

In Touch With Suffering

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[0 : 00] Our God and Father, we thank you very much for the privilege it is to be here with one another, to hear your scriptures read, and to know that by your grace this is a company of your Holy Spirit, and it is your purpose to take your word and by your Holy Spirit apply it to our hearts and lives.

So grant that our hearts may be open to your word, and that your word may be open to our understanding. In Christ's name, amen.

I had a very blissful week this week, in the expectation that I wasn't preaching this morning, and I got home and found I was.

So the best thing I can do is to share with you something of the Book of Job, which we spent the week on in the conference I was at in Magnetawan, north of Huntsville in Ontario, with a group of people who call themselves the Graduate Fellowship, and they have a summer camp every year, and they invited me down to speak to them.

So I went down and talked to them all week about the Book of Job. And now I'm so excited by it that I would like any of you who would like to arrange a conference for a weekend or anything and would like to hear all about Job, feel free, and I'd like to come and talk about it, anybody who wants to hear or talk with you about it.

[1 : 57] Very interesting was while I was talking about Job all week, I met and got to know some people.

And I want to give you just a kind of quick picture of some of the people I met. I met a wonderful research scientist, a young woman from New York City with a Brooklyn accent.

It's wonderful to meet a Christian with a Brooklyn accent. But anyway, she grew up and had a very vibrant faith when she was in high school and in university.

And she went on to grad school, graduated from grad school, and was destined, as she thought, to be single the whole of her life. And then after she thought it wasn't going to happen, it did happen, and she was married in an interracial marriage, so that she has a beautiful black daughter of ten who has at least a hundred braids on her head, which she says her grandmother puts in for her, and it takes two and a half hours.

But the mother looks out on the street where they live in New York and sees children the age of her children running the streets and living off the streets, and she finds it very difficult, and very difficult to reconcile her faith in God as an adult with the suffering she sees in the world in which she lives.

[4 : 00] Then I met a charming lady, divorced, two children, and she has recently contracted a kind of lingering, long-term, chronic illness, which has robbed her of most of her energy and vitality.

She has wonderful gifts, a deep sense of not loving God enough, and looking very much for a church in which she can find a kind of fellowship with people who also have a deep sense of wanting to give expression to the love they have for God.

Another beautiful lady who was there, she's one of these people who is busting with imagination and creative ability.

She has three children. She, too, is divorced. She spends virtually 24 hours a day making a life for her 16-year-old Down syndrome child with leukemia.

Now, that was very moving to meet them and to see them through the week. That child being probably by far the most memorable person I met, though I had known her all her life, but it was interesting to see her again.

[5 : 50] I met the wife of a successful doctor, the wife who is in her third year of psychotherapy because of depression and because of the problems of her life.

The idyllic setting of three beautiful children, a successful husband, and she on the point of despair. And the husband who has come to the conclusion that he doesn't need God, and she wondering whether she does and whether it would make any difference.

And so you could, in that kind of suffering, which is so invisible on first meeting somebody, and yet run so deeply through the whole of her life.

I met a former airline stewardess, now with three grown children. She, too, has been divorced. And in the past year, the eldest of her three children has been involved in an accident so that he is now a paraplegic.

And she says, that's not so bad. The thing that really is hard is that he has joined one of the cults and has been cut off from his family and from everybody by the perniciousness of this cult to which he's made a commitment which seems to be stronger than any other commitment in his life.

[7 : 28] And then I met a lovely, gracious nurse who has three small children, an interracial marriage, which is now broken down.

And she's left with three children under 11, the oldest of whom is autistic. And that child depends on her 24 hours a day.

And her whole life is totally consumed in the care of those three children. I met a very successful lawyer who's a senior partner in his firm.

He has four children and a very successful practice. But in his heart, he wants to go into the ministry and leave law.

Strange longing for someone who has done so well. You may observe, if you listen carefully, that most of the people I met are women.

[8 : 43] I mean, that I've mentioned here, that wasn't true of the camp, but it was easy. You could become aware of it very easily.

But behind all those women, I think there were some men who, some of whom I know, and not all of them, men who were locked into themselves, suffering acutely because they won't admit that they're suffering at all.

And that they are in charge and in control of the world in which they live and are making it work the way they want to make it work and are getting out of life what they want to get out of life.

And so, the acuteness of their suffering, I think, is because they won't admit it's there. and that's not unusual.

So, if you take these people and while I'm telling you this about them, I know that you could multiply those stories a hundred times by looking at the people in this congregation this morning that part of the cultural conditioning we have in our society is that when you come to church you don't let that show.

[10 : 19] And, so sometimes it's, so it's easier to talk about the people who are on the other side of the country than perhaps to know too well and too closely the people among whom and with whom we live.

But what I'd like you to do now is to take these people and send them to a church like the church or community company of counselors among whom the story of Job unfolds.

What would they find? what basically they would find is the question of a world which is full to overflowing with unintelligible suffering.

When I say unintelligible suffering, I mean it's the kind of suffering when it touches you or touches somebody who is meaningful to you, you say why does God allow this to happen?

In a world which God has created surely everything that happens in it should be understandable, should be intelligible in the light of an almighty God.

[11 : 52] And so that's that is Job's question. What do you do in a world that is full of unintelligible suffering?

And then when you go to this church and you feel deeply this suffering and you go to the church and the church says to you the reason you're suffering of course is because you have sinned and if you will only confess your sins you will be forgiven and the suffering will be over.

That's exactly the advice that was given to Job that Job would not confess the sin in his life God could not forgive him and the fact that he was sitting there in a body covered with sores a family that had been destroyed a fortune that had been wasted that all that had happened to him and when he went for the counselors the counselors said to him Job whatever whatever you have whatever you are experiencing you are experiencing because you deserve to if you will only confess that then

you'll be forgiven everything will be alright again that was the church that Job went to and the message that he got and Job said that is not what I want to hear that is not what I am prepared to believe and he could have gone on to say to that church as it were your answers are very true but your understanding of my situation is entirely false and that's the agony of the book of Job that the church was giving to him

I am just using it as a kind of picture of Job saying God will forgive you if you will only admit that it is your fault and the longing which surges close to the surface is that Job says I deserve a better deal from God and he ignores me I am going to run my own life my own way well that's the conclusion that a lot of people have come to after being to church that the prescription the church has doesn't fit the illness that they're suffering from and so you get close to the heart of what

Job is about the crux of the book of Job is in a very familiar verse you know and this is it seems to me extremely powerful Job has brought to him from all corners of his world the news of the destruction of his cattle the destruction of his property the destruction of his family everything is taken away from him Job stands up having received that nose and he takes his robe and tears it with his hand he shaves his head and he falls on his face and worships God very strange reaction and he says naked I came from my mother's womb and naked

[16:14] I will return the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away cursed be the name of the Lord you know that it doesn't say that it says blessed be the name of the Lord you see that we live in a world which when it faces the experience which Job faced which I am describing as unintelligible suffering it turns and curses God and says if that's the way you're going to treat us if that's the way you're going to treat me I want nothing more to do with you now of course that's what the book is about because when

Satan went to the Lord and the Lord said to him have you regarded my servant Job the Lord said or Satan said you may think Job is your servant but take away what he has and see what he does when you take it away he will curse you to your face he is only yours because you look after him and you provide for him and you've given him all that he has he knows he has to stay in relationship to you but take it away and watch what happens and the Lord said to Satan okay take it away Satan went to work and reduced Job to the very unhappy state in which you find him at the end of chapter 3 and

Satan's bet is that in those circumstances Job will say we'll curse God and his wife helps by suggesting that very thing to him but you see that is what is put before us very clearly in the book of Job and which seems to me to be an indictment of our whole generation at the point at which you experience the unintelligible burden of suffering which is placed on the shoulders of humanity what are you going to do are you going to say I cannot serve a God who could allow that to happen well that's what

Job certainly was tempted to do and and it's like this it's it's as simple as this when you have lost every human reason to worship God will you continue to worship God Job in the end says yes I am why does he say it he says it because there is nothing else he can do there is nothing else he can find there is no other place to turn he has got to do it he is compelled to do it as the Lord speaks to him and explains to him Job if you want to be God step right up and take charge can you do it and

Job recognizes that he can and that all he can do is to continue to put his trust and faith in the God of creation and the God of redemption and that's I think the point when you experience personally and accept the burden of the unintelligible world of human suffering you curse God or you bless him and that's your faith is based on what you do at that point you are brought to the point which in the whole history of humankind comes to a towering crescendo when

[21:40] Jesus Christ himself comes to that point and sees that obedience in faith to and trust of God means the cross and he shares the agony of everybody who encounters unintelligible suffering by crying out in prayer let this cup pass from me nevertheless not my will but your will be done one of the really poignant things about this past week for me was the number of people that said I wish I could find a church I wish

I could find a small fellowship of people among whom and with whom I could pray and could study and could find that faith and they're not finding me and it made me long very much that if people like that came here to this congregation and among these people among you that they would indeed find it and what would they find they would find as I would hope and pray they would find people who were deeply in touch with the reality of unintelligible suffering in their own lives to beginning but

also in the lives of other people around them like that mother from New York City who saw her own child and she loved very much but a dozen just like her outside on the street and she felt the burden of the suffering of those children but to find a church of people not a group of people who are thinking that as long as they were good and worked hard and did the right thing that God would bless them the people who at the bottom line recognize the pervasive reality of unintelligible suffering and being wide open to it and compassionate towards it and feeling the dimensions of it personally in their own lives would say would like

Job perhaps in their grief tear their robe would perhaps shave their heads they fall down on the ground and say I brought nothing into this world I know that I'm going to take nothing out I know that the Lord gives and I know that the Lord takes blessed be the name of the Lord in Him I will put my trust the tragedy of our world is so many people who have come to that point and said move over God I'm going to run this world my way at least my way and that isn't unintelligible tragedy that follows that that's highly predictable but in the tragedy of those who experience the unintelligible sufferings of our world to be given grace to see that God is still in control and God is to be deeply trusted and our faith is to be put unconditionally in Him and we come to the recognition which Peter came to when Jesus said to him will you go away and Peter said there is no place to go the only possibility for human life is a willingness a trust the God who has created us and the God who has redeemed us and Job discovered that and when he discovered it he repented in dust and ashes recognizing his own unworthiness that was the moment he came to and I think for all of us that's the moment we must come to and see it's simply the recognition that God is God and way back in the beginning of Job and this

I'm concluding but in the beginning in chapter 19 of Job you get that wonderful statement where he recognizes that ultimately God will provide himself with a vindicator someone who will vindicate God's purpose in the midst of a suffering world and Job expressed that faith in words which you all know and he said the worms destroy this flesh yet I know that in my flesh I will see God I know that my Redeemer lives and that that was that was Job's faith and that's the faith to which we are called as Christians in a world that has so much unintelligible suffering a world which is choked full of people saying why does this happen to me or why does this happen and we are given a grace to respond as Job responded to say in a world like this

[29 : 09] I choose to believe God and I know that my Redeemer lives Amen