

Job

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[0:00] Have you ever said to God, will you ever just leave me alone? What have I ever done to you? Those are hard words.

It's hard to believe that we would say something like that.! But I know in the middle of suffering I have said things like that. I would never say it out loud. And I would never say it in front of you. Sort of like Psalm 73, how Asaph said, if I would have spoken like that, I would have betrayed your children. But if you've been a Christian for any length of time, you probably have said something like that, or at least felt something like that, because life is hard.

Life is pain. It's painful. Maybe you've seen the movie Princess Bride, where at one point Wesley, the dashing young hero, says to Buttercup, life is pain, your highness. Anyone who tells you otherwise is selling you something. And there's lots of people selling us stuff. And they tell us about how life could be, or should be, or is supposed to be.

[1:14] And yet the pain goes on, the heartache goes on, and we wrestle with God. We try to endure. We try to persevere. Life is pain. And the question is, how do we wrestle with God through it?

And that's where the book of Job comes in. Job is written to help you puzzle through the problem of pain.

It's not going to give you an answer for why you are suffering in this particular time. But Job takes us by the hand and walks us through his pain.

Because Job actually tells God, and at one point, he tells God to leave him alone. And he says, God, what have I ever done to you? I've sinned against you, but what have my sins ever done to hurt you?

Why are you doing this to me? And those are hard words, but those are realistic words of our feelings. And so Job is written to give us a voice for our suffering.

[2:17] So when we're struggling with coming to grips with it, it's written to help us do that and to avoid certain dangerous rocks that we can experience while we're sailing through those waters.

But Job is a hard book, and that's why we're addressing it this afternoon. We're in a short series on this luncheon, on these luncheon days, where we talk about some of the hard books, it's hard to understand.

And Job is certainly one of them. I was telling my wife, you know, I'm thinking about preaching on Job, but you know, I don't know. I don't know if I really feel up to it.

And she said, well, I just finished reading Job, and it's like Shakespeare. I understand some of the sentences, but I don't understand what it all means, what the book is saying.

I know that Job's three friends are wrong, but I don't know why they're wrong. And I think that is a perfect summary of how most of us feel about the book of Job.

[3:19] We know that Job's three friends are wrong. Job ends up having to sacrifice for them, and God says what they were talking about is folly, but then when we look at it, it seems so right.

And it's a hard book. It's a hard book for a lot of reasons, and we're going to go into those things, but today I just want to give you a single key to open the door to the book of Job. We're not going to go into a lot of details, but I just want to give you the single key to open the door so that you can start to understand it and appreciate it.

And so when you are suffering, Job isn't a closed book to you, because you know it has to do with suffering, and so it is a book for you. So I have four points this afternoon, and the first two are just basic questions to get us warmed up so that you can profit from the book of Job.

The first question is, why is Job so hard? Why is the book so hard? And I think if we look at it and come to terms with the fact that it is difficult, it will help us to appreciate and understand it.

It's hard for a couple of reasons. The first is it's long. It's 42 chapters long, and it's not long like Isaiah is long with a lot of chapters. It's long because it's one long conversation between friends, and it's not the flighty conversation that can go on and on in hours when you're with your best friend on a road trip, and, you know, there's no one sustained theme.

[4:51] But Job is this one sustained conversation with the same themes coming up over and over again, and that is just hard to take in. It's hard to wrap our minds around a whole book because it's sort of like you have to understand the whole of it before you can start to understand the individual pieces, and it's hard to take in.

It's hard to come to terms with. Men, I don't know how you feel, but sometimes on the way home from church, my wife asks, well, who did you talk to? And what did you talk about?

And I hate that question because how do you sum up a whole conversation in a few sentences? She probably has that ability, but I struggle with that, and you don't want to repeat the whole thing for her.

You know, my brain is checking out. But that's Job. It's this one long conversation, and in order to come to terms with it, you have to find some way of wrapping it all up into a nice package.

It's hard for another reason. It's hard because it's repetitive. It's repetitive. Job has a very structured format. Elphaz speaks.

[6:07] Job speaks. Bildad speaks. Job speaks. Zophar speaks. Job speaks. Repeat. And repeat again for good measure. Now, along the way, Job's speeches, Job's words, you know, they can change topics, and they change tacks, and it goes in different directions, but Job's friends, Elphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, keep repeating themselves.

And that is hard for us to handle. As we sit there and try to read this book, why are they just saying the same things over and over again? And then we think, are they just repeating themselves? Am I missing something?

We normally look for some sort of advancement, for some sort of, we're making progress. And here's the secret that will save you from a lot of aggravation. It's not there.

Elphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have a theology. They have a view of God, and they just keep drumming it over and over and over again.

And Job says, but look, guys, it's not like how you're saying. It's not what it seems like to you. And over and over and over again, they say it, they say it.

[7:23] It's repetitive, but it's designed to be that way. It's to teach us something, that there is something wrong with what they're saying, that there is something wrong.

Their so-called wisdom isn't getting them anywhere. If you have real wisdom, you're going to make some progress, but these people are just, these men are not getting anywhere. It's not really helping. They're just running into the wall over and over and over again, and it's not helping Job, and they're not convincing anyone.

Now, that leads to the last reason that Job is so difficult. It's long, it's repetitive, and it's very subtle at the same time. Job is hard because it's subtle.

It's not elementary Sunday school. It's suffering in real life. And in real life suffering, truth and falsehood can live right next door to each other.

And sometimes wisdom and folly live right next door to each other in the same heart. And at times, they just decide to move in with each other. And it's hard to figure out where this is going and what is right and what is wrong and what is foolish and what is wise.

[8:37] Because in the same mind and in the same heart, there's folly and there's wisdom and there's truth and there's lies. And Job is difficult because it's dealing with real life.

And real life can be very difficult and very complex. See, Job's three friends are saying a lot of things that are right. And that's what's so hard about it.

His three friends are wrong. We know that because at the end, Job has to sacrifice for them and intercede for them. But what they're saying seems so plausible. It seems so biblical. And it's not so much that they're deliberately lying.

And it's not so much that they're completely wrong. The problem is they're misapplying the truth. Or they're overstating the truth. Or they're simplifying something that can be very complex.

In other words, Job's three friends are three pretty good guys with a lot of good things going for them and a lot of right ideas. But they don't apply them right. They don't think through them deeply enough.

[9:44] And that's why it's so hard. Now the second question is, who is Job for? So it's hard, but who is it for? Well, it's for those who are suffering.

Because Job is a character in this book. A real person that suffered. It's for people like Job. This is theology in real life in the trenches where life is messy.

And life is painful. And it's not pretty. And it's not laid out nice and neat. It's where truth and error live in the same heart because it's in my heart where I experience this suffering.

So is that you? Then don't run away from the book of Job. It's wisdom for the suffering. And what it's going to do is it's going to give you words to say.

And it's going to give you a sympathetic heart. It's going to take you by the hand and help you wrestle through your suffering as you walk through Job's suffering and what Job's feeling. It comes to help.

[10:42] It comes to help you and give you come to terms with what you're going through. So it's not a pie in the sky, Mickey Mouse book.

It's serious, but it's sympathetic. Sympathetic. You're going to feel the pain with Job. And as Job feels the pain, you're going to know that what you feel is not strange to you.

So it's full of God's wisdom and grace. So Job is for the suffering. It's also for the triumphalist. And what I mean by a triumphalist is Job's three friends, people who think they've arrived, who think they know all the answers, who they're like us in a lot of ways, where we think that we know what's going on.

And so what it turns out is Job's three friends, as nice as they are in a lot of ways, they can be pretty much loveless Pharisees at some points.

They're able to find fault in Job, or at least think there's fault when there is none. And they think they understand everything and they see what's going on and they can smell a theological rat a mile away.

[11:56] They know. Triumphalists think they've arrived. And if you say, I am wrestling with this, I'm having a hard time coming to terms with this, I'm having a hard time understanding or believing that, they'll give you four books to read and they'll tell you exactly what's the right thing to do.

Do you see what I'm saying? Job's three friends know enough doctrine to be dangerous. But they don't know enough doctrine, they don't know enough pain to be helpful.

They know enough to talk, but they don't know enough to just be quiet. So Job is writing to teach all of us because we all get into that way of thinking where I know what's going on with that situation.

I know what that person's done. I can explain it. And believe it or not, usually it's because that person has sinned or they sinned in some way as if we know all the secret workings of God and what goes on in the heavenly courtroom.

And isn't that the point of Job? The very first few chapters, there is a whole other reality that Job has no access to, that God never tells to him, never explains to him, that Job's three friends don't know about and never would know about.

[13:14] And sometimes we start thinking higher of ourselves and higher of our ideas than we ought to. And Job is written to put all of us in our place.

Job teaches the suffering how to wrestle with God, how to endure through the suffering. And it teaches triumphalists, like us, humility, that we don't know it all, that we haven't gained the victory, that we haven't triumphed completely.

So here's the third question, and here's the key. What is Job's main point? What is the main point of this book? What's the key to understanding it and opening this door?

Well, put succinctly, put theologically, it's this. And that's not going to make much sense to you until I explain it, but it's this.

Retribution theology is wrong. Retribution theology is wrong. And you're saying, that's not exactly helpful this Sunday afternoon.

[14:17] What is retribution theology? Well, here it is in a nutshell. This is Job's three friends, their theology, that they just keep on hammering over and over and over again. It's this.

If you sin, you will suffer. And if you are suffering, it's because you've sinned. And if you repent, God will bless you.

Now, that's it. If you sin, you will suffer. Now, is that true? Is that true?

Well, obviously, it is true. We've sinned and we suffer because of it. But, retribution theology goes further than that. And it says, if you suffer in this life, it must be because you've sinned.

So, remember, Jesus and his disciples are walking along and there's a man in John 9 who's been born blind and the disciples, you know, they know what's going on and they say, well, who sinned? This man or his parents?

[15 : 16] What was Jesus' answer? Neither. This was done so that the glory of God could be seen. So, they were holding this retribution theology in their mind.

If you suffer, you must have sinned. And if you repent, God will bless you. Now, do you see, it's a mixture of truth and error. It's a mixture of sort of like Proverbs and Joel Osteen and prosperity theology.

It's where we say, where people will say, well, do you not see the blessings of God in your life?

Well, there must be some area where you're not giving over to God, where there's some sin and if you confess it, God will bless you.

And of course, they mean, give you things. Are you suffering? There's some unrepentant sin in your life. So, what should you do? You should give everything up to God.

You should not hold on to your money, which is convenient. And, you just need to let it go and then God will fully bless you. There's nothing new under the sun.

[16 : 21] And Job's three friends are a perfect example of that. Job's three friends held to a prosperity gospel of their day. And so, that's the message over and over again. Job, you must have sinned, so repent.

Job, you must have sinned, so repent. If you'll repent, God will bless you. But does it do any good? No. It's actually kind of funny.

You read the book of Job and what ends up happening is Job's three friends, their speeches start to get shorter and shorter and shorter and Job's speeches get longer and longer and longer.

You see what's going on. Job is getting more and more riled up. He's not becoming more calm.

He's getting more agitated. And Job's three friends are just exhausted themselves because their theology doesn't help Job.

It doesn't give him the answers because Job knows it isn't true because they aren't holding out.

[17 : 23] Job's three friends, their theology isn't true because they're not holding out God's grace. This is the key. They're holding out ways to manipulate God.

They're holding out ways that you can manage God. And so their message, their theology is basically Satan's theology at the very beginning. Remember, Satan comes to God and says, well, why wouldn't Job serve you?

You've blessed him. You put a hedge of protection around him. So why wouldn't he serve you?

Take that away and he'll curse you. So what's Satan thinking?

Well, the only reason people serve is because of what they get. And Job's three friends have that basic mentality. It looks very different, but it's basically the same.

You do things for blessing. If you obey, you'll experience this blessing. And if you disobey, of course God won't bless you. And if you're suffering, it's because you've sinned.

[18 : 29] And so the thing to do is to confess and repent. And if you do that, God will bless you again. And the only problem is that Job loves God for God.

He doesn't love God for what God gives him. He loves God for who he is. And so he struggles with God.

He's not looking for an easy answer to manage God and I'll just say I'm a sinner and then God will make it all better. He's saying what you're saying is just plain wrong about me and about God.

He feels he's struggling with God because he believes that God is good and he loves him. And so that creates this conflict. And so there are points where he's wrestling with God and where he's saying things like God, get off my back.

Will you just leave me alone? Stop haunting me. But those are the words of a man struggling with God. Those aren't the words of a man who just wants God for his things.

[19 : 34] And so the book of Job is powerful yet it's subtle. It's a subtle message that we can never deal with God on the basis of our works, of our activities as if we can manipulate God, as if we can manage him by being good or confessing enough and if I do certain things that means God will do certain things for me and he'll owe me certain things.

By the end, you know how the book of Job goes, by the end Job is crying out I want a hearing. He's really very agitated. Give me a hearing.

Let me argue this out. And so what does God do? He says, you want to call me to the bar? That's not going to happen. Instead, I'm going to call you to the bar. I'm going to question you and you answer me.

And then what follows is like 40 some rhetorical questions where Job has no answer. Where the answer is, Job, you are nothing and God is everything.

And what happens is Job's pride is put in the dust. But at the same time, Job is able to hold on to a God that is way bigger than he is and who cannot be managed.

[20 : 54] His soul is left clinging to God. Job never gets the answer for the pain. As far as we know, he knows no reason for why the things he's experienced.

The book of Job isn't written to give us all the answers about why we suffer. But instead, it shows us in our suffering that the place to run to is not to a God that can be managed and manipulated, but a God who can't be managed.

Now, the essential problem with his three friends and their retribution theology is that it's not based on grace. It's based on works. It's based on self-righteousness and self-salvation.

Just repenting. Just doing the right thing. Where repentance isn't a soul giving up before God and giving up all the sin, but instead it's a soul trying to say, I'm sorry and hopefully if I'm sorry enough, God will have mercy on me.

Where repentance becomes just another form of trying to manage God. Instead, Job needed and we need when we are suffering a God who can't be controlled, a God who can't be managed, who is wild and free and unhindered and gracious.

[22 : 19] Because it's only a God that we can't manage that can help us. It's only a God who is so much bigger than our problems and so much bigger than our sufferings that we can't manipulate that it has the power to reach down into our sufferings and hold us in the middle of them.

And so what we need is God's grace not to deserve but to receive. Not to earn but to inherit. Not to do something but to have God do something for us.

Not to have all the questions answered. But to be loved by God. And God loves Job. And that's why He gives them this huge picture of him.

So the key to understanding Job is simply this, that God is the enemy of the self-righteous. Of the proud. Thinking, I found the answer.

I know how to control God. And God is not going to be controlled no matter how we dress up our management and our manipulation. Now, fourth question.

[23 : 26] Final question. Very briefly. Where does Job take us? Well, Job takes us to the cross. You see, for retribution theology, absolutely thought of, absolutely to not be true, what I mean is there is a truth to it.

But for it to not have the final say, there has to be a place of grace. There has to be a place where men aren't treated as their sins deserve.

There has to be a place where man is forgiven, where they don't get what they deserve, where it isn't you sin and so you suffer. And if you suffer, it must be because you sinned.

If there isn't a place where God gives grace to men, then there is no place for us to hide. There is no place for us to hide, and forever and ever we will be crying out, God, please go away from me. Please get away from me. Leave me alone. And he won't. So Joe points to another innocent sufferer who wrestled with God through his pain, who endured.

[24 : 49] And now because he endured, because Jesus endured, there is grace. And instead of getting what I deserve, I get something that I never could have deserved.

I get grace and Jesus. so he becomes the only way that we can escape the jaws of justice. You can't get Jesus through doing good works.

You can't get Jesus by being a good person. You can't even get him by repenting hard enough as if you're going to show God just how sorry you are and how bad you feel.

You will find grace and you will find forgiveness. You will find Christ when you lay it all down. When you see that you can do nothing, that you can't manipulate, you can't manage, you don't have the secret to getting God to do what you want, that your situation is too bad, your heart is too dead, that you realize that Jesus has to save you or you are not going to be saved.

And when you get to that place and you reach out to Christ, then you'll be saved. And then grace will pick you up and grace will deliver you.

[26 : 15] And that's how we endure suffering, by seeing that I can't come to terms with God, I can't explain all these things, but I simply must cling to his love and his grace for me in Jesus Christ.

And that's what the book of Job is about. That's where it takes us. So as you read it, hopefully that's a key. They'll open your eyes and say, okay, those people were wrong.

And Job really, he says some bad things and he wrestles, but in the end, he's enduring. And you know what, there are times in my heart when I say things that aren't true and I lie to myself and I struggle and I wrestle and it hurts.

But you endure by keeping at it with God, by receiving grace from him and letting him rescue you and stop trying to manipulate him. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we do ask that you would please give us wisdom. Job is a book of wisdom. It's meant to give us wisdom when we're suffering and you know how easy it is for us to lie to ourselves, to believe wrong things, to think harsh thoughts of you and hard thoughts of you that are sinful, that are wrong as we wrestle with you.

[27 : 46] But I thank you that Job is an honest book and it shows us people that honestly are, that Job is honestly trying to understand, honestly trying to endure.

And thank you that we find that God, you cannot be managed. You are not tame, but you are good. And we thank you that that goodness is for us in Christ, that your grace is free and unhindered and sovereign, and that it is you who save us and it's you who rescue us.

It's you who cause us to stand and endure in the hours of suffering, and it's you and your grace who will rescue us from out of all of our suffering. So will you help us to look to Job as a model, as an example of his endurance, and will you help us to follow in his footsteps and his faith.

In Jesus' name, Amen.