

# Good Times

**The Book of Job may not let you get to know exactly why you're suffering as you are, but it will help you get to know the God who knows! And that's the key to this helpful and exciting teaching series from BRYSON SMITH...**

**W**orkers dropped a crate containing a 75 million-year-old dinosaur skeleton outside a museum in the The Hague, Netherlands, breaking it into 188 pieces. "The two Canadian scientists who had spent two years gluing together the skeleton had tears in their eyes," a spokesman told a reporter.  
*The Bulletin, October 7 1997.*

Most of us know what its like to have one of *those* days - a day where nothing goes right - everything goes wrong. Sometimes those days are nothing more than a nuisance, and given enough time we can think back and laugh about them. Sometimes those days are far more tragic. The day the biopsy test comes back positive. The day the police knock at the door to tell you about a fatal accident. The day you discover a terrible secret within a relationship. These are days which can be the start of unimaginable grieving and suffering.

The Old Testament book of Job takes us into the life of man who loses everything. Job's possessions, livelihood, children and health are all ripped away from him in tragic circumstances. Job enters into crippling, mind numbing anguish.

On one level therefore, the book of Job is all about suffering. It offers certain insights into why bad things happen. However the central idea of the book is *not* an explanation as to *why* suffering occurs. The reason why Job suffers is never a mystery for the reader. We discover it by the end of chapter 1! Rather the mystery and tension of the book revolves around how Job will behave towards God. Will Job curse God as Satan predicts? Or will Job remain godly? That is the tension that draws the reader on.

In this respect Job is much more practical than it is theoretical. Job is like a first aid manual. A first aid manual doesn't usually go into great detail concerning all the different ways in which we might break our arm. It's more interested in explaining how to act when our arm is broken. That's like the book of Job. Job does not provide us with an exhaustive catalogue of reasons why suffering might happen. Instead, Job is more concerned to explain how to behave towards God when suffering occurs. Job is a book about whether God is worth trusting, even when He seems to be making our life a misery.

## **STRUCTURE & THEME**

Job follows a tight chiasmic structure which, in its most simplified form, can be represented by the following:

- A The start of Job's suffering (ch 1-2)
- B Three rounds of debate about Jobs suffering (ch 3-27)
- C A wisdom poem (ch 28)
- B' Three monologues about Job's suffering (ch 29-41)
- A' The finish of Job's suffering (ch 42)

This structure reveals how the book revolves around the critical, central, chapter 28. This chapter is a wisdom poem which abruptly breaks into the debate between Job and his friends over why Job is suffering. The poem describes the preciousness of wisdom and the difficulty of finding it. The climax of this poem comes in 28:28; "The fear of the Lord - that is wisdom." This statement is the central theme of all the Old Testament wisdom literature. Its insight is that true wisdom is relational. In other words, the best way to negotiate this life is by having an appropriate relationship of reverence

and dependence towards our Creator.

Within Job the importance of relational wisdom takes on added dimensions. Coming as it does at the close of a debate about why Job is suffering, Job 28 emphasises the idea that true wisdom is not a matter of knowing *why* suffering happens – rather, true wisdom is a matter of knowing the God who knows why suffering happens. The appropriate way in which to approach suffering is therefore not to try to discover why it is happening. Rather, the appropriate way to approach suffering is to try and know God better through the experience. Knowing God is better than being comforted.

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### **MAKING SENSE OF SOME DIFFICULTIES**

When we appreciate that the central theme of Job is the importance of growing in relational wisdom in the midst of suffering, some of the traditionally difficult sections of the book make more sense. For example, it is sometimes suggested that God's speeches to Job (38-41) are inadequate. Rather than explaining to Job why he is suffering, God instead chooses to bombard Job with a catalogue of questions about creation. It is suggested that this is a cruel, vindictive approach for God to take. However when we see that relational wisdom is the central theme in Job, God's questions are actually the most loving thing He could do.

God's words have the effect of humbling Job. The questions remind Job of that most crucial distinction - who is God, and who isn't. Job is brought to repentance (42:6). **This repentance is not from sins which have caused his suffering. Job's repentance is from the sin of not handling his suffering in the right way.** He is repenting of "obscuring God's counsel" and demanding an explanation from

God as if God owed him one. All this relates to the important lesson of Job 28:28... the key to negotiating life is not to know why things happen; rather, the key to negotiating this life is to know God. That is what God seeks to teach Job. God's speeches have the effect of helping Job to know Him better (Job 42:5). Job now fears God in a way that he never did before. This is far better than knowing why he is suffering.

Another aspect of Job which many commentators struggle with is its happy ending, in which Job is blessed even more than at the beginning (42:7-17). For some people this seems a contradiction to the rest of the book. If the book tells us that bad things can even happen to good people why at the end should Job's fortune be restored? Alternatively, other people find the ending frustrating in what it doesn't say. There is no sense of closure to God's opening dialogue with Satan. Job's friends are rebuked by God, but Satan, who initiated Job's suffering in the first place, is not! Elihu also is not addressed by God, even though he seemed equally hard on Job as the friends. It would certainly seem that the ending of the book is not neat.

However when we understand that relational wisdom is the central theme of Job, the incompleteness of the book's ending actually becomes the very point. The ending, like the entire book, highlights the fact that much of life is mysterious. All through the book Job and his friends have struggled with the question of why suffering occurs. The book finishes with even us the readers also wondering about things. Though we were privy to the discussions in heaven at the beginning of the book, we are not at the end. We are therefore left to wonder exactly why Job is blessed, as well as wondering what happened to Satan and Elihu. (Or even wondering who Elihu is in the first place!)

All this mystery only serves to show us that things happen in life and we may never understand why. But in the end knowing why isn't what matters. What matters is knowing God, for that is wisdom.

### **JOB AND JESUS**

When we appreciate the central importance of relational wisdom in Job, we are also in a much better position to appreciate how the book points us forward to Jesus Christ. Job takes us into a fallen world, where even the innocent suffer. It raises the whole question of how we should behave towards God in such a world. God's ultimate solution to this is to send His own Son to share in our experiences, so that a profoundly intimate relationship could be forged between God and man. Our experiences of innocent suffering in a fallen world are felt within God himself! Through Christ therefore, we now not only have a relationship with God based on knowledge, we have a relationship based on shared experience. Through Christ, relational wisdom is taken to staggering new dimensions.

Because of Christ's innocent suffering for humanity, our suffering can also now be transformed into a constructive and positive experience. Suffering can deepen our experience of Christ. By enduring the hardship of suffering we can produce a harvest of righteousness as we grow in patience and trust in our Saviour (Heb 12:4-11). In addition to this, there is comfort in knowing that we do not go through anything that Christ hasn't also gone through. How Job longed to know Christ (9:32ff)!

### **PREACHING PLAN**

Job is a big book with much repetition. There are therefore many ways in which to approach the book for preaching. In one sense the book could even be well covered in a single sermon. Alternatively, the series could consist of talks on each of the main characters: Job, his friends, God, and Satan. In the following sermon series the book was treated in four talks. Each talk corresponded to one of the main sections as outlined above, the exception being that chapter 28 was saved for inclusion in the final talk. This was done so as to wrap up the whole series in a way which avoided too much repetition of earlier talks.

### **RESOURCES**

As far as commentaries go, David Clines in the WBC series is the most thorough and stimulating. Though the commentary itself only covers chapters 1-20 (a 2nd volume is on the way) there is a lengthy introduction which explains Clines' approach to the

book. Anderson's commentary in the Tynedale series does cover the entire book but in much less detail. Anderson's comments on structure are very helpful though. Although not commentaries, two books of essential reading are Carson's "How Long, O Lord?" and Goldsworthy's "Gospel And Wisdom." Both books have exceptional chapters on Job.

## **OUTLINES**

### **Talk 1 - GOOD TIMES, BAD TIMES**

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... the key to negotiating life is not to know why things happen; rather, the key to negotiating this life is to know God.

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#### **Job 1-2**

##### **1.0 "SALLY WAS SCREAMING..."**

When Stuart Diver was pulled from the rubble 65 hrs after the Thredbo landslide you could just about hear the cheer go up all around the country. More people watched his rescue live on television than any other thing on television that week. The miracle of his survival and the tragedy of the disaster (in which 17 people included his wife Sally were buried alive) was a saga that captivated our country. But where was God in all that? How should we feel about God as a result of that tragedy?

The book of Job is about how we should relate to God when bad things happen. Job doesn't really tell us why suffering happens. Instead it simply addresses the fact that suffering will happen and when it does, how are we going to act towards God?

##### **2.0 WHAT JOB IS LIKE (1:1-6)**

Job is unquestionably godly. Three times in ch 1-2 we are told that Job was a blameless and upright man who feared God and shunned evil. He is the perfect example of a godly, wise man. And he is astronomically wealthy. This is exactly what you would expect from the Proverbs (Pr 3:1-8). The book opens with everything as it should be. Everything is as we would want it. A good man enjoying a good life. But then comes the shock - because despite how good Job is, bad things now happen to him.

##### **3.0 WHAT HAPPENS TO JOB (1:13-22, 2:7-10)**

In the space of two days Job goes from prosperity to poverty - from great comfort to crippling pain, from being the greatest man among all the people of the East to sitting on a rubbish tip scratching his scabs with a broken

piece of pottery. And almost compounding the whole tragedy is that Job has absolutely no idea why.

#### **4.0 WHAT JOB DOESN'T KNOW**

Only we the readers know that Satan has been running down Job's character. Satan figures Job only follows God for what he can get out of it. Job's not interested in God at all, he just likes the gifts God gives. So take away the gifts and he'll curse you God. God takes up the challenge.

It's important to remember that Job has not been privy to this challenge between Satan and God. All Job knows is suffering. This is true to life. Decisions are made in heaven which affect us, but which we, like Job, know nothing about. That's the way it is. The issue is how are we going to react? Are we going to question God's right to do that? Are we going to demand that God explain to us His heavenly decisions? Might we even curse God, as Satan claims Job will do?

We must wait till we finish the book to see the complete answer as to how we should relate to God through suffering but even in these opening chapters we are seeing one thing about God which we must never forget. We must never forget His sovereignty.

#### **5.0 SUFFERING & THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**

One thing that is so blatantly obvious in these early chapters is the controlling hand of God. Satan himself recognises his own limitations and Job also recognises God's controlling hand (1:21). Everything, even the bad times, falls under the scope of God's sovereignty. The bible also insists, however, that God is unfailingly good. God therefore is always presented as standing behind evil in a different way than he stands behind good. Here in Job, God doesn't directly cause the suffering but he does give permission for Satan to cause it. In that way there is no escape from God's sovereignty, but the language implies that the evil is not directly attributable to Him. This is perfectly seen at the cross. The most evil event imaginable, producing the greatest good imaginable, all within God's sovereign plan that he mapped out even before creation.

What does all this mean? It means that even when tragic things like the Thredbo landslide are happening, everything happens in conformity to God's good will. There's comfort in that. No matter how unknown and difficult the future may be for us, we walk into it with a God of unqualified power and unfailing goodness.

### **Talk 2 - LIFE IS NOT NEAT Job 3-27**

#### **1.0 "SOMEWHERE IN MY YOUTH OR CHILDHOOD...."**

Many of us know the song from Rogers & Hammerstein's, "The Sound of Music" in which Maria sings, "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could. Somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good." That's often how we think. When something goes well, we think we're somehow being rewarded. When something goes wrong our immediate response is, "What have I done to deserve this?" In some Christian circles thinking is even reinforced with spiritual sounding reasons. People are told they are suffering because there is some unconfessed sin in their life. But is that the way life really works? That's what this section of Job is all about.

#### **2.0 THE PATTERN OF JOB 3-27**

We enter a huge section of debate between Job and his friends. After some initial comments by Job (he basically says he wished he'd never been born) each of Job's friends have a go at explaining to Job why he is suffering so. Eliphaz goes first, and then Job replies to him. Bildad goes next and Job replies to him. Zophar goes last and Job replies to him. The entire cycle is repeated two more times. The whole debate soon becomes gridlocked as neither side refuses to budge.

#### **3.0 THE STALEMATE OF JOB 3-27**

##### **a) the accusation from Job's friends**

The friend's arguments are well summarised in Eliphaz's first speech (4:7-8). They think Job is suffering because of unconfessed sin in his life. If he repents, God will restore him to his former comfort (5:25-27).

##### **b) Job's response**

Job insists he has not done anything to warrant his suffering. Job isn't claiming to be perfect, but he is saying that he hasn't done anything bad enough to warrant the degree of suffering he's going through. As a result Job repeatedly calls on God to explain himself (13:22-24). In his despair Job even toys with the idea that there may be a level of cruelty in God (9:14-17). Indeed as the debate goes on Job grows increasingly bitter (27:2-6).

#### **4.0 THE LESSONS OF JOB 3-27**

##### **a) a truth about life**

Job's friends got it wrong. We know this from chapters 1-2. Their theology is too neat. They have no room for mystery. The result is that their counsel to Job is both naive and cruel. Sometimes undeserved suffering happens. The question is how do we cope with it when it does. Job's words show that he would have coped better if he had known Jesus.

##### **b) Job's need for Jesus**

Job's suffering is heightened by his loneliness (6:14). Job desperately needs a friend who will stick by him. Better still, he needs a friend who knows what it's like to be in his shoes. Secondly, Job admits he needs an advocate (9:32-33). Jesus is the perfect friend and advocate who knows what

its like to suffer innocently (Heb 4:14-16). We can therefore have perfect confidence in approaching God and asking him for the grace to help us in our times of need.

### **Talk 3 - BRACE YOURSELF LIKE A MAN Job 29:1-42:6**

#### **1.0 WHY?**

Following the death of Diana an amazing outpouring of grief occurred. An estimated \$54 million of flowers were laid outside Buckingham Palace. On one particular bunch of flowers was pinned a white card with one word written on it... "Why?" When suffering happens this is the question we often ask ourselves. This is exactly the question that Job has been asking God for the last 28 chapters.

#### **2.0 JOB'S & ELIHU'S SUMMARIES**

Just like in a courtroom drama scene the arguments of Job and his friends are now summarised by Job himself (29--31) and the mysterious Elihu (32-38). The debate is now complete. All that's left to go is the verdict.

#### **3.0 GOD'S VERDICT**

The surprising thing is what God doesn't say. God gives no reason whatsoever to Job as to why he is suffering. Instead of giving answers to Job, God mainly asks questions, the most blistering question being in 40:8. God here is hauling Job over the coals because of Job's willingness to condemn God in order to justify himself. Job is rebuked for questioning God's competence and integrity. Hence the reason why God floods Job with all these questions is to restore the right perspective to Job. If Job can't even subdue the creation effectively, what right has he to call the Creator into question?

#### **5.0 JOB'S RESPONSE AND OURS**

Job says he repents in dust and ashes (42:6). He is not repenting from sins which caused his sufferings but from the sin of not handling his suffering in the right way. This is an important lesson for us all. Suffering can be a very crippling experience and we can become completely engrossed in our self and our problems. But no matter how difficult things may be, it is never an excuse for being disrespectful or overly demanding with God. As such the Psalms are good models for us to follow for even when we are suffering - there are limits to how we should treat God.

### **Talk 4 - FAITH, MYSTERY & THE MEANING OF LIFE**

### **Job 42:7-17**

#### **1.0 ...THEY ALL LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER**

We all love happy endings and so at one level the end of Job should please us. Everything again turns good just as quickly as it turned bad. However there's something strange about this ending.

#### **2.0 JOB'S ENDING: HAPPY, FRUSTRATING, CONFUSING**

The ending is frustrating because it all happens so fast that there are still a few loose ends which need to be cleared up. Job's friends get put in their place but what about Elihu? What about Satan? The ending is also a little confusing. Up until now the book has been saying that Job's friends were wrong and life is not neat. Innocent suffering can happen and good people don't necessarily have good things happen to them. But all of a sudden here at the end Job repents and good things happen to him again. Were Job's friends right after all? It's a bit confusing and surprising. Which is exactly the point because that's what life is like. Life has an aspect of mystery to it. Indeed it's this mysterious aspect to life which takes us right to the heart of what the whole book of Job is about.

#### **3.0 JOB AND WISDOM (Job 28)**

Chapter 28 comes as an interlude amongst all the debate about why Job is suffering. It's a poem all about wisdom in which the punch line is that *true wisdom is to fear the Lord* (v28). This is THE lesson of the book in a nutshell.

#### **4.0 THE LESSON OF JOB IN A NUTSHELL**

If we want to get the most out of this life, it's not a matter of knowing why things happen, it's a matter of *knowing the God* who knows why things happen. This is a radical way of thinking, because we don't tend to value knowing God all that much. Being comfortable and happy is what we value. But the really important thing in life is not to be a well adjusted person with a good self image. The really important thing is to know God. It is exactly for this reason that following Jesus is always more important than being comfortable. Therefore, the big question in life is not, "Why is this happening to me?" The important question is; "Since this is happening to me, how can I trust and obey Jesus better as a result of it?"

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