

## Job 1:6-12

### The Lord of heaven and earth

'And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?"' (Job 1:8).

This book we are starting to look at is called the Book of Job. It is a book about Job. The first verse of the book speaks about Job, the last verse of the book speaks about Job, and Job is there from beginning to end.

But it is not only a book about Job. It is a book about God. The existence of God, the power of God, the wisdom of God and the goodness of God are necessary and given assumptions throughout the book. And this God rules, this God is Sovereign. That great and central fact is assumed, even when it is challenged. That is the way we should approach verses 6 to 12. 'The LORD reigns' (Psa. 99:1).

But how does God reign? How does God rule?

- Is he the executive chairman of a council or a cabinet, listening to advice from various members then making up his mind and having the casting vote?
- Is he looking at the world and making the most educated guess about the future and about the wisest course of action?
- Is he going to win through because he's bigger and stronger than all his rivals?
- Or is he an absolute ruler who sits all alone and simply presses buttons?

None of these pictures is accurate. How does God rule? Let's see.

### 1 God rules through his heavenly angels

There are some stories, as there are some films, where there is a shifting between scenes. Take the popular and successful *Back To The Future* series, or *The Matrix*. It is part of a writer's skill, not only to introduce these scene changes to hold our interest, but to make us ask the question, 'what's the relationship between these scenes?'

So it is here. The Book of Job, as I said last week, is a literary masterpiece. In verses 1 to 5 we had the scene on earth, and then in verse 6 we shift to the scene in heaven. In the Book of Job there is an earthly narrative which is the main part of the story, but there is a heavenly narrative which lies behind it. And it's important for us to understand that Job never knows what is going on in heaven. Everything Job is going to experience and say will be in his own ignorance of what has taken place in heaven.

But we, the readers, *do* know about the heavenly scene. And by way of brief application, it's an important part of personal application for all of us that behind our earthly story there is a heavenly story.

What do I mean by 'heaven'? I mean the place where God dwells. But when we use language like 'place' or 'where' or 'dwells', we need to be careful. Heaven is not a location that we might discover by looking through a telescope. It is presented as a physical scene because that is the only way our human minds can grasp it. In fact the details here are very sparse.

But here is the LORD, and before him are the 'sons of God'. Who are these 'sons of God'? They are the angels, superhuman beings who are not divine but are called 'sons of God' because they are like

God, they share in his likeness. These 'sons of God', whom the writer to the Hebrews calls 'ministering spirits', have gathered before the LORD who sends and appoints them on their errands.

And among the 'sons of God' is one who is called 'Satan' or, more properly in Job, 'the Satan'. The word 'Satan' means adversary or enemy. 'The adversary', the Satan, is there with all the angels.

The LORD says to Satan, 'From where have you come?' This question does not need to be understood as if God were saying 'What do you think *you're* doing here?' We shouldn't suppose that Satan is there as a gate crasher, as someone who wouldn't ordinarily be in heaven.

In the same way, Satan's reply, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it' should not be taken as something necessarily mischievous or malevolent. The NIV speaks of Satan 'roaming' throughout the earth, and the word 'roaming' has overtones of 'up to no good, I'll be bound!' about it, but this is not necessarily meant. (Christopher Ash suggests that Satan's answer may be evasive, as when a teenager might reply to the question 'what have you been doing?' with the one-word answer 'Stuff'!)

But Satan remains, in his essential nature, an angel, albeit a fallen angel. In this heavenly scene Satan is present and God's rule is exercised through the agency of angels, who include Satan. There is an invisible but vast heavenly dimension to God's government of his creation. There is the whole world of angels, spirits, powers and principalities: both good and evil. That is how God rules.

## **2 God rules through Satan's challenge**

Notice that it is God, and not Satan, who mentions Job in verse 8. What does God do? He describes Job in the same words which were used in verse 1. Job is 'a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?' The LORD underlines the testimony about Job that we saw last week. In fact God says even more about him. He calls Job his 'servant', and this title is often reserved for men like Moses and the prophets, or patriarchs like Abraham. And God explicitly says that there is none like Job on the earth; Job is an exceptionally righteous man.

What is going on here? Is God baiting Satan, challenging him to attack and harm Job? Doesn't that seem cruel and callous to us? Why does God seem to invite Satan to do his worst?

Very early on this book we come across the first difficult and painful question about evil and suffering, and where it comes from. There will be many more questions like this, and the answers won't always be easy. In fact there may not always be answers, at least not yet.

Notice that the LORD himself does not begin by suggesting that Satan might attack Job. The LORD invites Satan to 'consider' Job, to 'set your heart upon' him. We should emphasise this: God is never the author of sin, never the one from whom evil suggestions or temptations arise.

Instead it is Satan who makes a malicious suggestion. He turns God's statement about Job fearing God into a question and an insinuation. Remember: he is called 'the Satan', the adversary. He stands against Job but here he also attempts to stand against God. What does Satan mean in verses 9 and 10?

'Does Job fear God for no reason?' Is Job's fear of God and obedience towards God something that Job would give regardless of his personal circumstances? Satan's implication is that Job's fear of God is ultimately motivated by self-interest. Satan is suggesting that the only reason why Job is a God-fearing man is because his life is so prosperous and comfortable. God has placed a big, thick, insulating

hedge around Job. Look at all the livestock he has, and the perfect family he has. Anyone would be a good, upright, faithful believer under those circumstances, wouldn't they? But if that protective hedge were removed Job would immediately change and curse God to his very face.

Let me just pause and make an application. Do we discern in Satan's slander a bitter and envious spirit that we might even recognise in ourselves? Do we ever resent people who do well in life, who are successful by any measure, and who are faithful, godly Christians? Do we want to say - and perhaps do say - that it's all too easy for them, and if they really knew what hardship was they'd jack it all in? Do we even sometimes want hard things to happen to such people? We want to see them really struggling for a change, so that we can feel better about ourselves. If that is the way we feel then we need to be alarmed, because it means we are found to resemble Satan.

James in his Letter says that 'if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic' (Jam. 3:14-15).

### **3 God rules so that he may get all the glory**

In verse 12 the LORD agrees to Satan's suggestion. 'Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.' Again, we might recoil from this. What is God doing? Why is he consenting to this cruel plan of action? We haven't read on in the passage tonight, but we can see that Job is about to suffer unbearably. Can we make any sense of it? There are three things we must say.

First of all, notice that the LORD has to grant Satan permission to do what he wants to do. Satan is the adversary, and a powerful adversary, but he cannot work autonomously. Satan means harm and mischief, but Satan is kept on a lead. As I said a few weeks ago, Martin Luther wrote that 'even the devil is God's devil'.

Secondly, and this follows on from the last point, Satan can do no more than God allows him to do. Satan is restricted in the damage he can wreak. See God's words: 'Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.' There is a strict limit placed on Satan. He is allowed to harm Job's property but he is not allowed to harm Job's body.

We must learn this lesson for ourselves and take comfort from it. Whatever hard things happen to us in this life, they are never out of God's control or outside his permission. His sovereign will always prevails. God restrains Satan from harming us as much as Satan would like.

But perhaps we're still unhappy, perplexed and even frightened. Why did God allow Satan to do *anything* to Job? Why didn't God say to Satan 'No, Satan, leave Job completely alone! I'm not going to let you get your hands on him at all. I'm not going to give you the satisfaction of doing anything unpleasant to my servant Job. Away with you, Satan!'

No, God doesn't say that. This is the third and last thing I want to see, and this really is a big key that helps us unlock the meaning of the Book of Job: God must make sure that his own word, his own testimony about Job, is vindicated in the sight of heaven and earth. If God failed to do that, it would be an affront to his own glory.

What has Satan said? Job isn't *really* blameless and upright. What God has said about Job isn't *really* true. Doesn't it sound a bit like the serpent in the Garden of Eden? Satan is throwing down the gauntlet and challenging God's testimony, making God out to be a liar. And God must not allow Satan's

insinuations to stand. God cannot but rise to a challenge of this kind. God must be glorified; God's glory and honour must not be assailed or contradicted.

Job, blameless and upright, is going to suffer in order that God's testimony and God's glory will be upheld. And Job, in this, is an echo of Jesus himself. Jesus is completely innocent, pure, undefiled, sinless, which Job isn't; but Jesus must suffer in order to bring glory to God. That way, Jesus' claims to be the Christ and the Son of God will be seen to be true, and God will be seen to be faithful. We are still in the very early stages of the Book, but already we can begin to glimpse the Christian, Christ-centred use of the Book of Job.

In all things, God must be glorified. This is the Great Reason, the Great Cause of all that God does. How does Psalm 103 end? 'Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will! Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul!' The chief end, the primary purpose, of the whole creation is to glorify God.