

Sitting with Job - 3 October 2021

BIBLE READINGS

Psalm 26

Vindicate me, O Lord,
for I have lived with integrity;
I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.

Test me, O Lord, and try me;
examine my heart and my mind.

For your steadfast love is before my eyes;
I have walked faithfully with you.

I have not sat with the worthless,
nor do I consort with hypocrites.

I hate the company of evildoers;
I will not sit down with the wicked. ...

O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell,
and the place where your glory abides.

Do not sweep me away with sinners,
nor my life with those who thirst for blood,
whose hands are full of evil plots,
and whose right hands are full of bribes.

But as for me, I will live with integrity;
redeem me, O Lord, and have pity on me.



Job 1:1-2:13

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. He was blameless and upright, feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters; and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys and many servants. This man was the greatest of all the people of the East. ...

One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord and Satan also came with them. ... The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.' Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nothing? ... You have blessed the work of his hands and his possessions have increased. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, all that he has is in your power; but do not lay a finger on the man himself!' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

One day ... messengers came to Job and said, 'Sabeans fell on the oxen and donkeys and carried them off and killed the servants with the sword ... The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep ... The Chaldeans made a raid on the camels and carried them off ... and a great wind came across the desert and the house fell on all your sons and daughters and they are dead.' On hearing all this, Job got up, tore his clothes, shaved his head and fell to the ground in worship. He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

On another day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord and Satan also came with them. ... The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? ... He persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Skin for skin! A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh and he will curse you to your face.' The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your hands; only spare his life.' So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and inflicted painful sores on Job from the sole of his feet to the top of his head. Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself

with it as he sat among the ashes.

Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die!' But he said to her, 'You are speaking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?' In all this Job did not sin in what he said.

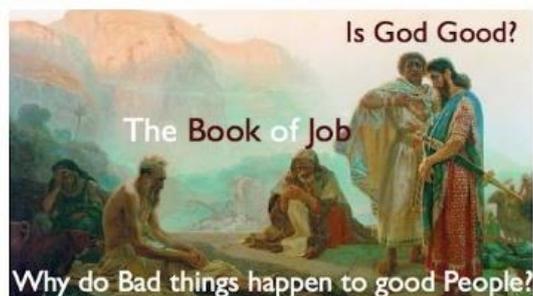
Now when Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, heard of all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes. They met together and agreed to go and comfort Job. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights. No one spoke a word to him, for they saw how great his suffering was.

MESSAGE **Sitting with Job**

Suffering seems to be an inescapable part of living that affects us all at one time or another, however hard we may try to avoid it. Suffering may be physical – whether due to sickness, accident or old age decline. Suffering may be mental – in the form of depression or loneliness or the breakdown of a relationship. Suffering may also be spiritual – the sense that one is cut off from God's presence and love.

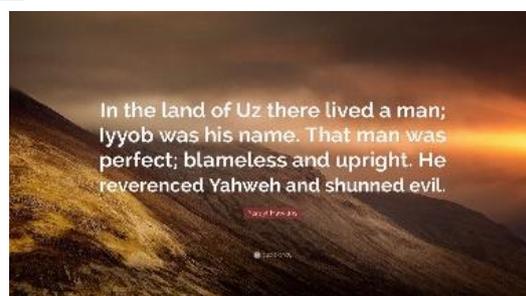


It's one thing to speak of suffering in a general or abstract way ... as we might about living through the Covid pandemic and the suffering it has caused for many people. It's another thing entirely to experience or witness suffering at a personal level where we can see its effects. So I have been concerned for a long time about Australia's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, for instance, but it was only when I started visiting the detention centre in Broadmeadows and met the people involved and heard their stories and saw them struggling with the mental trauma of indefinite imprisonment that I better understood their suffering.



This focus on the suffering of an **individual** is what the book of Job is about. Yes it draws on the traditions and wisdom of Hebrew theology, but does so in a way that challenges these traditions and wisdom and asks difficult questions. If it is true that God blesses the upright, then why do some good people suffer? This is the bigger question that Job grapples with by focusing on the story of one person ...

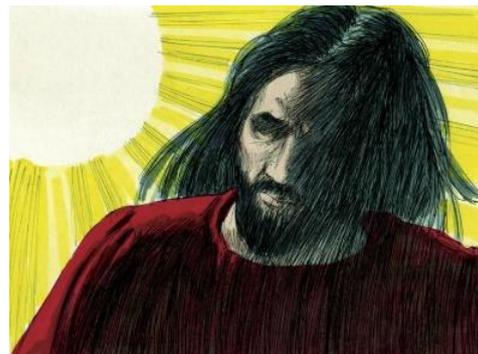
The book of Job begins in much the same way as many familiar fairy tales: 'There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.' He comes from somewhere to the East, the place of wisdom, the same lands that the Magi come from to worship the infant Jesus. This way of opening the book suggests a **fable** or **legend** rather than an accurate historical account.



Job is presented with faultless credentials ... he is upright, blameless, worships Israel's God and turns away from evil. So he is a good and moral person. And also very prosperous with thousands of livestock and a complete number of children, seven sons and three daughters making ten in all. In many ways he is a comparable figure to Abraham, although it is Job's **integrity** that is highlighted (i.e. his honesty and uprightness) rather than his faith.

The basis of the story is the wager between God and Satan, who is presented as a mischief maker among the angels rather than as a direct rival to God. Now God takes great pleasure and pride in Job, whose upright character and worship of God is affirmed. Satan disagrees with God's assessment and suggests that Job only lives such a good and devoted life because God protects him and blesses him. In other words, Job's love for God is **conditional** – he loves God only for the benefits that come his way. Satan wants to prove God wrong about Job. So both God and Job are effectively put on trial.

Two tests are instigated by Satan. In the first test, all of Job's possessions and children are taken away or killed. He refuses to curse God because **possessions do not define his relationship with God**, who not only gives but who may also take away. In the second test, Job's flesh and bones are afflicted with a painful skin disease. Again Job refuses to curse God because **circumstances do not define his relationship with God** either, as we may experience both good and trouble in life. So far, so good. Job has passed the two tests and maintained his integrity.



Job is struggling mightily, however, and places himself on the scrapheap as it were, sitting among the ashes, the discarded things of life. He still has friends though, who have heard of his misfortune and come to visit him. They are appalled by his suffering and sit with him, in silence, for seven days. And so the stage is set for the lengthy arguments between Job and his friends, and ultimately between Job and God.

A few thoughts about this book and how to approach reading it ... which I encourage you to do over the next week or so ... perhaps a few chapters every day ...

- **Each person's story of suffering is unique.** It's easy to generalise why someone might be suffering ... careless about their health ... they eat too much ... smoke too much ... exercise too little ... mix with the wrong group of people ... These may be contributory factors, but we are not to judge another person's misfortune (e.g. Matt 7:1-5). Their journey and experience of life is unique to them, as in Job's case.
- **It's unhelpful to draw a direct cause-and-effect relationship between suffering and sin** as Job's friends later do, influenced by passages such as Deuteronomy chapter 28 which sets out blessings and curses dependent on how carefully we follow God's ways. This traditional link between suffering and sin was still prevalent at the time of Jesus (e.g. Luke 13:1-5, John 9:2). We may also fall into this same way of thinking. Sometimes we may suffer because of our sin or our own stupidity, but often we suffer due to germs or accidents, the effects of aging, the indifferent or evil actions of others or just bad luck.

- **So why do some good people – like Job – suffer for no apparent reason?** This is the major theme of the book of Job and you need to read to the end of the book to discover the (non) answer.



- A related question is **why doesn't God end human (and other) suffering?** This is another theme in the book of Job, as God is on trial as much as Job. If God is forgiving and compassionate, is God not powerful enough? Or not just enough? Or if God is powerful and just, is God not actually loving enough? Is there a vindictive or vengeful streak in God that demands punishment for sin? These are deep questions that prompt us to consider the nature of God.
- Another deep question raised by the book is **why we love and worship God.** Is our love for God conditional upon receiving God's blessings, as suggested by Satan? Or do we love God because God first loved us (e.g. 1 John 4:16-19)? Or is there another reason?
- **God takes great pleasure in Job** and in Job's words and behaviour and ultimately vindicates Job (42:7). Although God only appears directly in the first two chapters and then in the last few chapters of the book, it's important to bear in mind God's overall attitude towards Job even as Job is nearly drowning in self-pity and righteous anger. And although we are imperfect – like Job – God also takes great pleasure in us!
- On a practical level, **what is an appropriate response when people are suffering?** Should we keep our distance? Should we offer solutions to ease their suffering (as Job's friends later do)? Or should we follow the initial response of Job's friends and simply be present and say nothing? From a pastoral perspective, staying away and offering solutions (that may seem obvious to us!) are not usually very helpful. Our presence – just being there or perhaps holding the person's hand or giving them a gentle hug – is often much more valuable and powerful than speaking many words. We can be God's hands when God seems absent or silent. Offering practical help and praying for the person are also helpful ... but we should check if that is what the person wants.