Job 1v13-22

All Bible verses taken from NIVUK®

Theme: God is vindicated by his servant’s sinless response to suffering

Aim: praise God amid suffering to the glory of his name

Last year hasn’t been easy for so many of us. I think of one friend whose mother died. I think of another who had ups and downs with their health, spending two extended periods in hospital. Those aren’t stories out there at a distance - they are the lived experiences of some of my close friends. Suffering is not far from any of us. If we aren’t suffering in some way individually, we’re almost certainly close to somebody who is. And so comes the age-old question, that has been wrestled with through the millennia: how should we respond to suffering? Not on an intellectual, hypothetical level, but on a raw, personal level, when the storms of life are raging.

We’re in the book of Job this morning, and few people in history will have experienced storms of such intensity as Job. And yet if you look down at v22 of our passage, you’ll notice that Job’s response to the horrific onslaught of suffering that came his way, was a sinless response. So there’s clearly some principles we can glean from Job. But, just a heads up, they are neither neat nor are they all there is to say on the matter.

Our passage today starts part way through chapter 1 of Job, but before we explore what’s there, we need to know some key details about Job to get us up to speed. The first thing to know about Job is that he’s a good man - 1v1 makes that clear. He’s a believer with great integrity - what you see is what you get - he’s a believer through and through. Another thing to know is that he’s a wealthy man, blessed with a bountiful supply of livestock. And finally, Job is a family man with 10 children! In his culture then he was living the dream - sorted in his relationship with God, sorted financially, all of this whilst have the having the ideal family. That’s Job.

And so delighted with Job was God, that during a heavenly cabinet meeting, 1v6-12, God brings him up as the point of conversation. 1v8: “‘Have you considered my servant Job?’ [God said to Satan, who appears to have a role in this heavenly cabinet meeting] ‘There is no-one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.’” Satan isn’t so convinced. He reckons that Job is only a surface level believer - so Satan replies: ‘he’s had it easy, God! Make his stuff disappear, then his worship will soon disappear as well.’ Satan had the audacity to challenge the reliability of God’s verdict. God responds in v12: “very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.”’

And so the storm begins.

Life in a storm

This section of Job contains relentless calamity. Imagine Job at home, the day starts like any other. Then suddenly one of Job’s servants comes rushing up to him, v14: “‘The oxen were ploughing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!’” Job stares blankly at the servant, struggling to process what he’s just heard, but, v16, “While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, ‘The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!’” A freak lightning storm - all the sheep and servants killed. Job’s stomach starts churning, his knees trembling. “While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, ‘The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!’”

In a matter of minutes this man has gone from the richest of the rich to the poorest of the poor. Totally bankrupt.

Then to Job’s horror, he sees another servant making a beeline for him. v18: “While [the previous servant] was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, ‘Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the eldest brother’s house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. [A tear rolls down the servant’s cheek] It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!’” [PAUSE]

It’s the stuff of nightmares. Everything Job had stripped from him. His stuff. His family.

What’s he to do? Where do you even begin a response to a situation as calamitous as this one?

Now I don’t know you as a church family well. I don’t know your situations. I don’t know your struggles. But, I think it’s a reasonable guess to suggest that many, in fact probably all of us, can find ways that our stories overlap with Job’s. Yes, probably not as extreme, but financial struggles, the loss of loved ones - these dark events are ones that many of us will have to journey through at some point. And so quite quickly the question we asked of Job, becomes one we need to ask of ourselves. What are we to do with situations like that?

Now the answer to that question isn’t neat and I’m very hesitant to give by way of a ‘5-step guide to dealing with suffering.’ In fact, to do so would be to misunderstand the book of Job entirely. But, as we mentioned before, Job’s response is declared to be one without sin in v22, so there are principles to be gleaned from Job’s response as to how to navigate life at its messiest.

Firstly…

Acknowledge the storms as storms

I was reading an essay on the Psalms of lamentation in church life, and the writer comments that: ‘Personally and publicly we deny pain and suffering, pretending they do not exist. We do not say much about suffering because we do not want to see it in people and we do not want to hear about it. … As a society we want to eliminate all pain. We want to medicate everything and find ‘quick-fix’ solutions, ways to take control. ... We use platitudes or quote-verses meant to make people feel better. We try to fix people, answering the ‘why’ questions, trying to bypass the pain and rushing to a happy ending.’

Maybe you don’t fit that way of thinking, but I know I often do. And of course the danger of that way of thinking is that pain becomes something that is almost frowned upon. Someone might feel agony within, yet they know the culturally acceptable thing to do is to put on a brave face, and say ‘yes I’m fine thanks, how are you?’.

Notice how differently Job responds. In v20 Job does five things. He gets up, tears his robe, shaves his head, falls to the ground and we’ll come to the fifth in a moment. Before that, notice that two of Job’s actions in the immediate aftermath of this tidal wave of disaster are to do with mourning, tearing his robe and shaving his head. Job knows it’s ok not to be ok - so whatever suffering you may go through in life, it’s ok not to be ok. You’re not doing anything wrong by admitting when life is hard. In fact that’s an entirely Christian thing to do - much more so that putting up a facade of sorted-ness.

Acknowledge storms as storms - that’s an appropriate thing to do whilst venturing through life’s storms.

Secondly…

Acknowledge the Lord as Lord

The great writer C. S. Lewis wrote a short book called a ‘A Grief Observed,’ which was a journal he wrote in the aftermath of his wife’s death. In it he said “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like.’”

Whilst suffering we can readily think badly of God. Satan knows that’s true, hence his attack on Job! But look with me at how remarkable Job’s response is: Job worships God and says ‘the LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.’ ‘The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.’ No cursing. Only blessing.

There are so many things that could be said of this response, but one thing I would love to consider with you is the implications this has in God’s cabinet meeting. Satan accused God of being wrong about Job, saying he’s just a surface level believer. How wrong Satan was. How glorified God is. Amid tears and loneliness and darkness and grief God is glorified when one of his servants acknowledge his rule, and doesn’t speak badly of him. I think of the children’s worker at the church I grew up at - her father was killed and her mother severely beaten by bandits as they served as missionaries in Eastern Europe. Unimaginable grief. Yet with time she came to forgive the culprits, and can testify to God’s patience and goodness through it all. That brings glory to God. Maybe you can think of someone who has suffered greatly - maybe even in this room - someone who has been through it all, and yet they are still here today testifying that God is good. That brings glory to God.

And as we finish this morning, I want us for a moment to consider one whose suffering perfectly brought glory to God. That is to say…

Look to the sinless sufferer

It might feel like an overwhelming ask to respond to suffering like Job does in chapter 1. That’s ok. If you read on you can see that even Job eventually sins in his response to suffering - you can see him repenting in chapter 42. But Job in the extremity of his suffering and isolation, is pointing us forward to the greatest sufferer. Job lost his great earthly wealth, but Jesus gave up the riches of the throne room of Heaven. Job knew some of the most extreme forms of suffering, the Lord Jesus took upon himself the most extreme form of suffering, taking God’s right response of anger towards human sin upon himself. Job in the face of suffering gave glory to God, the Lord Jesus went to the cross with the chief aim of glorifying his Father. And because Jesus suffered as he did, if we trust in him then we can be sure that on the last day we will be spared the most extreme suffering of God’s wrath, and our new home will be a world where we will suffer no more. Let’s pray.

Jesus said…

“‘Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!’” John 12v27-28a