

Job 23

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[0:00] So if you've got a Bible with you, you could turn to Job 23 and 24. It's quite a lot of text and it'll help you track along with what I'm saying. One small note to be aware of, Marian read from the ESV, which typically we do at St. John's.

I'm going to be reading from the NIV. I think in particular it does the best job with the Hebrew. And in the last few verses, 24, 18 to 25, better than the ESV significantly, but we'll get to that when we get to that.

So if you're just wondering why there's a discrepancy between what you see on the page and what I'm saying, that's where it's coming from. So on the radio last week, there was a local program where they were interviewing people who had experienced different effects of COVID.

And one woman in particular was being interviewed. And she was detailing all of the unexpected side effects. She had contracted it and it had been confirmed with testing.

And for a long period after that viral infection, she had all sorts of other things go wrong in her life.

[1:16] It was quite interesting to see all of the suffering that she laid out. And what was most striking about the interview was that she was looking for answers and she was looking for hope.

She was airing her grievances and then saying, you know, the government needs to really step up. There ought to be vaccines rolled out more quickly. Medical care should be better. Here I am in pain.

What are you going to do about it? Now in suffering, it reveals that there is a great deal we are not in control of. And the question is, who do we turn to? What do we do with our suffering?

Now our portion of scripture for today, Job 23 and 24, it comes to address that question. This passage is the third stop in our six weeks through our tour of the book of Job.

In case you missed the last couple of weeks or in case your memory is a bit fuzzy, we'll do a quick recap of the story. Now in week one, the first three chapters of the book were introduced to Job.

[2:13] He's a blameless and upright man. He lives in the fear of the Lord. Satan comes along and he's upset with the relationship God and Job have. So he tries to drive a wedge between the two of them.

And he does this by accusing Job of being an opportunist. Job, Satan says to God, he only loves you because you've given him a good life.

If you strip all that away, Job will surely abandon you. Now the underlying perspective of the accuser and the great temptation within the book is that each of us only have our own interests at heart.

I'm at the center of my life. You're at the center of your life. We're all fundamentally selfish. And you can only ever care about someone for the things they give you. Which means that if you think God exists, he only figures into it because he's the most powerful.

If he doesn't give you what you want, forget him. Find another God. So God takes Satan up on this wager. He allows Satan to inflict terrible suffering on Job.

[3 : 21] He loses possessions, then children, then his health. His wife abandons him and tells him to just curse God and be done with his life. His friends come onto the scene.

They're supposed to comfort him, give him strength, but they end up being the exact opposite. Uttering lies very similar to what Satan was insinuating in the heavenly council. And that brings us to the sermon from last week.

Chapter 22. One of Job's friends, Eliphaz, he says to Job, You're getting exactly what you deserve. Your evil is abundant. And because he doesn't know of any specific sins that Job has committed, he makes up a laundry list of injustices and drops them all on Job.

Now the reason Eliphaz can say such insensitive things, such false things, to his supposed friend, is because of the way he views God. He thinks, since God is all-powerful, since God is just, since suffering is punishment for injustice, that means Job's suffering is punishment and Job must have sinned.

Eliphaz sees God as some kind of mechanism in the universe. You do good, you get good. You do bad, you get bad. If you're getting bad, you must have done bad. So Eliphaz counsels Job 22, 21, Agree with God and be at peace, thereby good will come to you.

[4 : 48] And on the surface, that sounds pretty pious. But at the heart of this advice is the exact same perspective as Satan. Eliphaz wants to have the good life, and you get there by doing good things, which means that at the end of the day, you're still in the driver's seat, in control of your own destiny.

Now the problem of the book, as we know, is that Job is an upright man. He hasn't done any of the things he's being accused of. So as we drop into the conversation, in chapter 23 for today, at the very start, in his own reply, then Job replied, he asserts his innocence.

Job says to Eliphaz, I haven't sinned. He is confident that if he could only have an audience with God, he would, in the words of verse 7, be acquitted forever by my judge.

Be delivered forever by my judge. Job's friends have piled on the accusations, and Job replies by saying, I really wish I could bring my case before the Lord.

Surely he would listen to me and find me right. I know I don't deserve this suffering. And Job is right about that. As we learn at the start of the book, he has not done anything to merit his suffering.

[6 : 14] But the bigger struggle for Job in this present moment is that he doesn't seem to have the audience with God. He desires. And it takes us to the heart of Job's speeches, the heart of this speech in these two chapters.

One of the big questions in the book of Job is, why am I suffering? What's the purpose of senseless, incomprehensible suffering? But there's another question very closely related to it.

It comes into sharp focus in this passage in particular. Where is God in the midst of suffering? It's the relational question.

Job begins to describe it quite movingly in verses 8 and 9 of chapter 23. This is the language of the Psalms of lament. When we cry out in our suffering with words like those of Psalm 13, How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? And these first nine verses of Job 23 highlight an uncomfortable but important truth. When we suffer, it can often feel as though God is absent.

[7 : 26] If I go to the east, he is not there. If I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him. When he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.

And that can be even more painful than the suffering itself. C.S. Lewis, in his book, *A Grief Observed*, reflects on the death of his wife, Helen, in this way.

Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing him, so happy you are tempted to feel his claims upon you as interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be, or so it feels, welcomed with open arms.

But go to him when your need is desperate. When all other help is vain, what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting, and double bolting on the inside.

After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.

[8 : 48] There are no lights in the windows, it might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once, and that seeming was as strong as this seeming.

What can this mean? Why is he so present a commander in our time of prosperity, and so very absent a help in time of trouble? Now if, or when this happens to us, like Job, in chapters 23 and 24, we need to remember a few things.

Now the first thing to remember, which is driven home so strikingly in these opening verses, is that when we hurt, we need to call out to God and ask for his justice and his presence.

There is a form of religion which stresses God's sovereignty so much, we end up hardening our hearts and pretending it doesn't hurt. Because of that, we are unable to bring our hurt to God because we think he doesn't care.

D.S. Lewis again, shortly after that, puts it this way, it's not that I am in danger so much of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him.

[10 : 11] The conclusion I dread is not, so there's no God after all, but, so this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.

This is Bildad's conclusion in chapter 25, immediately after our passage. Job finishes speaking, and he says, Dominion and awe belong to God.

He establishes order in the heights of heaven. Can his forces be numbered? On whom does his light not rise? How then can a mortal be righteous before God?

How can one born of woman be pure? Even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his eyes. How much less a mortal who is but a maggot? A human being who is only a worm.

But you, I, we, are not maggots. We are human beings made in the image of God.

[11 : 15] God. And when we suffer, you suffer, when I suffer, God's good creation is being disfigured.

God cares. God loves you. When you suffer, cry out to him. Suffering does not mean God is against you.

God. And that's the first lesson of our passage for today. Now the second lesson comes in the verses immediately following Job's opening complaint.

We get this remarkable pivot in verse 10. Job says, I don't know where God is, but he knows the way that I take.

When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold. Job has no idea where God is. He cannot feel him. He's in misery with three accusers sitting at the city dump.

[12 : 17] And then he says, but I know the, but I know he knows the way that I take. He knows that God knows his coming and his going and is with him all the time.

Though it might feel as though God is absent, that his presence has withdrawn, he is not. It would be very easy, I think, to insert the words of Psalm 139 here into Job's speech.

It's such a strikingly beautiful confession of faith and God's faithfulness. And it's not just that Job knows that God knows his path and is with him in it, but he also, in a way, recognizes he's being tested and that the testing is for his blessing in order to refine him.

When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold. So you might ask, how on earth does Job have such remarkable faith?

And the answer comes in verses 11 and 12. Job has faith because he knows the character of God. And he knows the character of God because he knows scripture and has been living for the God who reveals himself in scripture.

[13:46] Verses 11 and 12. Job, to borrow again from the Psalms, is like a tree planted by streams of water with deep roots, nourished by the law of the Lord.

Now, our therapeutic culture is quite fond of self-help books and learning life lessons. You know, money isn't everything, make every moment count, practice good self-care, learn from your mistakes.

Now, that's all well and good and understood the right way. Any of those statements could be grounded in scripture. But the problem is that this perspective usually leaves us back in the driver's seat.

We are invited to take control of our lives. You know, this is the sort of thing you get from YouTube self-help gurus and their ilk. I used to be like this and then I discovered the four principles.

I was depressed, unemployed, single, and then I got my life together. Here's how. And the conundrum of senseless suffering, suffering that seems to have no purpose, suffering which we cannot control, suffering you don't just bounce back from, suffering that grinds you into the dust and just leaves you there.

[15:21] This conundrum exposes the weakness and cruelty of our false gods. Because what do you do if you don't measure up? Now, the beauty of the Bible, as Job has learned, is that it is not a self-help manual whereby we fix ourselves after distilling great spiritual truths hidden inside of it.

Scripture brings us into an encounter with the living Lord of the universe. It locates us within his story.

It is his word to us so we might be in relationship with him. The Bible is the living word of the living God. And through Scripture, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we come to know God, come to know that he is the one who made us, who sustains us, who loves us, who watches over us, who has plans for us, and who is with us when we suffer, even when we don't feel as though he is there.

We are drawn into relationship with God. Job has faith in the midst of profound suffering because Job knows God, and Job knows God because Job has met him in the Scriptures.

This is why, as Christians, we spend so much time hearing Scripture in our worship services, hear it preached, gather in groups to study, memorize it so it gets into our bones, so we digest it, can call it to mind.

[17:05] And that's true at all times, but in a very particular way, when we suffer, we absolutely need the perspective of Scripture to convict and comfort us.

When we have lost all sense of orientation in life, when we have no sense of God's presence, we need to hear his voice to us in the word of Scripture and trust that his presence, the Holy Spirit, will be at work through those words in our lives.

So the first lesson from this passage was when we suffer, we need to cry out to God. The second lesson, when we suffer, we need to listen to the God who speaks to us in Scripture and in the words of verse 12, chapter 23, to treasure the words of his mouth more than our daily bread.

His words and his deeds are hope when we feel like we have lost all hope. And that brings us to our third lesson in the concluding verses of chapter 23.

Job has cried out to God, Job has been reminded of who God is, and then in verses 13 to 17, he takes a posture of humility, acknowledging that because God sees all and knows all and has all power, he does whatever he pleases because whatever he pleases to do is good and is for our good.

[18:56] And, verse 15, that is precisely why Job is terrified of God. He carries out his decree against me and many such plans he still has in store.

That is why I am terrified before him. When I think of all this, I fear him. Job knows that this suffering is for his good and he doesn't want it.

That is a profound mystery which Job holds in tension within himself. We might be tempted to think that this is a failure of Job's faith, but it's not.

We observe the exact same pattern in Jesus' ministry when at the Garden of Gethsemane, hours before he is about to be crucified and experience loneliness in a way no one has ever experienced loneliness.

In a moment of terror, he asks the Father if it is possible may this cup be taken. We should never desire or embrace suffering.

[20:18] It is a consequence of the fall and it is evil. Only God in his sovereignty can control it. only he as the great physician knows the dosage we can endure.

Only he is capable of redeeming that suffering for our good. This is exactly why we ask God in the Lord's Prayer to lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

In Job's terror, we see not only the reality of evil but also the frailty of man. Job is not a hero. Job is a man and by the grace of God that is enough.

As Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 12, through Christ God's power is made perfect in our weakness. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul reminds us that God chose the weak to shame the strong which, incidentally, is precisely what is happening to Satan in this book.

He is being put to shame by Job's weakness. And the truth is that when we suffer, we have the opportunity to experience these truths in a very profound and particular way.

[21:47] We all want to be strong, to take it on the chin, shrug it off, have a faith that just wows people. And subtly or not so subtly, our egos come creeping back onto center stage.

But it is not our faith that we put our trust in. It is in God's faithfulness that we stake our lives. And this is why even in the midst of his terror, Job is not silenced by the darkness, by the thick darkness that covers his face.

In his humility, he can continue to trust God and wait for his redemption. Now we've gone fairly far.

We're going to go just a little bit further. And in order to do that, we need to gloss over a lot of chapter 24 fairly quickly as I work towards my conclusion.

There's a lot going on here too. We don't have time for all of it. But here I think we can say once again, responding to his friend's argument that good people are favored, wicked people are punished, Job unflinchingly lays out how rampant injustice is in the world.

[23:07] And he paints a chilling picture of wickedness which goes unchecked, murder, adultery, theft, oppression of the poor. And the situation that Job describes here, it raises the same question he asks God in chapter 23.

In his own suffering, Job wonders, where are you God? And then he looks out at the world, sees all of the suffering, and asks the very same question, 24 verse 1, why does the Almighty not set times for judgment?

Why must those who know him look in vain for such days? And here I think is where the NIV gets it right and the ESV misses the mark by just a little bit.

There's a bit of an answer in verses 18 to 25 and the answer that Job gives is the only answer one can give which is to trust in God and to yearn for his justice knowing that God will make it right.

So this is how the NIV puts Job's closing in his speech here. Yet they, the wicked, are foam on the surface of the water. Their portion of the land is cursed so that no one goes to the vineyards.

[24:29] As heat and drought snatch away the melted snow, so the grave snatches away those who have sinned. The womb forgets them, the worm feasts on them, the wicked are no longer remembered but are broken like a tree.

God drags away the mighty by his power. Though they have become established, they have no assurance of life. He may let them rest in a feeling of security but his eyes are on their ways.

For a little while they are exalted and then they are gone. They are brought low and gathered up like all others. They are cut off like heads of grain. The world is a complex place.

There is justice and injustice. mixed in ways we do not often understand. Job sees this. Job recognizes it. He asks where God is in this.

And Job in the end affirms that if God is good, if God is sovereign, wickedness is dealt with even if it doesn't look like it on the surface.

[25:30] and as the chapter and Job's speech come to a close, Job reminds himself, reminds his friends that in the long run those who rebel against God and reject him do get punished.

As Martin Luther King Jr. famously said some years ago, the arc of the moral universe is long and bends towards justice. Now some commentators are disappointed or perplexed by these final lines of Job as though he's lapsing back into trite piety.

But Job is not an existentialist. He is suffering profoundly but this suffering has not persuaded him that life is absurd, that God does not exist, that there is no guarantee or purpose.

Job is an upright man who fears the Lord and trusts in his maker. And so as he reflects on the injustice of the world, he holds true to the confession that God is a God of justice, that God is present.

God's purposes are always accomplished in spite of all the suffering, in the midst of all the suffering. Job can say with confidence in the end all will be well. This is in a word the hope of heaven.

[26:58] The ultimate and final reality which orients all of our suffering, individual and corporate. It lifts our eyes above our circumstances to be a part of something greater than anything we could ever accomplish on our own.

and Job knows this ever so faintly. So when we suffer, we need to cry out to God knowing he's just.

When we cannot feel his presence, we need to come to scripture knowing it is the living word of the living God given to us so we can know who he is.

when we are terrified in humility, we need to come to God and pray like Jesus did at Gethsemane. Not my will but yours be done.

And lastly in our suffering, we must simply wait and hope in God's final return and judgment when his rule is fully established and all is made well.

[28:08] Now suffering is no easy journey. In suffering, we taste the bitter fruit of our rebellion against God in the fall.

We feel the sting of Satan's power. But, thanks be to God, in Jesus this power is undone.

In the apparent weakness of the cross, the deepest suffering ever experienced by a human being, suffering becomes the occasion for our redemption.

In the crucifixion of Christ, suffering servant, God's power and love and righteousness are perfectly displayed.

And because of it, we can be close to God in a way which Job only dreamed of. In the resurrection of Jesus, death and suffering is transformed into something glorious, the redemption of the world, which is the piece of the puzzle that Job knows must be there but cannot quite articulate.

[29:30] And in the ascension of Jesus to heaven where he reigns today with the Father, he sends the Holy Spirit, God's very presence, as the guarantee of the hope of heaven which we receive in the waters of baptism.

Ultimately, because of Christ, we can be comforted. Because of Christ, our death and our suffering as incomprehensible as it might be can become something glorious.

As Peter reminds us in his first letter, this is 1 Peter 1, 3-9. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

This inheritance is kept in heaven for you who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of his salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

[30:53] These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith, of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus is revealed.

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your soul.

God be the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.