

## Meditations on Job

### **PART ONE: Evil showing itself in a good world - The curse, Job 1: 1 and 2: 1-10**

*By Karen Stallard, Union Chapel Minister*

At the beginning of the story of Job we are introduced to the concept that evil shows itself even in a good world.

Job was a good person, blameless, this not meaning sinless perfection but rather a person of integrity. He was an upright character, faithfully obeying God's laws: he feared God, in other words he was wise and he turned away from evil, a practical expression of wisdom in the moral realm.

*"Satan inflicting boils on Job" - William Blake's illustration*



Here in Chapter 2 we enter the story where Job, this good person, has already lost many members of his family but he himself is physically intact. It is at this point that the accuser argues that if Job himself is afflicted then surely he won't remain faithful to God. The accuser is seeking to find a weak point in Job's character and so we hear that Job is afflicted with a terrible disease, and quite likely he thought he was going to die. The accuser is hoping that this affliction will lead Job into rejecting God, and indeed Job's wife becomes that voice; one could say she seems to be the most sensible voice speaking, considering the circumstances: Job's wife speaks that which



you would think Job himself should quite reasonably be speaking. She suggests that Job has been so cursed that he himself should curse God and die.

And so we enter the main part of the book of Job, as his friend enters the dialogue and we hear cries of pain, songs, poetry, and theological discussion all around the issues which have been raised through Job's underserved suffering.

And with this brief introduction I will leave you with three thoughts as we enter the book of Job.

A true test of human character asks the question, "Can you keep your integrity even when you are cursed so much you feel as if you are going to die?" A response without faith would say no, and no-one would expect you to anyway. However a response with faith would say, "I don't know what it might look like, but I think I might be able to hang onto my integrity even if all else is stripped away from me." This was Job's response.

Viewing the world from a human need rather than a Godly requirement gives us a very different perspective. This is what the book of Job does and it quite clearly has much helpful pastoral stuff in it. This is a strange book and rather like William Blake's pictures it feels rather unreal, and yet it seems to be very real in terms of how it views human need and mental distress. For someone who is depressed this book can bring real connection - at last here we have a man who really is suffering. I can relate to this, this is real. You might think that when one is depressed you would need some happy book to perk you up, but no, it is my experience that this book, in viewing the world from a human need connects directly to those who are truly suffering. It is a painful read but perhaps that is why it can become such a precious book to those who know the pain of feeling cursed and not knowing why they deserve such suffering.

This book makes us think about pain and suffering in different ways.

Job has done nothing to deserve this, and no other human being has done anything wrong in order that Job might suffer; clearly we are hearing that God allowed this suffering to take place, and this raises many questions for people of faith about the loving merciful God we might like to worship.

Perhaps God does allow us to suffer, not because we are bad, or because he hates us and wants to destroy us all, but because we become better people when we experience being in relationship in spite of the pain, and to manage and maintain our integrity even when the other appears to be allowing us to suffer. God can no longer be boxed into a God who punishes the bad, here is a God who is behaving very differently. There is something deeply trusting going on here, Job is trusting God, and God is trusting Job. And there is the idea that the world is not always good to



you, even when you are good to it, shit happens, but how we face that shit is really the test of our characters.

Now this doesn't mean that we become a punching bag and just take all the rubbish which might come our way, as we shall see. Job struggles with God, he tells him exactly what he thinks of the state of affairs, he does not just lie there and take it, but enters into an angry, troubled, forthright dialogue with the God who has allowed his whole world to be shattered. He maintains his integrity not by cursing the one who allowed this to happen, and also not by remaining silent, but by engaging in a real relationship, speaking of real feelings and experiences and asking fundamental questions of God. Job in his state had nothing to lose and so he went for it, and what a gift we have in this story.

This finally brings us to communion and a connection with Jesus on the cross: here have a blameless man being punished for another's sin. God seems to let this happen and we ask why, what is this all about? Is this some masochistic God who demands some kind of child abuse ransom in order for his wrath to be satisfied? Or are we at the story of the cross meeting with the same God as Job's God, a God who cannot be boxed in, a God who trusts we can maintain human integrity no matter what? A God who doesn't demand sacrifice and suffering, but who longs for us to know integrity and fear of God even at the darkest hour? Job illustrates this for us and so too does Jesus as he travels from the garden of Gethsemane to the cross.

## **PART TWO: The human response: There is no God - The struggle, Job 23 and 24**

Job is surrounded by three comforters, who have been trying to convince him to repent of the sin which he must have committed in order to have got into this state. Job refuses to repent of a sin which he would need to fabricate as this would compromise his integrity: indeed, that would be a sin in itself.

So here in ch 23 we find Job complaining bitterly, only he doesn't speak directly to his comforters or to God; it is a monologue which is delivered by Job declaring his frustration that God appears to be nowhere - He is hiding. Clearly this is a cry out to God but because God is not showing himself. Job keeps God in the third person throughout this chapter.

Yet Job, however much he is 'Groaning', is also confident, he has a fighting spirit in him and is keen to meet with God and argue his case, if only he could find God! Job seems to be confident that God will hear his case, and that as Job wins his case, so too God will win his case over Satan, the accuser.



*"Job's Despair" - William Blake's illustration*

God's hiddenness reveals also His growing confidence in Job, Job does not need to have a face to face encounter with God in order to trust. This hiddenness of God is often referred to as the 'dark night of the soul' by some of the great mystics. People of great faith will reach a moment when they experience the world where God is absent, missing or hidden, and as they travel through this dark night of the soul they emerge with the ability to continue to believe and have hope even when there appears to be none.

Now this is the true gift of the book of Job to us: you see without hope we lose the will to live and we die; it is easy to have hope when we can see the rescue helicopter approaching towards us, it is much harder to have hope when there is no sign of rescue and when the absence of rescue continues for hours and days and weeks. The dark night of the soul is the place where we as spiritual beings explore the possibilities of hope where there appears to be none: this is true faith. But in order to explore this we have to experience that which takes away signs of life. Death and bereavement are experiences which we all have to go through, and often you will hear of people of great faith struggling with the dark night of the soul as their loved ones are no longer with them.



At this point I would like to quote from a little booklet which you can buy on line as an ebook from Amazon, written by Nigel Copsey a year after his wife died:

*“The thoughts I have shared in this booklet have emerged from a personal journey of struggle with an experience I never thought would be as difficult as it has so far proved to be. I realise more than ever that one of the hardest tasks in following Jesus is to be able to hold together faith with the waves of feelings within. I have come to call this experience ‘Grit Faith’. It is being able through the grace of God to continue to trust Him in spite of the pain within. I wish I could say that my soul has been at peace in this time of exile: it often has been torn with anguish and a crying out to our Lord. I have learnt that it has been essential to ‘hold onto’ all the blessings that touched our lives before Kathryn’s passing: in other words to keep returning to a regular reminder of His leading and guiding throughout our lives together. It is that core foundation which has enabled me to continue to trust.”*

*(Life after Death, Nigel Copsey)*

Here Nigel is expressing something of the faith which we can read about in Job, Nigel calls it in his booklet ‘Grit Faith’ and this is a great way of describing Job’s faith in this chapter.

In verse 10 we can see the hope that Job is clinging on to, he uses these wonderful words of hope, faith and trust: “when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.” I like this statement, it is truly gritty, it is the sort of spirit that we saw during the Olympics.

Job is saying, I trust that God will be on my side, I trust that I will survive this, I trust that I will come out the end of this an even better person.

Grit Faith keeps people alive in the darkest of places, Grit Faith can pull someone out of a deep depression or back into reality after a psychotic episode. Grit Faith can bring a smile to someone’s lips when they are in pain and dying, Grit Faith can enable someone to achieve something amazing against all odds. Grit Faith is real, is raw, is honest and it really comes into its own when God is hidden. Grit Faith is what Jesus displayed on the cross as he quoted the scripture ‘My God, My God why have you forsaken me’. Grit faith is a mature faith, it is something which develops over time and through experience and it is something to be practiced.

So how can we practice Grit Faith? I don’t believe you need to go through horrendous suffering in order to practice Grit Faith, but through journeying alongside others and seeking integrity, Grit Faith can be developed, so that when we do hit difficult times



in our lives we have the resources to journey though the dark night of the soul with faith intact.

The story of Job is an interesting one: right from the beginning God trusted that Job had enough Grit Faith to get through the worst of trials. This would clearly suggest that Job had Grit Faith already living within him well before the accuser came and did his worst. Job's confidence didn't just appear when he started to suffer, Job's confidence came from the good years, the years where he lived a blameless and upright life, it came from the years when it was easy to trust in God, where God was not hidden, when everything seemed hunky-dory!

This brings me on to my final point: why is all this important to the church and the world today?

Well the good news is that a developed spirituality which includes hope, trust and faith will help individuals survive the worst things in life and will perhaps enable them to "come out like gold"

The problem is that many people out there do not even know what spirituality is all about, let alone work hard at developing their spirituality. There is a deep suspicion of institutionalised faith, and general scepticism about whether there is a God; and churches don't allow people to explore faith and spiritual things unless they are prepared to sign up to certain doctrine. And so people don't come to church, they are spiritually neglected, and the development of Grit Faith is stifled. I think we are in interesting times: people are searching for something beyond the modern secular world, there is a rise in interest in spiritual things - but is the church ready to welcome those hungry for spiritual development, and can the church encourage and teach people the kind of spirituality which will produce the seed of faith which is like that of Job's gritty, honest and full integrity?

We have some work to do, don't we? It is our job to help one another and those in our communities to explore their spirituality in a healthy and developing way. Let us embrace anything which encourages the disciplines of faith and trust, partnering with others who also see the value of faith; let's seek ourselves to be blameless and upright, nurturing that Grit Faith in our own community here in the chapel, and inspiring others to walk a similar path towards a faith that can endure and remain hopeful always