Do you still hold fast your integrity?

Curse God and die. But he said to her, You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God?

And shall we not receive evil? In all this, Job did not sin with his lips. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

[6 : 41] The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the law are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

Heavenly Father, we pray that as we look at your words this morning, please would you revive our souls, make us who are naturally, spiritually simple, wise, rejoice our hearts, and enlighten our eyes.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, as you know, if you've been following this series of talks in God's sovereignty, the aim of this series is that we'd have a bigger view of God, hence the series title, A Very Big God.

And today we're thinking about God's sovereignty, and suffering, and evil. And I guess the hard reality is that all that needs to happen for us to suffer is that we need to live long enough.

And Christians know that is true as much as anyone else. Poor physical health, poor mental health, unemployment, family tragedy, an ill child, and a happy marriage, bereavement, financial difficulties, midlife, disappointments, all those things, real people suffer.

[8 : 02] John, can I just ask you to open the doors just so we have a bit of a draft that would help me, I think, not to overheat. Real people suffer. Which raises the question, of course, doesn't it, is God really sovereign?

Is God all-powerful? And if he is really sovereign, is he good? I guess that's the real issue, isn't it? The accusation that Stephen Fry so vehemently made earlier on this year in a television interview was what about suffering?

What about evil? If God really is in control, then surely he can't also be good. Now before we get stuck in, I want to give us a second tip for how to listen to these talks.

The first, if you'll remember, was thinking about our posture, not our physical posture. You can slouch for all you like, but our sort of mental and spiritual posture in terms of the way in which we respond to God's words.

It's why, by the way, we haven't had a question time during this series. One or two people have asked about that. And that is because God's sovereignty can throw up all kinds of emotions. And it can be very hard, I think, to ask humble questions.

[9 : 12] Remember Isaiah 45, verse 9, from the first talk, I've stuck it there on the insert, on the outline. Woe to him who strives with him who formed him.

Does the clay say to him who forms it, what are you making? The dangers here of putting God in the dock, putting God on trial. And so the second tip is to listen to these talks prayerfully.

Because once we've grasped that God is sovereign, it should give us great confidence and security. There's much to praise God for. I hope we've seen that over these last few weeks or so. But it may be that along the way, there are also things which leave us confused and upset.

So pray. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Either pray on your own, or pray with someone else over coffee later on in the week.

Just as I trust there will be things where we realize actually how brilliant God's sovereignty is. Again, take it to the Lord in prayer. While we're looking at the book of Job today, it addresses this whole question of suffering head on, not as an armchair observer, so to speak, who asks these questions

in a very kind of academic way, but actually as a real issue.

[10:30] And the book of Job's articulates, and it speaks the words, not the kind of polite words that people speak in church, but actually it knows how people really feel and what people really say.

And it gives us a vital framework for suffering. Have a look at chapter one, verse one. 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.

Job is a believer. He's blameless, he's upright, he fears God, that doesn't mean he's perfect. But he is what we'd call a godly, wise Christian.

And yet by the end of chapter two, he has lost everything. His wealth, his livelihood, his dear children, and his physical and mental health as well.

First of all, the book shows that God is sovereign. Notice in verse six, we're introduced to what we might call the world's spiritual government.

[11:34] Verse six, now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. This is a meeting of what we might call the heavenly cabinet.

And it shows that God is sovereign in his world. Notice in verse seven, God is the one who takes the initiative in asking Satan what he's been doing, and Satan in turn is accountable to God.

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. In verse 12, God sets the limits on Satan's power.

Verse 12, the Lord said to Satan, behold, all that he has is in your hands. Only against him do not stretch out your hands. So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

In chapter two, verse three, God takes full responsibility, notice, for what has happened to Job. I think this is very striking, chapter two, verse three, and the Lord said to Satan, have you considered my servant Job that there is none like him on the earth and a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil?

[12:44] He still holds fast to his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason. Isn't that striking? You see, God doesn't say to Satan, look what you've done to my servant Job.

No, he won't concede an inch of his sovereignty and authority to Satan. God is sovereign. He is behind the pain. He is behind the joys.

Without exception. I put some other verses there on the outline. Ecclesiastes, chapter seven, verse 14. In the day of prosperity, be joyful, and in the day of adversity, consider God has made the one as well as the other.

But you say, is God really solving over everything? What about financial hardship, for example? 1 Samuel, chapter two, verse seven. The Lord makes poor and he makes rich. He brings low and he exalts.

What about drought? Amos 4, seven. I also withheld the rain from you. I would send rain on one city and send no rain on another. Birth defects.

[14:00] Exodus 4, 11. Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Chronic medical conditions.

2 Corinthians 12, verses seven and eight. A thorn was given me in the flesh. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. Infertility.

1 Samuel 1, 5. But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. Now, sadly, people try and explain the existence of suffering in our world in other ways apart from God's sovereignty.

Some say it's because God gave us free will and we make bad decisions. But if our free will overrides God's sovereignty, then God cannot be sovereign, can he?

Others suggest that God doesn't know the future or that he regrets wrong things that have happened. Or he says, I wish I could help you, but I can't help you.

[15:07] The problem is all those things leave us with a God who is limited and with evil in the universe that God does not intend.

There's a story in the paper a couple of weeks ago, you may have seen it, of a man in Bristol who'd received a tax bill from the inland revenue for 14 trillion pounds. I had to sit down and it took me quite a long time to work out exactly what it was.

There were so many figures there, but I have worked that. 14 trillion, 301 billion, 369 million, 864,489 pounds and three pence. Now he was 42 and this guy worked out that on his current salary it would take him 369 million years to pay the tax bill.

Well, how did that happen? Well, presumably not because some kind of enormous thing happens inside the inland revenue. Presumably there's just some tiny little glitch somewhere on a computer program or one person at some stage pressed the wrong key on the keyboard and it had the most enormous consequences for this one man.

The point being, you see, that if God is simply 99% in charge of his world, in other words, almost 100% but not quite 100%, the consequences could be completely disastrous.

[16:35] One small glitch, one tiny thing in the sort of program of the world so to speak, in the computer program, could have enormous consequences. But wonderfully, God is 100% sovereign.

That's what it means to be sovereign. But secondly, Satan is real because the heavenly cabinet meeting also shows the existence of other powers in the universe that shape events including Satan.

Verse 9. 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've 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.

Satan's contention is that Job is simply a fair-weather believer. God has so showered blessings upon him that his worship of God is purely self-interested.

[17:41] I guess it raises the question for us, doesn't it? Do we simply believe in Jesus, those of us who do, when life is going well, when the cupboard is full, when we have happy families, satisfying careers, good health and money in the bank?

Are we merely fair-weather believers? And so God gives Satan terrible permissions. Verse 12, And the Lord said to Satan, Behold, all that he has is in your hands.

Only against him do not stretch out your hands. Now notice, although Satan is real, he is not presented as a second god.

Rather, he is a creature, yes, with remarkable powers, but he can only exercise those powers by divine permission. He is like a dog on a lead, if you like.

And however long the lead is, and perhaps to us sometimes the lead feels very long indeed, nonetheless, it is God's lead. In other words, you see, we don't live in a world where there are sort of two equal and opposite forces, the good of, the force of good, it's God, and the force of evil, Satan, who are sort of battling it out together, and at any one point, no one is really sure which one's going to come out on top.

[19:07] Sometimes you come across Christians and everything that happens to them that's bad, they put down to Satan. So they lose their car keys, they get a cold, they lose their job, and whenever suffering comes along, their response is to drive out evil spirits and pray for deliverance.

But you see, that is a failure to grasp and embrace God's complete sovereignty. And notice too here that although Job's troubles can be attributed to the activity of Satan, they can also be put down to other things as well.

Robbers, freak weather conditions, viruses. The fact is that several secondary causes are often at work in the world while still being overruled by God.

In other words, none of these things would have happened to Job had God not given permission for them to happen. But notice, that is not the same thing as saying that God directly brings about evil and suffering.

He doesn't because God is completely good all of the time. Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 4, his work is perfect for all his ways are justice.

[20:21] A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he. In other words, God is essentially good in his being.

Not most of the time, but all of the time. Which is why the Bible never shows God directly doing evil or directly taking pleasure in evil.

And he is never blamed for evil and suffering. You see, he doesn't stand behind good and evil in the same way. He brings blessing and good, but he's never the perpetrator of evil.

He's never guilty of sin or doing wrong. God is sovereign and he is good. Now, my book recommendation for this week, you'll see if you just flick over the outline for the time being, is Don

Carson's book, *How Long, O Lord?*

And this is precisely the point he makes in his book, that God is sovereign and he is good, and he is sovereign and he is good all the time. And once we've grasped the full extent of the implications of that and of God's sovereignty, then I take it we won't rail against God, nor will we make the mistake of thinking that there are times when Satan gets the upper hand.

[21 : 43] So God is sovereign, Satan is real, thirdly, looking through a keyhole. people. Because you see the danger is that as we experience suffering and hardship ourselves, or as we see suffering and hardship in the lives of others, the great danger is that those circumstances then come to dictate the way in which we view God.

Now that is the wrong way around. Instead you see the way God reveals himself in the Bible should be the thing that detakes the way in which we view our circumstances.

in particular because you and I never see the whole picture. Imagine you want to know what's going on in a room without actually going into the room.

You're inquisitive, you're nosy, whether perhaps it's home or school or work or whatever, and you decide you're going to look through the keyhole. But of course all you're ever going to see is you kind of peer down, look through the keyhole.

All you're ever going to see is partial. There could be someone else in the room who you have no sight of at all. There could be other things happening in the room which you're simply unaware of.

[22 : 52] And because you can't see everything that's happening, you misunderstand what's really happening. You miss out on the big picture. Just like a soldier on a battlefield has no idea of the big picture of the war as a whole.

Indeed, if you read chapters 38 to 40 at the end of the book of Job, do read those chapters later on, God says to Job, don't presume you should know everything that happens in the universe.

And don't presume you should know why it happens. And don't hold me to account by your own limited perspective, your through the keyhole perspective of the world.

God does everything in his world for his own glory.

Even the very worst event of history, the murder of Jesus Christ, all for the glory of God. Yes, there may be times when you get a glimpse of God's purposes.

[24 : 18] Back in the summer, I was hearing about the large number of refugees in Munich, many of them from Muslim backgrounds who have become Christians. At about the same time, the Guardian ran two stories about the number of people from Muslim backgrounds coming to put their trust in Jesus in this country.

Wonderful. But you say, hang on a moment, does that then justify the sheer scale of hardship in terms of the refugee crisis hitting Africa and Europe?

that all we can see is the view through the keyhole. There is so much that we cannot see.

Sometimes we get a glimpse of what is being achieved, sometimes we don't.

And of course the point is that Job is completely unaware of what is going on in the heavenly cabinet meeting. Nor does he need to know because nothing happens that is outside of God's sovereignty.

And that is what explains his wonderful response as he affirms God's goodness at the end of each chapter. Did you notice that at the end of chapter one and at the end of chapter two?

[25 : 28] He affirms God's sovereignty and goodness. Verse 21 of chapter one, 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. And then chapter two verse nine, then his wife said to him, do you still hold fast your integrity?

Curse God and die. But he said to her, you speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God or shall we not receive evil? The word means disaster.

In all this Job did not sin with his lips. sin with sin with sin with sin with sin. Let's think about how we respond to suffering.

Now, we all find suffering hard. That is okay. There's nothing to be gained by being stoic and middle class and pretending that suffering is not hard.

[26 : 32] It is hard. But how should we respond to it? Well, first of all, heed the warning. 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 died? Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

In other words, he says, don't be a Buddhist or a Hindu and assume suffering is deserved. That's the mistake that Job's friends make. They say to Job repeatedly, insistently, Job, the reason you're suffering like this must be because you've done something wrong.

Instead, Jesus continues, no, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Suffering, you see, is there to warn us that all is not right with the world.

Just as when you're bowling down a motorway at 70 miles an hour and there's the overhead sign telling you to slow down because it's an accident, that sign is there, isn't it, as a warning. So you don't just keep on going, oblivious to what the future has in store.

[27 : 41] So says Jesus with suffering. It tells us that all is not well with the world. It's a warning to turn to Jesus in repentance and faith while we still can.

And it may well be there are some here this morning for whom that is precisely the warning that we need to hear. Heed the warning. Secondly, understand the purpose because genuine Christian faith is proven in suffering.

You see, Job shows us how misguided we are if we assume that the wise, godly, Christian believer will not suffer. The New Testament says just the same thing.

1 Peter chapter 1 verses 6 and 7. You have been grieved by various trials so that the tested genuineness of your faith may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The book of Hebrews tells us to regard hostility and hardship as God's loving discipline. Just as a loving parent disciplines their child in love, so our loving heavenly father disciplines his children.

[28 : 58] In other words, if you are willing to suffer as a Christian, if you are willing to suffer for the gospel, you have really turned a corner in your Christian life.

Just as if you've ever had sailing lessons, you'll know that one of the very basic lessons you are taught is how to capsize. What do you say? Hang on a moment. Is that really necessary?

All that getting wet and all that getting cold? Can't I just have sailing lessons without learning to capsize? But you're taught to capsize early on so that the fear of capsizing doesn't hold you back.

In other words, you see, it is vital to making progress. If you're willing to suffer for the gospel, you have turned a corner. If you haven't, then at best you run the risk of being a timid, risk-free Christian.

If I speak out as a Christian, what will my friend think? Is it going to imperil the friendship? What will my colleagues think? Will it imperil my position at work?

[30 : 10] And at worst, a dangerous, unstable Christian, because you won't be able to cope with hardships and difficulties. You'll shake your fist at God. You'll think that God has in some way deserted you.

Indeed, in Galatians chapter six, it's the fear of opposition and persecution that makes false teaching so attractive. Why is it, you see, that so many churches are unwilling to make a stand on the issues of the day?

Well, because they fear opposition from their respectable friends and neighbors. I might say something that those of us who are parents, we need to teach our children this.

If I shield my child from opposition at school or suffering in life, now of course at one level we want to do that, don't we, as parents. It's a very natural thing to do.

But we'll produce children who put popularity before faithfulness to the Lord Jesus, who put safety before taking risks for the Lord Jesus, and comfort before making costly sacrifices for the Lord Jesus.

[31 : 23] It's not just adults who have turned a corner once they are willing to suffer for Christ. It's our children as well. So heed the warning, understand the purpose.

Thirdly, remember the outcome. Because suffering in the Christian life always leads to glory. Turn, will you, to Romans chapter 8. Romans chapter 8, page 1137.

And Romans chapter 8, verse 17. If we are children, that is children of God, then heirs.

Heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him, in order that we may also be glorified with him. As we've seen, suffering is part of God's purposes for the Christian because we are heirs with Christ.

Christ who suffered. So don't fall, you see, for the prosperity gospel, and imagine the Christian life is to be marked by victory, prosperity, fulfillment, satisfaction, and health.

[32 : 43] But Romans 8 assures us of the outcome, end of verse 17, that we may also be glorified with him. Romans 8 is a wonderful chapter.

Do read through it. Here are some highlights. Verse 18, for I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

That's not trivializing suffering, but it is incomparable with the glory of the new creation. 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.

God uses all of life, the good and the bad, for our holiness and godliness. You miss the bus. You're ill-treated at work. You don't get into the sports team or school or university you were hoping for. You lose your job. You break up with someone. All things. And the destination is certain. Verse 31, what then shall we say to these things?

[33 : 51] If God is for us, who can be against us? That is true just as much when life is hard as when life is good. Verse 38, for I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor heights nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's pray. What then shall we say to these things if God is for us? Who can be against us?

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed that you help us to understand the world in which we live.

Thank you that you are sovereign. Thank you for showing us that Satan is real. Thank you for this reminder that we simply look through the keyhole and don't see the big picture.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you help us to be those who understand the purposes of suffering. And so you live in the light of this glorious future.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.