

A Frowning Providence

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[0 : 00] So let's turn back to Job chapter 23 that we read together and we can take as our text verse 10. He knows the way that I take when he has tried me I shall come out as gold.

Now many of you are familiar with the story of John G. Payton and we were speaking about him this morning. When John G. Payton was called to be a missionary in the New Hebrides he was under no illusions of the task that lay ahead of him.

He was a city missionary in the Glasgow City Mission where he faced many challenges and opposition as he spread the gospel in some of the worst areas of Glasgow.

But the New Hebrides was not Glasgow. The first missionaries to land on Erromanga in 1839 within minutes of landing had been clubbed to death and their flesh eaten.

But 20 years later, 19 years later in March 1858 John G. Payton sailed for the island of Tanna in the New Hebrides.

[1 : 21] And if you read his autobiography he describes graphically how he set up home on that island in the midst of barbaric practices, death all around him.

Whenever the weather changed the natives would blame John G. Payton and his God and he would get the blame for everything that happened. And eight months later in November 1858 John G. Payton brought his young wife Mary Ann Robson out to that island of Tanna.

For three months all went well. They were happy and they were healthy as they set up home together. But in February 1859 Mary Ann became ill with a fever and she developed pneumonia and she died a month later.

As if that wasn't bad enough, just a week earlier she had given birth to their first son Peter Robert Robson who died a week later. John G. Payton found himself bereaved and bereft in a hostile country where he was seeking to follow the will of God.

He buried his wife and little son at the end of his house in Tanna and he was a frequent visitor to their grave. And Payton says in his autobiography, Whenever Tanna turns to the Lord and is one for Christ, men in after days will find the memory of that spot still green, where with ceaseless prayers and tears I claimed that land for the God in which I had buried my dead with faith and hope.

[3 : 18] But for Jesus and for the fellowship he vouchsafed me there, I must have gone mad and died beside that lonely grave.

Why did the Lord call John G. Payton to the New Hebrides and allow that tragedy to happen? Why does God allow so many dark providences to come into the experience of a Christian?

Often Christians who are faithful and Christians who are fruitful. Well it was a question that Job asked many times.

Why sometimes is there a crook in our lot? We know that Thomas Boston preached those famous sermons from Ecclesiastes chapter 7 verse 13 and he entitled them, The Crook in the Lot.

Consider the work of God. Who can make that straight which he has made crooked? Why does God sometimes afflict the most faithful, the most fruitful and the most effective Christians?

[4 : 32] Well this is the story of Job. We know the spiritual reality behind Job because we have read Job chapters 1 and 2.

The story of Job is remarkable enough but we read in chapter 1 of Job that it was God himself who initiated Job's suffering.

It was Job, it was God that initiated the suffering. He allowed the devil to attack Job but God put forward Job for testing.

The devil asked, Does he fear God for no reason? Stretch out your hand and touch all that he has and he will curse you to your face.

The Lord permits Job to be attacked relentlessly. His flocks are attacked. His business is taken away.

[5 : 42] His family are killed. And finally we read that Job was struck with loathsome sores. As if that wasn't bad enough we read in the following chapters that his three friends then try and create this fantasy life that he had.

This life that he was supposed to have committed all these terrible and wicked things that weren't actually real. And these conversations go backwards and forth, back and forth throughout the whole of the book of Job.

His friends are trying to apply the theology of Luke chapter 13, the theology that we hear still today. That passage where Christ had to deal with people who said that those Galileans were killed.

And those people on the Tower of Siloam, those 18 people were killed. And they say to Jesus, Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

Jesus said, No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. There's a theology that has infected the church over many, many centuries that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people.

[7 : 11] And of course that theology is far from biblical. Very often dark providences happen to good people.

Very often the worst people seem to live trouble-free lives and have trouble-free deaths. The Bible makes it very clear as Christians, contrary to so much of what is taught today, that we can expect sufferings and trials in this life.

It says in Acts 14.22 that through much tribulation we will enter the kingdom of God. Jesus says in John 16 that in this world we will have tribulation.

The idea of a health and wealth and prosperity gospel is absolutely alien to the Old and to the New Testament. That word tribulation literally means to press.

The imagery is of pressing grapes or pressing olives in a press. That sense that all of us at times in our lives will experience the crushing of dark providences.

[8 : 27] But tonight what we want to do is to look how Job responds to his trials and to his sufferings to see what we can learn for ourselves. And we see first of all that Job seeks.

We see in verse 1 and verse 2 that Job has a bitter complaint. He is weighed down by God's dealings with him.

My hand is heavy on account of my groaning. Literally it means that his hand is heavy. He can't do what he wants to do because he is so overwhelmed by the providences of God.

It's interesting in the book of Job that God never rebukes Job for crying out in his distress.

Back in chapter 7 verse 11. Job says, Everything tastes bitter to Job at the moment.

[9 : 43] He is distressed and he is downcast. But at no point does God discourage him in his cries of distress. As you well know if we go through the Psalms we see time and time again in the Psalms just as we've been singing the distress of the Psalmist.

God encourages us to cry out in our distress to him. But we read this amazing cry of Job in verse 3.

Oh that I knew where I might find him. That I might come even to his seat. Oh that I knew where I might find him.

This phrase, Oh that I, Oh that is used in Job more than in any other book of the Bible. We see it back in chapter 6.

Verse 8. Oh that I might have my request. And that God would fulfill my hope. And that it would please God to crush me. That he would let loose his hand and cut me off.

[10 : 53] Again in verse 14. So chapter 14 verse 13 we read it. Oh that you would hide me in shawl.

That you would conceal me until your wrath be passed. That you would appoint me a set time and remember me. And again in chapter 19 verse 23 we have it again.

Oh that my words were written. Oh that they were inscribed in a book. Oh that with an iron pen and lead. They were engraved in the rock forever. This crying out of his soul.

Oh that I knew where I might find him. He longs to meet with God. To find answers to his crushing. To his grief. He wants to find God's seat.

Literally God's dwelling place. Or God's fixed place of dwelling. If he could just find God. It would be enough for him. It reminds us of Philip in John 14.

[11 : 54] Lord show us the Father. Father and it is enough for us. If Job could just find God. It would be enough for him. And we see that even in the darkness.

Job is searching and seeking in the right place. But we also see under this heading of Job 6. That Job lays out his arguments. I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.

I would know what he would answer me. And understand what he would say to me. Job is rehearsing what he would say to God if he could find God. He would lay out his arguments.

He would lay out his case before him. And one of the most incredible things about Job that we see time and time again.

Is we see these words in verse 6. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No. He would pay attention to me.

[12 : 55] Or as the authorised version has it. Put strength in me. What on earth does that mean in the context of Job? Well we must always remember when we're reading the Bible.

That the gospel did not begin in Bethlehem. And the gospel did not begin in Calvary. The gospel began in the Garden of Eden. There was grace in the Garden.

You remember that God said that he would crush the head of the serpent through the offspring of Eve in the Garden of Eden. And if Job was a spiritual man as we believe that he was, he would have had some understanding of the coming redemption of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have these remarkable words in chapter 19 verse 20-25. For I know that my Redeemer lives. And at the last he will stand upon the earth.

And after my skin has been destroyed. Yet in my flesh I shall see God. What can that mean but a prophecy of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ?

[14 : 09] In a very rudimentary way. Job is saying here. That when he stands before God, God will not destroy him. Based on the faith that he has in the coming Redeemer.

Job, by faith, has some sense that he can stand before a holy God and be justified. Job seeks God because he knows that in God there is grace and there is mercy.

He doesn't understand the doctrine of justification as we understand it. He doesn't understand the doctrine of Christ. But he understands that there is grace and mercy in God.

So we see that even in the darkness Job seeks. But then secondly we see that Job knows. Job believes that even in the darkness that God is at work.

When we are going through suffering. When we are going through trials. We have a sense of darkness. We have a sense of confusion. We feel our faith slipping.

[15 : 29] We say, what is God doing in the midst of this? Why is God afflicting me? How can God, a God of love, do this to me? And you see the problem is that Job, the problem for Job is that God is invisible.

He can't see him. He can't feel him. And he can't touch him. He goes forward and he is not there. He goes backward but I do not perceive him.

On the left hand when he is working I do not behold him. He turns to the right hand but I do not see him. Now as you probably know these words are traditionally spoken from the point of a compass.

When people are facing eastwards. And traditionally the Jews believed that the city of Zion was in the north. So if somebody is facing eastwards.

They say that God is at work on their left hand. And that's what Job means. And again remarkably by faith we can see that in the darkness and in the confusion and in his bitterness under the trial of God.

[16 : 45] Job is able by faith to see that God is at work in the darkness. God is at work in his left hand. God is at work in the darkness.

God is at work in the darkness. But the greatest comfort for Job comes in verse 10. But he knows the way that I take.

When he has tried me I shall come out as gold. as gold. I wonder if there are any more comforting words in the Bible when we are going through suffering and trial and tragedy than the words, but he knows the way that I take. Job knows that God knows and that is enough for Job. Job knows that God knows and that is enough for Job. The incredible thing for us as we look back with New Testament eyes is that we know that God is not some remote deity. He is not some distant, unfeeling God because this God has now walked this earth and he has been touched with a feeling of our infirmity and as we were praying earlier on, everything that you feel, everything that you experience. Whether it be sadness or loneliness or disappointment or rejection or betrayal, if you feel judged, if you feel misunderstood, Jesus has been there before you and Jesus has experienced it. That's why we read in Hebrews 4, for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. What gives us confidence to go to the throne of grace?

Jesus. To help in time of need is because Jesus is able to sympathize with your weakness tonight. He is touched with a feeling of your infirmity. Jesus is the suffering servant who knows what we are going through and unlike perhaps many people that we feel around us, he cares for what we are going through. When we've been going through difficult times, sometimes somebody will send us a card to say, we are thinking of you, we know what you're going through and we're praying for you. And you know how much that means to you, to get that card or that text or that letter. And what a comfort tonight to know that God knows what we are going through. He knows the what and he knows the why.

But we're also told in verse 10 that there is a purpose to our sufferings. He says that when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold. God is refining us.

[20 : 22] He is testing the genuineness of our faith in times of suffering. We see this, of course, in the life of Abraham, don't we? He was a man of faith, but yet he was tested and he was tried.

He left Ur of the Chaldees in faith. He was promised a land. He was promised an heir. He gets impatient. He tries to bring things about by himself through Hagar. Ishmael is born.

He has to wait another 11 years before his heir is born in Isaac. And then what does God do? God says, I want you to sacrifice Isaac.

Again and again, Abraham is tested and tried. And what does God say when he offers up Isaac? Now I know that you fear God.

Now I know that your faith is genuine. Trials test our faith. That's what Peter means when he says, In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary.

[21 : 40] You have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Isn't it amazing that in the midst of all the suffering that we experience in this world, that God, in the midst of all that confusion and darkness and suffering, God is producing gold in his people.

As John Flavel said, Oh, the blessed chemistry of heaven to extract such mercies out of such misery. One of the old hymns says, When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace all sufficient shall be thy supply.

The flame shall not hurt them, I only design, they dross to consume, and thy gold to refine. We've seen that Job seeks, that Job knows, but then thirdly and lastly, we see that Job rests.

Where do we find Job in the midst of all these trials and all this pressure and all this bitterness? Well, we see in these final verses of this chapter, we see that Job is in the path of obedience.

[23 : 14] My foot has held fast to his steps. I have kept his way and have not turned aside. I have not departed from the commandment of his lips. I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.

Job rests in the path of obedience. He remains steadfast. His foot has held fast to his steps.

He remains single-hearted. I have kept his way and have not turned aside. And he remains grounded in the word of God. I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.

When sufferings come our way, we want to run, we want to hide. But God calls us through Job to be steadfast.

Keep to the path of obedience and remain grounded in the word of God. That's what Job did. He treasured the words of God more than his own food.

[24 : 21] And that's where we must be in times of sufferings. We must cling to the promises of God. When Murdoch Campbell lost his wife in his book, In All the Reflections, he was overheard in prayer the night that his wife died.

He said, he was overheard saying this, If an angel from heaven told me that this would work for my good, I would not believe him. But because the word says it, I must believe it.

When we are feeling crushed by our sufferings, we must cling to the promises of the word of God. And that's, of course, what it says in the last chapter of James, where we have a testimony of the steadfastness of Job.

Behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Job's great legacy was his steadfastness in suffering. That's in James 5, verse 11. Job is in deep distress.

[25 : 38] He seeks for God. He knows that God knows what he's going through, and he will bring good out of the situation. But in these very final few verses, what we see is that Job rests in the sovereignty of God.

But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. It's one thing to walk the path of obedience.

It's one thing to have a clear conscience. But Job understands that God is unchangeable. He understands that he is suffering because of the sovereignty of God, and he acknowledges that there are many more sufferings to come, that God is not going to change his mind about the sufferings that he is going through.

Job sees that God has appointed these sufferings for a purpose. And what we see in these final few verses is the fear of God coming over Job.

Therefore, I am terrified at his presence when I consider I am in dread of him. There's a real fear in Job in the way that God is dealing with him.

[27 : 07] God's dealings have unsettled Job as suffering so often unsettles us. But they have also led to a change of heart. I don't think the ESV translation is very good here, but this is what the AV says in verses 16 and 17.

For God maketh my heart soft, and the Almighty troubleth me, because I was not cut off before the darkness, neither hath he covered the darkness from my face.

I think it brings out the sense that the sufferings have softened Job's heart and the sense that he was not cut off before the darkness.

He is thanking God that God has not cut him off completely. And he is resting in God's sovereignty and in God's providence.

So what can we say by way of conclusion tonight? We have seen that Job seeks, that Job knows, and that Job rests.

[28 : 17] None of us like suffering. None of us like hard providences. But as we can see from the book of Job, sufferings are sometimes part of God's sovereign plan for his people.

What is our comfort in dark providences? Well, we can take some comfort that God has a purpose in suffering.

Suffering is not some random act, but it is in the providence of God. We think of some biblical examples, we can think of Joseph.

We can think of all that Job experienced at the hands of his brothers. And as he came towards the end of that suffering, as he met them in Egypt, what did he say?

But as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. In order to bring it about as it is this day, to save people alive.

[29 : 24] Joseph saw the hand of God in his many sufferings. What did Job say back in chapter 1? Did he blame the Chaldeans and the Sabeans for all his sufferings?

Who had taken away his camels and his sheep? No, he says, the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. He saw the Lord's hand in the suffering. There are no easy answers with regard to dark providences, and we should never pretend that we have easy answers.

But there is some comfort to know that there is a purpose in our suffering. God's love. It's all in the secret plan of God.

And when he has tried me, I will come forth as gold. And then I think the second thing we can say just by way of application is that God is with us in our sufferings.

[30 : 36] Ralph Erskine said, Every work of Christ towards his people carries something more great and precious in the bosom of it than we are capable at the time of understanding.

We do not know what God is doing in dark providences, but we trust that he is doing much more than we can understand at the time of these events.

But the great comfort for us is that God is with us in these dark providences. Even at our left hand, God is working very often in the darkness.

We cannot understand it, but we know that he is doing a great work. He comforts us. He strengthens us. Every tear is in his bottle.

He sees every toss and turn when we can't get to sleep. As William Cowper said, ye fearful saints, fresh courage take. The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head.

[31 : 49] When we are in darkness, our faith must be in the promises of God. Yes, we experience many dark providences in this life, but behind the dark providences are the smiling face of God, working for his glory and for our good.

God's love is not ultimately to be measured in outward providences, but by his promises. As Spurgeon said, when we cannot trace God's hand, we can trust God's heart.

And the great comfort tonight, friends, whatever you're going through, is that he knows the way that you take. He sees you, he loves you, and he will be with you in every trial.

Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the furnace. What did King Nebuchadnezzar say? But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt, and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.

Whatever furnace you are going through at this time, Christ is with you in that furnace. He is leading you, and he is guiding you, and he knows the way that you take, and when you come out, you will come out as gold.

[33 : 15] Let's pray. Our gracious God, we thank you for the practical nature of your word. Lord, thank you Lord, that you do not promise that we will go through this life without trials and tribulations and dark providences.

We thank you, O God, for the great, great comfort tonight, that you know the way that we take, and that when we come out, we will be tried as gold.

We pray that, Lord, you would humble us under your mighty hand, that, Lord, you would comfort those of us who are going through dark providences at this time, that you would comfort those of us who have been bereaved, and that you would bless those of us who are experiencing things that perhaps none of us know about.

Well, gracious God, bless your word to us, we pray. Help us, Lord, when we cannot see your hand, to trust your heart, and help us, O Lord, to cling to those precious promises of your word.

Hear our prayers, in Christ's name. Amen.