

Eleven

THE FAITH OF JOB—I

We have now heard what each of the comforters had to say, and we have heard Job's rejoinders to them.

As all these attacks were coming on Job, what was Job's faith? What was he maintaining all through? What was sustaining him in that? We need to remember the context: this was a testing time, not just for Job, but for God. Satan had challenged God's righteousness, and God, in letting Satan have his way with Job, was undertaking to sustain Job in that faith and that trustful righteousness of his, no matter what should come. So now we are going to look at Job's faith. This is one of the most significant areas of our study in the Book of Job.

JOB RIGHT ALL ALONG

Remember in 42:7 God said to the comforters, 'You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.' God was telling the comforters that Job was right all along. Coming at the end of the book, that takes us by surprise. It often seems that the comforters were speaking orthodox truth, and that Job was saying some pretty outrageous things. Having read that at the end of the book, and then going back to what the comforters said, we have been able to see where they were going astray. But when we come at it cold, it takes us by surprise.

Some of the things that Job says strike us as being very bold, even outrageous. Perhaps God does not mind that, if we are on the right track. Perhaps He does not mind us shooting off our mouths, if it is to Him that we are speaking, and it is on Him that our hope is fixed. We may say some pretty outrageous, even some stupid things, crying out to God. But God can handle that, if He knows where our heart is. Having heard that again, let's go back now and see how Job was really right all along.

A CONSISTENT ATTITUDE

We have looked a number of times at these words in 1:20–21:

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.'

That is a wonderful expression of Job's faith and understanding of the ways of God and of life. And in 2:9–10:

Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.' But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

That is Job's basic attitude right through this book. The poetry, which begins in chapter 3, starts a new section of the book, and because of that some commentators say, 'Well, the first two chapters were written by someone, and then someone else wrote the chapters on from chapter 3, because that is written in poetry and this is written in prose, and there is a break there, so you can say the attitudes in chapters 1–2 are not the same as the attitudes you find in the poetry chapters'. I warn you of that, because if you start reading commentaries on Job, that is what you will come up

against. If you accept what these commentators say, then it means that you are starting to break the book up, and if there are things that you do not quite understand or cannot quite come at, then you can explain them away, because, well, someone said this and someone else said that, and you can play them off against each other. That is one way of approaching the Bible. But it ends up being that you make of the Bible what you will, and the Bible ends up being fitted to the limitations of your understanding or your preferences. I have found it much more valuable and much more rewarding just to try and take it as it is. And where that challenges me or puzzles me or confronts me, then maybe it's I who need to change, and not the Bible. So our approach to the Book of Job has been that the whole book is a consistent whole. So we can say that Job's attitude right through the book is consistent with what he says in chapters 1 and 2. That is the basis on which we have been expounding Job, and the treasures and riches that come out of it when you do that are quite amazing.

JOB AND HIS 'COMFORTERS'

Let's just recap on what the three comforters were saying. Eliphaz said that human beings cannot be righteous or pure before God: God is great, a human being is a worm, and must knuckle under when suffering comes, and put up with it. God is remote and indifferent, says Eliphaz. So, if God is making Job suffer so much, Job must have done very terrible things to attract that kind of attention. Eliphaz ended up accusing Job of terrible things—maligning him. Bildad said, Good is rewarded, evil is punished—that is strictly the way it is; there is no grace allowed; there is no compromise. That was his whole system, and he stayed locked inside it. Zophar, the youngest of the three, thinks that he can tell Job a thing or two, but is himself arrogant and rude. From the start he counts Job as guilty, accuses him, and counsels him to change his ways.

Out of all this we have seen that Job had a better and a deeper understanding of God and of the real world than any of them did. Not only that, Job, of all of them, is most conscious of being directly before God, of being dealt with personally by God. In fact, he is the only one of them for whom that comes through so strongly. The others speak of God in good theological words, but it is Job in his suffering that is again and again confronting them with reality, with the direct action of God in his own life. It is that, as much as anything, that silences them in the end.

RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD?

What is Job's faith-claim? Unlike Eliphaz, he claims it is possible for a human being to be righteous before God. The hope and conviction he expresses is that he will be such a one. Eliphaz said, 'Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?' (4:17). And he thinks, 'No, that is totally impossible'. But Job says, 'No! It is possible for a person to be righteous before God, and I shall be such a one'. That is what angers his comforters—they call it gross presumption. We might be tempted to do the same.

I wonder if we are tempted to agree with the comforters? I'm an Anglican, so I'll just speak for the Anglicans. I have found that Anglicans especially are reluctant to say that they will appear righteous and upright in the presence of God. I guess they would not be alone in that. Ask them if they *know* that they are going to heaven, and they will say, Well, I *hope* so! But they will not be definite or sure about it. They may go on to say, 'Well, I've certainly tried my best'. And that gives the game away. That

shows that they are expecting to get into heaven on the basis of what they have done. That is the highest and most blatant form of presumption and pride—that it is their efforts that count in getting to heaven! So their unsureness about whether they'll be there or not is not genuine humility. They may count it so, but it is not. Actually, it is a thin veil or cloak for a most perverse form of pride. If we had less of that kind of timid self-deceiving uncertainty, and more of the boldness and gutsy courage and conviction of Job, then we would be much better off.

ON WHAT JOB HAS DONE?

On what then does Job base this strange hope of his that he will appear righteous before God? On a superficial reading, some may conclude that he bases his faith on his own righteousness—the things he himself has done right. Let's read Job's final claim for himself in chapter 31. We have already looked at chapters 29 and 30. Chapter 29 we looked at right at the beginning. It showed Job in his prosperity and security, what great respect he was held in there, what a fine figure of a man he was. In chapter 30 he speaks of where he has come to, where his prosperity and his family and all his possessions are gone, and he is a laughing-stock, buffeted by people and by circumstances. Chapter 31 is Job's final claim for himself.

Listening to chapter 31, it might sound from it that Job is basing all his claim for righteousness on what he himself has done. As we go on, we will see that is not the case.

RIGHTEOUSNESS IN PRACTICE

Let us see how Job understood what righteousness is. This chapter is very instructive. It is a wonderful chapter:

31:1 'I have made a covenant with my eyes;
how then could I look upon a virgin?'

That reminds us of what Jesus said in Matthew 5:27–28: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart'—that if you look at a woman lustfully, you have already committed adultery with her in your heart. Job knows the wisdom of not leaving it till then, but settling the matter beforehand. 'I have made a covenant with my eyes'—I have undertaken that I shall never treat a woman in that way. A friend of mine once put it rather crudely: 'I doesn't matter how much you go window-shopping, as long as you don't touch the merchandise!' That is letting it slip. Job did not have that attitude. He said, I have made an agreement with myself that I will never let my eyes wander, or think of a woman in that way. not because he has a fetish about it, but because he fears God:

31:2 What would be my portion from God above,
and my heritage from the Almighty on high?'

—if I allowed myself to stray into those ways? Job knows that God in His faithfulness has something really wonderful for us that is not to be detracted from by trying to get those kinds of things for ourselves against His commandment.

31:3 Does not calamity befall the unrighteous,
and disaster the workers of iniquity?'

Job's true hope is in God, and he knows that sin does not go unpunished, and he knows that everything he does is before the eyes of God:

31:4 Does he not see my ways,
and number all my steps?"

It is all before God.

31:5 If I have walked with falsehood,
and my foot has hurried to deceit—
6 let me be weighed in a just balance,
and let God know my integrity!—"

Job is asking to come before the Judge of all.

31:7 If my step has turned aside from the way,
and my heart has followed my eyes,
and if any spot has clung to my hands;
8 then let me sow, and another eat;
and let what grows for me be rooted out.

There are echoes of what Job is saying in many other parts of the Scriptures. I think particularly of Proverbs 4:20–27:

My child, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
Do not let them escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.
Put away from you crooked speech,
and put devious talk far from you.
Let your eyes look directly forward,
and your gaze be straight before you.
Keep straight the path of your feet,
and all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil.

That is very much the spirit in which Job is speaking here: 'If my step has turned aside from the way . . . then let me sow, and another eat; and let what grows for me be rooted out'—it would be my just deserts for nothing in my life to be fruitful, and that is what I would ask for.

NO PLACE FOR ADULTERY

Job goes on:

31:9 'If my heart has been enticed by a woman,
and I have lain in wait at my neighbour's door;
10 then let my wife grind for another,
and let other men kneel over her.

Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for sharing with strangers.
Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
may you be intoxicated always by her love.
Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another woman
and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?
For human ways are under the eyes of the LORD,
and he examines all their paths.
The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them,
and they are caught in the toils of their sin.
They die for lack of discipline,
and because of their great folly they are lost (Prov. 5:15–23).

So Proverbs goes on in chapters 6 and 7:

a prostitute's fee is only a loaf of bread,
but an adulteress stalks a man's very life (Prov. 6:26).

An adulterer likewise. I draw these passages to your attention because of the prevalence and apparent acceptability of adultery in our community. Those words from Proverbs can come to us as a wonderful protection in all of that. It is good that we read these words, and that we read them to our children, so they can know those things too.

That was something that Job was clear on.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INDUSTRIAL EQUITY

Remember that Eliphaz had said to Job back in 22:6–11: 'You have exacted pledges from your family for no reason, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The powerful possess the land, and the favoured live in it. You have sent widows away empty-handed, and the arms of the orphans you have crushed. Therefore snares are around you, and sudden terror overwhelms you, or darkness so that you cannot see; a flood of water covers you.' Eliphaz made those accusations to Job, and we are going to see that they were quite baseless, quite unfounded. Eliphaz felt he had to say that to fit in with his scheme of understanding: that all this suffering has come on Job, so he *must* have done those things. But Job holds fast his integrity in those areas of social justice and industrial equity:

31:13 If I have rejected the cause of my male or female slaves,
when they brought a complaint against me;
14 what then shall I do when God rises up?
When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?
15 Did not he who made me in the womb make them?
And did not one fashion us in the womb?

Those are incredible words. You would not find words like that anywhere else, perhaps, in the ancient world. The idea that a slave could actually bring a complaint against the master, and be heard, and be treated on the same footing as the master! That is where Job has come to in his understanding of who God is. This is something that James warns us about in his letter:

poor person has been made in the image of God, and you have been made in the image of God; if you oppress the poor, you are insulting God—‘but those who are kind to the needy honour him’ (Proverbs 14:31). ‘Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full’ (Proverbs 19:17). See how the Lord identifies Himself so closely with the poor! We can see what Jesus was getting at in Matthew 25:31–46: ‘Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Proverbs 21:13: ‘If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.’ Proverbs 22:22–23: ‘Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.’ That is what Job knew. He wanted to be able to face God’s majesty. We also know from Isaiah 11:4 that when the Messiah comes, ‘with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.’ I guess ‘the poor’ is all of us, really: we are all the needy before God, we acknowledge ourselves to be meek before Him, and then we receive His strength.

Job knew that he was in no different position from the poor, as far as God was concerned, and he knew God’s care for the poor—he knew God’s care for him—and he cared accordingly. It is not a patronising or condescending way in which he cares for the poor (verses 16–21). It is on the basis of that equity: we are all before God in that way, and that is the way God deals with us, so that is the way we deal with the poor. It is simply straightforward: it is not us from our great height pouring our largesse upon the poor unfortunate people. It is just that they are there, and we are there, and we are together in that. So we need to be together in that.

GOD THE GIVER AND MAKER IS TO BE WORSHIPPED

We read on:

31:24 If I have made gold my trust,
 or called fine gold my confidence;
25 if I have rejoiced because my wealth was great,
 or because my hand had gotten much;

We have seen how wealthy Job was—perhaps the most wealthy man in the whole country—but he never depended on that for who he was, or for his righteousness. His trust was in God, because he knew it all came from God.

He has not indulged in idolatry—sun worship or moon worship:

31:26 If I have looked at the sun when it shone,
 or the moon moving in splendour,
27 and my heart has been secretly enticed,
 and my mouth has kissed my hand

—towards those wonderful shining lights. He knows that they have been made by God, and God is to be worshipped, not them. Sun-worship and moon-worship were rife in the area where he lived in those days—

31:28 this also would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges,
 for I should have been false to God above.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Job continues:

31:29 If I have rejoiced at the ruin of those who hated me,

30 or exulted when evil overtook them—
 I have not let my mouth sin
 by asking for their lives with a curse—

What did Jesus say, in Luke 6:27–28? ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.’ That is an incredible thing, that I don’t know many of us who have ever lived up to, but here is Job right up there with Jesus, so many years before, in his understanding and in his practice of his care for his enemies. Why is that? maybe he had an inkling that while we were still the enemies of God, God’s grace in Christ has come to us (see Romans 5:6–11). We are going to see that Job was a man of grace, and that he knew God’s grace, and so it figures that this is the way he would treat his enemies, as he knows how he has been treated by God.

THE HOMELESS AND THE REFUGEE

In the same vein:

31:31 If those of my tent ever said,
 ‘O that we might be sated with his flesh!’—
32 the stranger has not lodged in the street;
 I have opened my doors to the traveller—”

Whether Job knew the Book of Deuteronomy or not, at least he knew the spirit of it, where God says to the Israelites: ‘For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (Deuteronomy 10:17–19). See how all God’s laws come from the character of God Himself, and are spoken to us who are in the image of God, in relationship with Him, to live in keeping with the way He is. That is the way God is towards the refugees and the homeless—that is how God has actually treated you, when you were a homeless refugee—so that is how you will be.

PEOPLE-PLEASING?

It is the healthy fear of God, not the self-serving fear of others, that motivates Job:

31:33 If I have concealed my transgressions as others do,
 by hiding my iniquity in my bosom,
34 because I stood in great fear of the multitude,
 and the contempt of families terrified me,
 so that I kept silence, and did not go out of doors—”

He says, I have nothing to hide: everything I have done has been open and above board, and I am prepared to answer for that, to anyone who wants to claim otherwise.

31:35 Oh, that I had one to hear me!
 (Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!)

He is saying to his friends, I do not have to answer to you. It is God that I want to come before to be judged.

I wonder if we can be that bold? ‘It is God that I want to come before, to be judged!’ But who else would we want to be judged by?

Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
31:36 Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
I would bind it on me like a crown;
37 I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him.

I want to come before the court. I would be glad to give a full account of all my actions—that is my integrity—I would be glad to have them judged.

ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

One final little bit:

31:38 If my land has cried out against me,
and its furrows have wept together;

Job knew about conservation and care for the environment before the ‘greenies’ were ever heard of! He knew that you don’t over-use the ground. Again, we are not sure if he was aware of the laws that were given to Israel about letting the land rest every seven years, and get its breath, before you go ploughing it up again (see Leviticus 25:1–7).

31:39 If I have eaten its yield without payment,
and caused the death of its owners;’

—if I have exploited the people who work there, and not given them just returns—

31:40 let thorns grow instead of wheat,
and foul weeds instead of barley.’”

Again, Job asks for those just consequences.

THE FEAR OF GOD, IN A FAITH-RELATIONSHIP

The words of Job are ended.

That is the note on which Job closes. It may make us feel that Job is claiming there that he has done the right thing, and so he can come before God. But behind what he is saying here is this: ‘I have a fear of God, in my faith-relationship with Him, and that is what has sustained me in all of this right behaviour’. We will see that it is not those things in which he is putting his trust, and that he acknowledges that he is a sinner. He is not claiming sinless perfection. So it is God that he is depending on, to come before Him as righteous.

Lord God, we thank You for the wonderful ways in which You sustain us, by revealing to us Your righteousness, and enabling us to walk in it. Yet we acknowledge, Lord, that this is nothing of us, and all of You. We thank You, Lord, that when we have failed to walk in the ways of Your righteousness, then Your mercy and Your grace have done that deep work which enables us to walk free, and still come before You in the righteousness of Christ. So, Father, we pray that Your Spirit will continue to work in our lives, and in the lives of those whom we love and are

close to us, that Your ways may be known on earth, and Your praise amongst all the nations. Amen.

Twelve

THE FAITH OF JOB—II

What is Job's faith-claim? He claims it is possible for a human being to be righteous before God. The hope and conviction he expresses is that he will be such a one. That is what angers his comforters—they call it gross presumption. But the highest and most blatant form of presumption and pride is to think that it is our efforts that count in getting to heaven. Getting us to heaven is something that God does, not something that we do. Job is sure of coming before God, not because he is sure of himself, but because he is sure of God. Our unsureness about whether we will be there or not is not genuine humility. It is a thin veil or cloak for a most perverse form of pride. As I said, if we had less of that kind of timid self-deceiving uncertainty, and more of the boldness and gutsy courage and conviction of Job, then we would be much better off.

Job is right in line with what the New Testament has to say. For example, the opening words of the Letter to the Ephesians: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world *to be holy and blameless before him* in love' (Ephesians 1:3–4). How is that different from Job's hope? It is the same thing.

THE BASIS OF JOB'S HOPE

On what does Job base this strange hope of his, that he will come as righteous before God? In the previous section we looked at Job 31, and saw how wonderful that chapter is. It is Job's final claim for himself, before God and before his comforters, and on a superficial reading we may conclude that Job bases his faith on his own righteousness—the things that he himself has done right. That is certainly the way his comforters take it, and Elihu, whom we are still to meet. What we saw reading that is that Job had very high and strong moral integrity, well in advance of much in his own day, and much in our day indeed. For instance, verses 13–15:

If I have rejected the cause of my male or female slaves,
when they brought a complaint against me;
what then shall I do when God rises up?
When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?
Did not he who made me in the womb make them?
And did not one fashion us in the womb?

An incredibly wonderful basis for industrial relations, that I still don't think we've quite caught up with yet! But Job knew that. Verse 38, where we said that Job knew about conservation before the 'greenies' were heard of:

If my land has cried out against me,
and its furrows have wept together . . .

Soil degradation is today one of our most pressing problems. But Job knew how to treat the land well.

We also saw that Job is unimpeachable in terms of sexual morality, and social justice. He is right up there, we found, with the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

He is laying this all before God. He is open and above board about it all, he is glad to give a full account of himself, and to be judged by God. Verses 35–37:

Oh, that I had one to hear me!
(Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!)
Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
I would bind it on me like a crown;
I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him.”

It is with great conviction that Job is desiring to bring his whole life before God for the judgement.

On a superficial reading of that, we may conclude that Job is saying: ‘Look, God, I’ve done all the right things, and so You’ve got to vindicate me!’ We are going to see that is not the case, but that is certainly the way his comforters took what he was saying, so we should not be surprised if it comes across to us that way too. In 11:2–6, Zophar, for instance, said:

Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
and should one full of talk be vindicated?
Should your babble put others to silence,
and when you mock, shall no one shame you?
For you say, ‘My conduct is pure,
and I am clean in God’s sight.’
But oh, that God would speak,
and open his lips to you,
and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!
For wisdom is many-sided.
Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.

Zophar and the others thought that Job is saying: ‘I am clean, I am right; it is on that basis that I come before God’. Zophar says: ‘Oh, no—you are a terribly guilty man, and God is letting you off lightly’. But it is like trains going past each other on opposite lines, missing each other. The comforters are not on the same wavelength as Job is.

Remember the story Jesus told of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9–14). The Pharisee stood up and said, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ He is standing there and he is actually boasting before God, commending himself to God on the basis of what he has done. If we look at it carefully, we can sense that there is a difference between that and what Job is saying here.

In chapter 31, and indeed right through, Job is holding fast to his integrity. He is prepared to lay himself on the line, and we have no reason to expect that anything he says in chapter 31 is untrue. Just think back to chapters 1 and 2: has not God already called him ‘a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil’? If that is God’s judgement of Job, why should ours be any different? We do not have to think here that Job is boasting. Job is beyond that, as we shall see. He has nothing to gain by boasting, because he believes he is about to die anyway. He is simply stating facts. He is saying to his comforters, ‘Despite what you say, I have been loyal to God and His law. What is happening to me now has no connection with what you claim to be my sin’. Being loyal to God and to God’s law is certainly a part

of fearing or having a respect for and faith in God—that is how it shows in our lives. What Job bases his faith on is not what he has or has not done. He leaves that entirely out of his consideration, and that is why they are not meeting when they try to talk with each other. Despite what his detractors say, Job does not regard himself as having sinless perfection. He is fully aware of what sin and its consequences are in his own life. We need to look closely at that now.

JOB AS A SINNER

Look at 10:14–15:

If I sin, you watch me,
and do not acquit me of my iniquity.
If I am wicked, woe to me!

Job fully acknowledges that sin has its consequences, and if he sins he is rightly answerable to God, and it is woe to him. In the face of that, he says:

If I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head,
[for] I am filled with disgrace
and look upon my affliction.

In the Hebrew, there is no ‘for’ there: it simply says, ‘I am filled with disgrace’. In other words, ‘I cannot balance anything good I do against the evil of my sin, and hope that somehow that is going to make up for it’. That is out of the question, as far as Job is concerned.

We turn back to 7:20–21:

[If] I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?
Why have you made me your target?
Why have I become a burden to you?

This verse begins with the word ‘If’. But, again, that word ‘If’ is not there in the Hebrew. It is often quite instructive to see how even a translation can bring a slant, depending on what the translator feels is the context or understanding. If even the translators, who are soaked in these words in the original languages, cannot quite come at what Job is saying here, a little word like ‘If’ will be slipped in to try and make sense of it for them. But that word ‘If’ is not there. Job simply says, ‘I sin’. For Job, there is no question about that.

I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?
Why have you made me your target?
Why have I become a burden to you?

Job is saying, For sure, I am a sinner. But what is the reason for this incredible suffering that has come upon me now? I can’t see that it comes out of anything that I have done or not done. He would be right. We know from chapters 1 and 2 that the suffering that has come upon him has nothing to do with whether he sinned or didn’t sin. In fact, it comes upon him because he is righteous, and is being tested.

Why do you not pardon my transgression
and take away my iniquity?

So Job also knows God as a forgiving God. Why else did he take care to offer the sacrifices for his children as his normal practice, in case they had transgressed and offended against God? He knew God as the God of forgiveness, and he knew himself as a sinner. What Job cannot understand, because he has not been privy to what we have been shown in chapters 1 and 2, is why this suffering, now?

For now I shall lie in the earth;
you will seek me, but I shall not be

We need to bear in mind, as we have seen, that Job is very conscious of impending death.

CLINGING TO GOD

Let's look at 13:26. We are seeing how Job fully admits he is a sinner, but remember he is a wise man, who has learned from early mistakes, we may suppose, and is living in peace and in faith with God. But he knows that in his youth he probably did some pretty stupid things. Don't we all?

For you write bitter things against me,
and make me reap the iniquities of my youth.

Let's read the whole of that passage:

13:13 Let me have silence, and I will speak,
and let come on me what may.
14 I will take my flesh in my teeth,
and put my life in my hand.
15 See, he will kill me; I have no hope;
but I will defend my ways to his face.
16 This will be my salvation,
that the godless shall not come before him.
17 Listen carefully to my words,
and let my declaration be in your ears.
18 I have indeed prepared my case;
I know that I shall be vindicated.
19 Who is there that will contend with me?
For then I would be silent and die.
20 Only grant two things to me,
then I will not hide myself from your face:
21 withdraw your hand far from me,
and do not let dread of you terrify me.
22 Then call, and I will answer;
or let me speak, and you reply to me.
23 How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make me know my transgression and my sin.
24 Why do you hide your face,
and count me as your enemy?
25 Will you frighten a windblown leaf
and pursue dry chaff?
26 For you write bitter things against me,
and make me reap the iniquities of my youth.
27 You put my feet in the stocks
and watch all my paths;
you set a bound to the soles of my feet.
28 One wastes away like a rotten thing,

like a garment that is moth-eaten.

Look particularly at verse 16:

This will be my salvation,
that the godless shall not come before him.

Job hopes to appear blameless and upright before God, and he believes that God is going to make sure that this happens. Verse 18:

I have indeed prepared my case;
I know that I shall be vindicated.

All through, Job is clinging to God. It is on God that he bases his hope. The thing that Job most fears is the loss of that direct contact with God: 'Why do you hide your face?' In fact, when he says, 'Only grant two things to me, then I will not hide myself from your face': again, with this translation, that may not be what it says. The Hebrew perhaps means, '*Don't* grant these two things, that my face should be hidden from you . . .' It is not always easy to work these things out, and I don't envy the translators their job at all—we are very glad that they have done what they have done. But we can see that the whole thrust of what Job is saying here is, 'I don't ever want to be separated from you!' Even after he has been through all this—'withdraw your hand far from me, and do not let dread of you terrify me. Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me'—'We want to be face to face: I want to be together with you. Even if I have got iniquities and sins, let me know all that, but do not hide your face from me, or count me as an enemy.' That is the last thing that Job has ever wanted, because his whole life has been one that has walked with God. That has been his life and his strength, and he knows that without that, he cannot be. Nothing makes any sense, without that.

Yet Job knows that he is quite helpless before God. 'Will you frighten a windblown leaf and pursue dry chaff?'—like the dead, dry leaves rattling through the wind: they can't go anywhere but where they are blown. Job knows that he cannot stand against that wind, or against the things that are happening in his life, and to his body.

Verses 18–19: 'I have indeed prepared my case; I know that I shall be vindicated. Who is there that will contend with me? For then I would be silent and die.' That reminded me of some words from the Book of Isaiah about the suffering servant of the Lord. There are points where the sufferings of Job and the sufferings of the servant of the Lord, which prefigure the sufferings of Christ himself, seem to have a lot to do with each other. In Isaiah 50:4–9, the servant says:

The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.

Was that not like what Job used to do?

Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,

I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

Job had said, 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' (2:10).

The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.

This was the faith of the servant. That is the faith that Job himself was groping towards: 'I know the Lord God helps me—that is where my faith is! Not in anything I have or have not done—that is of no account—but I know that the Lord God helps me':

Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

'I know that no one can stand against God. I know the Lord God helps me so that I will be able to stand before Him holy and blameless—who then will speak against Him and declare me guilty?' That is Job's faith.

That was, in fact, the faith of Christ, where it says in 1 Peter 2:23: 'When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he *entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.*' Isn't that wonderful!

I WILL TRUST IN HIM

Look again at Job 13:15. It says in this translation:

See, he will kill me; I have no hope;
but I will defend my ways to his face.

If you have an Authorised Version, you will find the wonderful translation:

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.

In a church building where I was serving there was a stained glass window depicting Hope. Hope is a woman standing there, holding firmly to a cross, with these words underneath: 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him'. Someone asked me, 'Where do those words come from?' I tried to find them in this New Revised Standard Version (*NRSV*) translation, and it didn't sound quite the same. Again, it is a case of the translators deciding, What kind of slant can we put on these words that we have in front of us? They have read them as being, in a sense, defiant of God: 'He's going to kill me, I've got no hope, but I'll stick up for myself anyway'—that kind of thing.

One of the commentators I read has gone into what all the other commentators have said, and concludes that the Authorised Version is the one that should stand, if you understand what Job is really on about: 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him'.

We saw earlier that Job is very conscious of death. If we take it the way it is written in this *NRSV* translation—'he will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face'—it is almost going back to what Job's wife said in 2:9: 'Curse God, and die', which is the very thing Job refused to do. We have seen how conscious Job was of death: there were times when he longed for it, when he prayed for it, particularly when he began his laments in chapter 3. It is clear here that he fully expects it to come: He will slay me. He expects that he will die in his sufferings, and maybe he does not have much more time left—in fact he hopes he hasn't, because that will bring his sufferings to an end. Perhaps that is why he is so brutally frank in everything he says—he has nothing to lose. But it is clear also that his hope is not confined to this life. Unlike some of the comforters, who want to see a one-to-one correspondence in this life between virtue and reward, sin and punishment—especially Bildad, and Zophar too—for them it was all closed off and all tallied up in this life. They just had to see that that's the way it was. They couldn't see any differently. Job, as we saw, pointed out that it is not like that in this life: the wicked get away with murder, and the righteous suffer. Often that is the way it ends up—in this life. Yet even though Job thinks he is going to die, he fully expects to be vindicated.

What does that tell us about Job's faith? As long as we are alive, we can theoretically do something about our sin and our virtue. We can try to make up for what has gone wrong, we can strive to do better. Death puts an end to all of that. That is the cut-out point: once we are dead, there is nothing more that we can do. That is the point at which all our effort cuts out and counts for nothing. Hebrews 9:27 says: 'it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment'. That is the point at which any possibility of self-justification ends. We can do nothing to put anything right that we have done wrong, and if we have been depending on that to be right with God, death puts an end to that. We can do nothing more to try and build up some 'store of goodness'—we have already seen that Job says that is of no account before God: you cannot work it that way to balance off your sins. So if that is what you are trying to do in life, death spells the end of that. 'It is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment.'

It is not just in death itself. We have 'little deaths' along the way. For instance, when, as a pastor, you are called to go to another parish, and to leave the parish where you are: it is a time when you are very conscious of the things you haven't done that you should have done, the things that you have done that you shouldn't have done, but you are just going to have to leave it. There is nothing more you can do about it. It was with that in mind once that I wrote a song:

Where would we be?
Where would we be
 Without grace?
Always too little,
Always too late
 Without grace.¹

¹ *New Creation Hymn Book*, Volume 1, Number 207.

That is the way our whole life is. We kid ourselves if we think it is not that way. Death simply makes that very clear.

So if we are going to be vindicated beyond that point, it is something that will have to be done by God Himself. There is nothing more that we can do—if we ever could. So why not, from the start, put our trust in our vindication as something that God will do. Job is sure that he will come before God as a godly man: not because he is sure of himself—we have seen that he is not—but because he is sure of God. He holds to that.

HUMAN LIFE AND HUMAN GLORY

Look at what Job goes on to say in chapter 14. This is in three parts. Verses 1–12 talk about the transitoriness of life: how life has its set limits, and you cannot go beyond those, but that there are indications in this life that, say, if you chop down a tree it will shoot again—that happens—there are times of hope. In the middle section, verses 14–17, there is a magnificent prayer of hope, even in the face of death. Then, by contrast to that, the final section, verses 18–22, talks about the way the mountains and the rocks and the hills are eroded, and they are not built back up again. So if you try to put your hope in the things of this life, it is not going to be well-founded. A beautiful chapter, containing some of the best poetry in the whole of the Book of Job (which is crammed full of it anyway!):

14:1 A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble,
2 comes up like a flower and withers,
flees like a shadow and does not last.
3 Do you fix your eyes on such a one?
Do you bring me into judgment with you?
4 Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?
No one can.
5 Since their days are determined,
and the number of their months is known to you,
and you have appointed the bounds that they cannot pass,
6 look away from them, and desist,
that they may enjoy, like labourers, their days.
7 For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease.
8 Though its root grows old in the earth,
and its stump dies in the ground,
9 yet at the scent of water it will bud
and put forth branches like a young plant.
10 But mortals die, and are laid low;
humans expire, and where are they?
11 As waters fail from a lake,
and a river wastes away and dries up,
12 so mortals lie down and do not rise again;
until the heavens are no more, they will not awake
or be roused out of their sleep.
13 Oh that you would hide me in Sheol,
that you would conceal me until your wrath is past,
that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!
14 If mortals die, will they live again?
All the days of my service I would wait
until my release should come.

- 15 You would call, and I would answer you;
 you would long for the work of your hands.
- 16 For then you would not number my steps,
 you would not keep watch over my sin;
- 17 my transgression would be sealed up in a bag,
 and you would cover over my iniquity.
- 18 But the mountain falls and crumbles away,
 and the rock is removed from its place;
- 19 the waters wear away the stones;
 the torrents wash away the soil of the earth;
 so you destroy the hope of mortals.
- 20 You prevail forever against them, and they pass away;
 you change their countenance, and send them away.
- 21 Their children come to honour, and they do not know it;
 they are brought low, and it goes unnoticed.
- 22 They feel only the pain of their own bodies,
 and mourn only for themselves.”

Just reading that, I feel very inadequate. What can you say that is equal to such a vision of human life and human glory? But to look at one or two points.

We may be familiar with the opening words of this chapter, from the old funeral services: ‘Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.’ We tend not to have passages like that in modern funeral services any more. Job is speaking as a man who is face-to-face with death, and has had his fill of life, so he can say these things without any qualms, because that is the way it is. The transitoriness of life, like a flower, like a shadow, even. Yet God’s eye is upon ones who are so frail and transitory as that, to bring us into judgement. There is no one we know, that can bring a clean thing out of an unclean. We know that God is in charge of our lives: He numbers the months we live—when we are born, when we die—that is all in His hands. Job is praying, ‘While we have this little span of time which is our lives, don’t be too hard on us: let us enjoy them’.

There is that scent of water that makes the stump sprout again. We are very aware of that in Australia: we have many plants that lie dormant, or almost dead, for years, in the desert conditions. Then just a sprinkling of rain, and up they come! Have you ever seen the deserts in the north full of wildflowers after a rain? Those seeds have been lying there for fifteen to twenty years without sprouting, waiting for rain just at that right time. there are some seeds that wait for rain, say, in the second week of May, and if they don’t get rain then, they will stay there till they get it. Others come up if there is rain in July—or whatever. It’s amazing! That is something that God has given us in His creation.

HOPE AFTER DEATH?

It seems, on the outward appearance, that human beings die, and that does not happen with them. No shoot appears: ‘mortals lie down and do not rise again’. Job is facing the real issues here: we cannot have false hopes. But he says: ‘Very well, I am going to die. But I want You to take me there’—to ‘hide me in Sheol’, the place of the dead. It is almost a picture of God putting Job carefully in this place, to hide him there: ‘that you would conceal me until your wrath is past’—let that be a release for me from what I am suffering now. And *then*: ‘appoint me a set time, and remember me!’ Where have we heard those words before? Remember the thief on the cross, in Luke 23:42: ‘Jesus, *remember* me when you come into your kingdom.’ What does Jesus

say? 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' It is the same thing: 'I want to have that hope, *after* I die—in your kingdom, with you!' A thief said that, and he knew he had no right to enter the kingdom of God, because a thief cannot inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:10). Yet he said that to the Lord who was dying alongside him: 'Remember me!' He did not say: 'I want to sneak in the back way and somehow make it'. He said, 'I want to come before you, in your kingdom'. So where is his trust? Certainly not in himself or any merit that he has, but in this one who is dying for him. Who has done something about his sin, so that he can come into God's kingdom. Not as a thief any more, but as a godly man, and be remembered, and be with him in paradise.

Job has not seen his Lord dying on a cross and raised from the dead. But it is still the same faith-longing that he has:

If mortals die, will they live again?
All the days of my service I would wait
until my release should come.

Job had said, 'Do not human beings have a hard service on earth?' (7:1). Here he is saying: 'This is my hard service in death, but all that time I would wait, until my release comes'. How would that release come?

You would call, and I would answer you;
you would long for the work of your hands.

Where is Job's faith? In God who has made him, who has gone to all the trouble of making him, and who will not just put him into death and leave him there, and that's it. 'You would long for the work of your hands'—even after I have gone to that place. 'For then you would number my steps,' (the Hebrew does not have the word 'not' there) 'you would not keep watch over my sin': even in death, 'Your eye will be upon me'. It will not be like when God was watching him before in 13:27: 'You . . . watch all my paths; you set a bound to the soles of my feet'—that is the kind of eye of God to which he is saying 'Look away from me!' in 7:19 and 14:6. Job is now saying: 'In that place You will be watching me, but You will not be watching over my sin. All "my transgression would be sealed up in a bag"—the word here is 'rebellions': all my rebellions will be tied up in this great big bag—and you would cover over my iniquity': it will be finished and gone. That is Job's hope: in the forgiving God.

Of the verses that remain in this chapter, some say, 'He reaches this high point, but then collapses in despair'. That is to be a little bit too literal, I think. He is saying: 'By contrast to what I have just said, try and put your hope in anything else, and what hope is there? The great mountains, the rock?' We even call God a mountain and a rock in the Scriptures. But the mountains and the rocks are getting worn away by erosion. Uluru ('Ayers Rock') has been there for a long time, but it is not something that you can finally set your hope on—it is being worn down every time there is a rain or a wind. So to think that in this life you can resist death: that kind of hope is destroyed, and you end up in loneliness and sorrow. Job has a hope for something more than that: a hope that is based on God Himself.

Father, we thank You that one day, we shall see You face to face, and then our hearts will beat as one. Father, we pray that our hope may be set on nothing less than Jesus Christ, and his righteousness, which will bring us to that place. We thank You, Father, for Your servant Job, who was bold to speak the truth, and see the whole state

of humankind, and to see in that Your wonderful care and love for the creatures You have made. Keep us in that faith, and in that love, in Jesus' name. Amen.