

Job 23:3 O that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him.

When life doesn't go the way you planned it.

It certainly hadn't for Job.

The book is the story of a good man who suffers total disaster – he loses all his children and property – is afflicted with a terrible disease.

Then on top of that he has to put up with his tedious friends - their theories.

Somehow they'd learnt that God rewards the good and punishes evil.

(Sounds like Robin Hood!)

So Job's sufferings from their point of view can only mean that he has sinned.

Job can't believe this about God. He very boldly challenges God. Pours it all out. Wonderfully doesn't lose his faith.

God doesn't give an answer to Job's questions but he does respond to Job's faith – overwhelms him with a picture of his divine power and wisdom.

When life doesn't go the way you planned it:

Our goals and God's may start off being very different. Perhaps they stay like that. Maybe, by God's grace and patience our goals start to come more into line with his. As we continue our journey into eternal life

In our Home Group recently we had the question –

"If someone were to follow you for a day would they see that you are looking forward to being at home with the Lord in eternal life?"

Answer on a scale of 1 to 10?

Most of us have our plans for this earthly portion. That's as far as it goes.

God has his plans for now and stretching into eternity.

That Home Group question keeps coming up in my mind.

Thank you, Lord, for the challenge.

Thank you Lord for the reminder that I am on a journey (with every other human). That this is not my home. That like Abraham and all who have gone before I am seeking a city which has foundations – whose builder and maker is God. –

"That you, God, are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."

The Home Group was also sure that our time here with God in this world is important – not just to be tolerated.

Rod Thompson, principal of Laidlaw College, in an address to the “Wellness Conference” reminded everyone how Jesus in his Galilean ministry went about healing the sick.

“And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.”

I have no doubt that is the first response God calls us to make when we are confronted by sickness and suffering – our own or someone else’s.
Pray. “Call for the elders”. “Consult the physician” – Ecclesiasticus.
Time and again the problem is dealt with. Glory be to God.

There are those other times when the outcome we hoped for does not come about.

Take Paul. What he survived! Miracle after miracle in his life. His conversion, the greatest miracle.

Yet when he asks that the “thorn in his flesh might be removed” (some physical problem, we don’t know what) – it doesn’t happen.

Instead the response he hears is –

“My power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Cor.12:9

I imagine he took some time to think this over. To check, this really was what God was saying. I certainly would have needed time to be sure.

When he was sure, you know what he said?

“Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong”v10

God said, “My power is made perfect IN weakness” – not despite weakness.

Amazingly Paul is saying that being weak is to his advantage.

By the power of God he’s looking to live in imitation of Jesus dying on the cross. That’s what he’s doing.

Paul’s looking to live in utter dependency, obedience, humility. To be like Christ. So different from the goals of his day. And ours.

God has a backwards way of dealing with problems in our world.

And somehow God gives the power to carry on through those times of weakness, suffering – Isaiah 40:28f

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God... His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless... those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength.”

Job felt that God had given him a rough deal. Things could hardly have been worse. Jesus on the cross was to all intents and purposes alone – so it must have seemed to him from his cry – quoting Psalm 22 -

“my God, my God, Why have you forsaken me?”

But in fact he had not been left alone, not abandoned.

God, while publicly absent, maintained his hidden presence.

So, like Job we will always struggle with suffering – to understand it, to overcome it, to continue to experience God through it. We also know that Jesus faced the limitations we do.

Does Jesus suffering transform ours?

Suffering remains suffering. Death remains death. They are attacks on life. Not to be made light of. Not to be accepted stoically or apathetically. To be fought – in the personal, in the community. Our hearts go out to the Syrian refugees. We do something to help.

It’s not a simple equation but because of Jesus, suffering and death can have a meaning. Acquire a meaning – a hidden meaning. We can’t do it for ourselves. It takes the Holy Spirit’s working in us. As with Job, it will likely be a process. It’s not given automatically.

Suffering remains an evil. But with trust in God it is not an absolute evil (as the absence of God would be.)

Do we come to the place where we realise – suffering is part of life in this world? Wouldn’t life be better without it? How do we know? Questions.

Job, after all his questions and complaints – Job, when he does hear the voice of God, cries out –

“I heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” Job 42:5,6

“Why do I suffer?” The question - that’s been described as, “the rock of atheism” - can bring us closer to the heart of God. Suffering constantly proves to be the crucial test of trust in God. It was for Job.

It wasn’t the philosophical arguments of his comforters. They were no more help than a lecture on food chemistry would be to the starving.

It was when, in his waiting, he heard the voice of God.

It's in our "looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" that the miracle happens. That we are saved from the possibility of cynicism or despair. It is because of Jesus that we can have a hope.

We trust in God that one day, one day there will be a revelation of its meaning. When we will know as we are known.

We have not been deserted. God has not left us just to fend for ourselves. In Jesus God has come to be alongside us – all the way.

Some of the old hymn writers who today we pass over – who we see as being rather dreary, especially in their tunes – some of them sought to express these concepts. Dismal they may seem, when we would like to be more cheerful. But they're dealing with reality.

Take John Newman's, "Lead kindly light"

"Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom, Lead thou me on:

The night is dark, and I am far from home; Lead thou me on.

Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene –

one step enough for me... (then the last verse) -

So long thy power hath blessed me, sure it still will lead me on..."

When we look to Jesus – the Jesus who suffered – we can know that God is here with us, present, despite how bleak things may look.

(When the sun's shining, and our prayers have been answered, another goal achieved, our hearts can easily be full of praise. We rejoice, sing praises.)

God can be known, encountered not only in light and joy, but also in the darkness. In sorrow, and pain, melancholy.

We need to be reminded: Suffering is not a sign of God's absence. Job's friends missed the point, had it so wrong.

The Kingdom of God runs on different lines from the kingdoms of this world.

The cross, the suffering of Jesus, shows this is the way of God.

At the cross our God is identifying himself with us. God the Father is feeling the pain of loss. His love is being crucified, spat on, rejected.

In fact, time and again, suffering turns out to be the point where we encounter God afresh. Maybe even for the first time.

Years ago I read a book, "The Hospital, a place of Truth". It told the stories of many who found hospital was the setting where, taken out of their normal

circumstances and supports, they reflected, looked beyond themselves, were open to the One beyond.

God is present with us. God sustains.

God is not just the God of the healthy and the prosperous. He is the father of the lost. Think of all the NT stories about searching and finding the lost – the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son.

In the power of the Holy Spirit we are invited to dare to hope. To find that our God is merciful – that he keeps us going.

It's so clear in all Jesus' life and work that God is on our side.

God is the God who is friendly to people. God is suffering with people.

God is on the side of the weak, the sick, the poor, the oppressed.

Jesus' earthly ministry even leads us to believe that God is on the side of the irreligious, the immoral and the ungodly.

The meaning of the cross can never be defined abstractly.

From a worldly point of view it is not attractive. Quite the opposite.

Paul's best explanation was to live it.

When we reflect on Jesus' earthly life and ministry we see connections with Job. Some have said that Jesus answered the questions Job was asking.

There's more to it than that.

In a real way Jesus became Job – *"Learning obedience through the things he suffered"*.

At Gethsemane Jesus shouted and wept in prayer. He fought his way to a costly submission to God's purpose. That purpose took him through death into the world of new creation.

God's love does not protect us against all suffering. He protects us in suffering. God's purpose for us will be completed in his future. His glorious future.

Job's cry - we began with –

"O that I might know where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling" –

That cry is answered for Job, and for us in Revelation 21 -

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

see the home of God is among mortals, He will dwell with them and their God, they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them, he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."