

REAL PRAYER

Job 38: 1–7

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We often talk about how great and good God is, how God gives us good things, how God loves us and cares for us well beyond our deserving. We all have many things to be grateful for – things in our lives that we didn't earn. But what about pain, trouble, misfortune, disaster...? Unless you have a very negative view of human beings, unless you see people as basically worthless, it seems clear that bad things that we don't deserve do come our way.

What happens when the bottom falls out of our lives? What happens to our relationship with God when we are suffering, when we are grieving, when we are in pain?

There are two likely responses. One response is to **ditch God**: I must have been crazy to believe in God. Look what has happened in my life! God obviously doesn't really care about me. Why did I ever think of praying to God? What good has that done? There probably is no God. I'm never going to make the mistake of trusting in God again. As far as faith goes, I'm out of here. I'm walking away from all of it.

The second response is maybe a bit more surprising. It is to **protect God** by going into denial: I mustn't question God or show anger towards God or express disappointment with God. There's a good reason for what has happened even though I don't know what it is. God has a better plan. I should be thankful for what I still have. I have no right to question the Almighty. So we continue to praise and thank God while beating down the negative feelings, too scared to express them.

A couple of years ago, while at a church conference in Nashville, Tennessee, I visited a big church called Crosspoint which met in a converted warehouse. It was filled with young people and the senior pastor, Pete Wilson, looked about twelve years old. Pete talked about a terrible car crash in which a young man was killed. Pete was called to go to the family home. He got there almost as quickly as the police who were delivering the news. The father of the household was shocked for the first few minutes but then seemed to pull himself together. He said that God had a plan, that his son was safe with God and that the family would simply trust God for the future.

For Pete this response was coming much too quickly, though you might consider that it seems a very mature and faith-filled reaction. But it was based on the idea that it would be wrong to express doubt, anger or outrage to God. This man was heading for trouble. We'll return to him in a moment.

The Book of Job is an important one which takes the subject of our relationship with God very seriously and explores it through a made-up story. It reads like a play; the main characters are given dialogue which reflects different kinds of arguments that people then – and even now – might use.

Job himself is a character deliberately created to tick all the right boxes. He is rich and successful. He has vast collections of animals and land with servants and hired hands to help him. Then he's got a lovely wife and a beautiful family. To top it off – he's a great guy. He is honest, he's good and he is deeply close to God. This man, Job, is living an exemplary life; everything is great for him. He doesn't have one single problem to be concerned about.

The book starts off with a conversation between God and the Devil. The Devil tells God that the only reason Job worships God is because of all he's got going for him. His life is so perfect – no wonder he trusts in God. It's easy for Job to believe in God. Take away his things, his loved ones, his health and Job will turn against God. God and the Devil end up having a kind of bet about this. The Devil is given the chance to send disaster Job's way in the hope that Job will give up his faith. In the blink of an eye, Job loses most everything dear to him: his home, his possessions, his livestock, his workers, and his children. Then Job comes down with leprosy.

Why has this happened? Where is God in all of this? Some well-meaning 'friends' turn up to suggest answers: *God only does bad things to bad people, so you must have done wrong. Maybe there are some sins that you've forgotten about? Perhaps God is doing this as a kind of warning or to test your faith?* But Job doesn't buy any of this.

In chapter 38, God speaks to Job for the first time. At first glance, it seems to be a disappointing moment because God does not give a reason for all the trouble that Job has undergone. Instead God reminds Job that, despite all that has happened, God is still ultimately in control.

Some people are desperately unlucky in life. Some get more than their fair share of pain and heartbreak because that's the uneven, random world that we live in. Stuff happens. But, just as misfortune doesn't really come our way through God having a bet with the Devil, neither is misfortune sent by God. People used to think that God was responsible for everything that happened, good or bad. If you were well, God had blessed you with good health. When you were ill, God had made you ill. But that's never been true. God does not send misfortune. When tragic things happen, they have not been engineered by God. That old, primitive idea just has to go.

If you are suffering today, does it matter whether or not God caused it? It might be reassuring to know that God isn't sending trouble our way but how does that change

the trouble? In Job's story it's not what so much what God says that is interesting. It's the fact that God spoke. What changes Job and gives him hope at the end of this story is that he has met with God. The God he has heard about and believed in for all those years suddenly has become real. Job has actually encountered God for himself. He realises that, however much may go wrong in life, God is still ultimately in control and will never abandon him. God is on his side and God will be there for him – God is his ultimate security.

Who would have thought that Job would have made it into the English language? Yet we all use the expression 'the patience of Job'. The funny thing about that is that Job is not patient at all! His friends keep telling him to be patient – to be quiet, to stop moaning, and to watch the words he uses when talking about God. When Job starts criticising and questioning God his friends warn him that he is on dangerous ground.

But it is because Job does this that he meets with God.

It's because Job won't lie down to injustice that he meets with God.

It's because Job demands to wrestle with what God is like that he meets with God.

It's because Job is totally open and honest with God that he meets with God.

It's because Job looks up to God and, in effect, says *I demand to know what's going on here* that God grants him an audience. The relationship between Job and God is maintained and strengthened by Job being totally real and telling God exactly what he is feeling and thinking without trying to tidy it up. Far from being angry and offended, God honours this.

God seeks a real relationship with us even when that might involve us in communicating feelings of disappointment, bewilderment - even anger. God is big enough to take our honest feelings and process them into a better understanding. Let's go back to that car accident...

When it came time for the funeral, there could be no open coffin because the body had been pretty smashed up. But the undertaker allowed a private viewing for family members. The family asked Pete if he would go with them and if he would say a prayer. He said he would but that he thought they should all say a prayer.

What Pete remembers of that occasion was the father leaning over the coffin looking down at his son saying, *God, why could you let this happen? God, why could you let this happen?* over and over again. That was his prayer.

Pete said that was the only prayer that the father could pray then. That was what he had to say to God on that day. That prayer was real. God didn't cause the accident. God didn't kill his son. It wasn't God's fault. God was getting the blame because the

father had no one else to blame. But God could take that because it was honest and open and real. And then the process of healing could begin.

You might remember we talked recently about colouring-in books for adults. These have become quite a thing just now. It's a simple idea – easily dismissed – but it turns out to be good for us. Prayer is the same. It's good for us.

There are many ways to pray that we can explore, but maybe we are at the point where we can't even start. We don't know how to begin because something is bugging us. Maybe we feel some frustration about our relationship with God, or maybe we can't be sure that we even believe in God. We wonder how we could pray with all those doubts and feelings? But this is exactly the place where we need to start praying or maybe we never actually will.

When you are in a relationship with someone and there is an issue between the two of you, the relationship can be kept going superficially, up to a point. But if the relationship is to be sorted out and deepened, somehow you have to find a way of addressing that issue. In the same way, if there is an issue between us and God, then we have to admit it, broach it and take it to God. That's how we get our spiritual life back on track – or how we kick it off for the first time.

Job had a good relationship with God when his world started to crumble. He refused to give up on God. He refused to give up on faith and curse God. He also refused to protect God and blame himself. He did not take the line that his suffering was deserved or was divine punishment. Job refused to accept any of these options but he also refused to stop talking to God or asking God for help. He was brave enough to be open and honest with God about what he was feeling, including his sense of anger and betrayal. Because of that persistence, God came through for him. God broke through and Job encountered God for himself. God honoured Job's honest attempt at communication.

At the end of the book, Job's life is restored and he ends his days in the happy state he was in at the start of the story. But the point of the book is not to tell us about a man called Job; he's just a fictional character. The point of the book is to tell us that God does not send trouble our way, though trouble will no doubt find us at some point. The book tells us, too, that God honours our prayers when they are real, when they are true, when they are honest – even if they contain doubt, uncertainty or anger.

So when you come to pray today, or any future day, be real. Real prayers are the ones that will build our relationship with God.