

Rubbish And Unfair

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[0 : 00] So tonight we're going to turn back to the book of Job and we're going to read again verse 4 of chapter 38. But in many ways we're really thinking about the book as a whole tonight.

But let me read these words where God asks Job, Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.

So Job's a book that we don't tend to read very often and it's one that we don't very often preach on. I actually don't even know if I've ever preached on the book of Job before. And that's actually a huge shame because this is a book that teaches us all about something that we experience every single week of our lives.

Job is all about suffering. But in particular it's not just suffering, it's actually about suffering that isn't our fault.

And that's an issue that we encounter every single week of our lives. Often it's something that we witness. So we see people suffering in war zones. We know people who are battling relentless illnesses.

[1 : 12] We can all think of people who are hurt and people who've been abused and mistreated by those who should be caring for them.

So we witness people suffering unfairly all the time. And sometimes it's something that we experience ourselves. There's times in life when we suffer and we know it's our fault.

So I don't know about you but whenever I get a takeaway, I lie in bed at night thinking, why did I do that? And that's suffering, that is my own doing.

But sometimes we suffer and it's not a direct result of something that we've done. So you get people who receive an awful diagnosis even though they've spent their whole life trying to eat healthily and stay fit.

You see people getting picked on at school even though they are just trying to work hard, they're just trying to behave well and they're just trying to be nice to others and yet they get singled out.

[2 : 14] You see people who get rejected in a relationship but who get cheated on even though they've done nothing, absolutely nothing to deserve that. And you get people who are overlooked in the workplace even though they've poured their heart and soul into their job.

All of that happens. It's so common, it's so real and it's so hard. But we don't talk about it that often, we don't talk about it enough.

And because of that it can leave us struggling in our faith, it can leave us wondering how to make sense of it all. And this is why the Book of Job is so wonderful because it's one of the biggest books in the Old Testament and it's entirely focused on the fact that sometimes life is rubbish and sometimes it feels totally unfair.

And so that's our title for our sermon this evening, Rubbish and Unfair. Because that was Job's experience and often that's what life can feel like for us.

So already we can see that Job is one of the most relevant books in the Bible. It's speaking about one of the most pressing aspects of human experience.

[3 : 39] Yet if you're anything like me, this is a book that you don't tend to read very often. And I think part of the reason why we don't read Job very often is because it's not the easiest book to read.

And one of the reasons for that is because Job's a little bit of an unusual book in the Bible because there are many books in the Bible where you can just go and dip into. So the Book of Psalms, you can go, you can really turn to the Book of Psalms, anywhere you can read a Psalm you'll find it helpful.

And even the Gospels, although it's good to read the Gospels all the way through, you can go to Mark chapter 6 and you can read great accounts of how Jesus healed people. And you can dip into these books more easily.

Job's not really like that. It's a book where you need to know the whole story and you need to understand the whole book if you're going to get a picture of what's being said.

And if you're going to make sure that you avoid misunderstanding the specific part. So it's very much something where you need to look at the whole thing, you need to know the whole story.

[4 : 44] It's actually very like what we've seen in the press over the past couple of months about Catherine, Princess of Wales. It was so interesting to watch what happened with Catherine over the past couple of months.

She had abdominal surgery at the start of the year, loads of speculation about what was going on, lots of people not happy that they weren't being told, the full details of what was wrong with her and then there was even talk of potential leaks from the clinic and stuff like that about what was going on.

Then she puts out this photo at Easter and then everybody pounces on her because they'd see that she's like everybody else edited it with her phone. Just like the rest of the world does.

And everybody's about to jump on her back and then it turns out that she has cancer. And all of a sudden that completely changes how people view the situation.

Once people know the whole story, they have a very different perspective. And that's through loads of situations in life, it's definitely through when it comes to the book of Job.

[5 : 48] We need to know the whole story to understand what's going on. So we're going to just, this is just a one-off sermon tonight, we're not starting a series on Job. Apparently there was once a minister, I think he lived in the 1600s, he did a series on Job where he went through it all verse by verse, it took him 40 years.

I mean even I'm not that bad and so we're not going to do that. We'll do less than 40 minutes tonight. So if I take 40 minutes tonight you can think, well at least it's not 40 years. And what we're going to do tonight is I'm just going to tell you a little bit about this, about the whole book because I want you to understand how the whole book fits together.

And that's going to take us about 15 minutes or so to do that. And then when we finish that we're just going to highlight three brief lessons from the book of Job. So it's all a bit different really but I hope it's helpful in terms of enabling you to read the book of Job with a bit more understanding.

But most of all I hope it's helpful because the lessons we're going to highlight are actually crucial, crucial lessons for us. So first of all for the next 15 minutes or so I want to just give you an overview of Job.

It's the story of a wealthy successful man who loses everything. And he lived in what's known as the period of the patriarchs which means he lived probably around the same time as Abraham which is very early in terms of the periods of time recorded in the Old Testament.

- [7 : 12] The key thing you have to understand is the overall structure of the book which I've got here on the screen. Chapters one and two is like a prologue where we're told the background to what's happening.
- Job loses everything. Chapters three to twenty you have a dialogue between Job and three friends. Then in the middle in chapter 28 there's this poetic interlude.
- It's all about finding wisdom. Where shall wisdom be found? Then 29 to 41 the speeches resume but this time Job speaks then a fourth friend, Elihu, who will say a bit more about the minute speaks and then God speaks.
- And the bit that Euna read from 38 is when God starts speaking and then chapter 42 there's a conclusion that rounds the whole thing off. I'm just going to go through these bits in a little bit more detail so you know what's happening.
- So chapters one and two you have this fascinating narrative where Satan challenges God to allow Job to suffer to see whether or not he's going to remain faithful to God.
- [8 : 15] So you've got Job, he's done well, he's successful and Satan says well take all that stuff away and he'll curse you. He'll stop following you if he doesn't have all of these nice things in his lives.
- And so there's this sense in which Job is being tested through the whole book. And that's the context for everything that is about to happen in the book. And the key thing is that we know that even though Job doesn't.
- So as you read about Job he doesn't know that this is what's going on but we do. So we have an insight as the reader that he doesn't have. Now there's loads that we could talk about in chapters one and two and it's easy to get sidetracked by the question well how do God and Satan have a conversation.
- I think when we read chapters like that it's important to focus on the key point that's been made. And the key point that's been made is that the suffering that Job is about to experience is something that God has allowed for a specific purpose.
- And therefore the suffering is not a direct result of something that Job has done. In other words it's not his fault.
- [9 : 29] And that's crucial to remember as we go through the whole book together. So he loses his wealth, his family and his health. Then in chapters three to twenty seven this bit here you have three friends.
- They're called Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. And they come along and there's this very carefully structured dialogue where one of them speaks, Job replies, then the next one speaks, Job replies and so on and the thing goes round three times.
- And all three friends are basically saying the same thing. They're coming to Job and they're saying all this awful stuff has happened to you. You must have done something and you need to own up to it.
- And that's their basic thinking that these calamities have been caused by something that Job has done. So here's an example, this is from Eliphaz, one of the, this is Eliphaz is speaking, this is one of Job's friends.
- He says, is not your evil abundant? There's no end to your iniquities. For you have exacted pledges of your brothers for nothing and stripped the naked of their clothing. You've given no water to the weary to drink and you've withheld bread from the hungry.
- [10 : 40] The man with power possessed the land and the favored man lived in it. You've sent the widows away empty and the arms of the fatherless were crushed. Therefore snares are all around you and sudden terror overwhelms you or darkness so that you cannot see and a flood of water covers you.

You can see it's just very clearly to see his logic. All this awful stuff has happened to you here because of you've done all these bad things here. That's his basic accusation.

But again and again and again Job says, I don't know why this has happened. I don't know what I'm supposed to have done. You see him speaking in those terms in various places.

This is Job speaking in 7 and in 23. He says, if I sin, what do I do to you? You watcher of mankind. This is Job talking to God. Why have you made me your mark? Why have I become a burden to you?

Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity? For now I shall lie on the earth. You'll seek me, but I shall not be. He's basically saying, I don't know what I've done and even if I have done something, I'm sorry.

[11 : 42] And in 23 he says, my food has held fast to his steps, to God's steps. I've kept his way, I've not turned aside, I've not departed from the commandment of his lips. I've treasured his words, treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.

And so Job is adamant that he's not done something. He can't see what he's done. And of course we know that. We know from the beginning of the book that the suffering that Job's experiencing is not because of something specific that he's done.

It's actually the opposite. If you go back to the start of the book, Job gets singled out because of his uprightness, not because of his failure. And so that's the pattern. So if you open Job, say 12, 13, 14, you're just going to read more and more of that stuff again and again.

If friends saying, this is your fault, Job saying, I don't know what I've done. And the pattern goes on and on and on. Then in chapter 32, a young man, Elihu, speaks.

Elihu is younger than the others, so he waits till they finish speaking before he speaks. But it's interesting because he is unimpressed with everything that they've said. These three men cease to answer Job. That's the first three friends because he was righteous in his own eyes.

[12 : 58] So they thought, you know, he just thinks he's righteous in his own eyes. They give up basically. Then Elihu, the son of Barachel, the bullseye of the family of Ram, burned with anger. He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God.

He burned with anger at Job's three friends because they found no answer, even though they declared Job to be in the wrong. Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he, and when he saw there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, he burned with anger.

Isn't that so interesting? He's like, Job, you're wrong because you're not owning up to God. But at the same time, he's saying, the three friends, you're wrong because, you know, yes, you're accusing Job, but you're not explaining this. You're not coming up with the right answer.

And Elihu, he then goes on to speak to Job and he speaks about Job in verse 35, and he says he's talking rubbish. He opens his mouth in empty talk.

He multiplies his words with knowledge. And so Elihu, is that how you say it? Yeah, Elihu, he says something similar to the three friends.

[14 : 06] He says, you know, you have to remember that sometimes God can use suffering to bring you back if you wander down a negative path. And that's a little bit better than what the friends were saying.

The original friends were basically saying, bad stuff means you've done something. It's your fault. Elihu says, well, no, no, sometimes bad stuff can be God's way of bringing you back from a negative path.

But he's still assuming that Job has done something wrong, that he's gone wrong, and God is bringing him back through this suffering.

And so all the friends are variations of the theme. This is your fault, Job. Everything reaches a climax in chapter 38 when God speaks.

But while Job and his friends are waiting for a verdict to find out who's right, who's wrong, what's going on, God does something very different. He doesn't begin by giving them a verdict.

[15 : 04] Instead, he shifts everyone's perspective and he exposes the limitations of human wisdom. That's what he's doing in the passage that Euna read. The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Dress for action like a man, I will question you and you make it known to me. And then he asks tons of questions. And so the whole of 38 into 39, God is asking questions.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know. Or who stretched a line upon it?

Or what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars signed together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Here God is basically saying, you guys think you know it all.

And he said, I created the universe. Where were you when I did that? And by asking these kind of questions, he's exposing to these humans that actually their knowledge is tiny.

[16 : 14] Their perspective is so limited and they don't have all the answers. And we're foolish if we think that we do. Job hears God speak and he realizes it.

He says, I am of small account. What shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I've spoken once. I'll not answer. I'm not going to speak anymore. He realizes that he cannot answer God. He cannot tell God what God is or isn't doing.

And it culminates as we reach the end. In 42, Job acknowledges that only God has full knowledge and he just expresses his repentance. Interestingly though, at the end of 47, at the end of 42, God responds by vindicating Job and not his friends.

And this is so crucial. This is one of the things that's hard to, it's easy to miss because just a few verses here explain chapter after chapter after chapter of dialogue that we've had earlier in Job.

The friends have been talking, talking, talking, talking. If you're thinking Thomas, you could be one of those friends. Talking, talking, talking all the time. And they sound right all the time. And yet actually at the end, God says, these friends, you have not spoken what is right. You were wrong in your mindset.

[17 : 50] And so you have this vindication of Job and a rebuke towards the friends who had accused him all the time.

As the book concludes, Job's fortunes are restored. And it's absolutely fascinating, but I hope that that helps you to understand the book, but I also hope it helps you to see that in order to understand each part, you need to look at the whole thing. Okay, so that's the briefest of brief introductions to what Job is all about.

I want to just spend the next 10 minutes drawing out three brief but very important lessons from this book. We're thinking about the fact that very often life can feel rubbish and unfair.

And in response to that, often we desire stuff, we demand answers, and we default to karma.

Now, what do I mean by all of these things? Well, these are crucial lessons that we need to learn because they're all pitfalls that we can fall into when we encounter suffering in our lives. And so we need to think about all of them. And what I hope we'll see is that what Job teaches us will help us to cope with suffering more easily, but more than anything, it will point us to Jesus and to the fact that ultimately it's only in him we find what we long for.

[19 : 20] So one by one, let's go through these briefly. First of all, a big lesson from Job is that we desire stuff from God more than we desire God himself. Such a crucial lesson for us to think about.

And this is the basic argument that Satan uses at the very start of the book. He comes before God, God highlights Job's uprightness, and Satan says, yeah, let's see if he's still that upright when you take everything away.

So if he loses his wealth and his family and his health, let's see if he's still believing in you then. And behind Satan's argument is the idea that people will only like God because of the nice stuff that God gives us.

And that is such an easy trap to fall into. It's so easy for our view of God and our view of faith to be grounded on that kind of idea that it's the stuff we get from God that is really going to satisfy us.

That you'll remember is the mindset that laid behind the prodigal son. When he went to his father and he says, give me the inheritance so I can go and spend it. He's like, Father, I want your stuff much more than I want you.

[20 : 39] And that was what led him to go off and squander it all. The key point for us is that suffering can easily push us into this mindset.

Many of us here can think, well, yes, I think I believe God is real and I want to know him and follow him. But then suffering comes into our lives and we have second thoughts.

And we think to ourselves, it wasn't meant to be like this. And we so often can turn away from God. And the huge danger is that our priority can easily be that in our devotion to God, we're not wanting to know him.

Instead, we want to use him as a pathway to a suffering free life. And this is where Job is such a powerful example for us because even though he struggled hugely in the midst of suffering, he didn't reject God even though his life had turned bad. And that's such a powerful lesson for us from this book.

God has not created us to live in a relationship with the nice stuff that he can give us, the beautiful world that he has, the great things that we can enjoy with one another and in the world around us.

[22 : 01] First and foremost, God has created us to have a relationship with him, to know him, to know that we are made by him and made for him. He is the one where our origins make sense.

He is the one, the only one that can give us hope of an eternal destiny. We are made to know him. And that knowledge of him, that intimacy with him, that reality of having God as our Father, that is actually so much better than even the best of stuff that God can give us.

And of course, this is just the basics of any relationship. A husband, a wife, a child who is just concerned about the stuff they can get out of another person.

That's not appealing. That's not a good relationship at all. God wants something so much deeper, so much richer, so much more personal.

And it's reminding us that you must never, please don't ever base our relationship with somebody on the stuff that you will get out of it. And please don't ever base your relationship with God on the stuff that you'll get out of it.

[23 : 14] Instead, we have to remember that he's made us to know him, whether things are going really well or whether things are going really badly. And all of this points us to an amazing truth that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

One of the crucial realities at the heart of the Gospel is that our relationship with God is only possible because Jesus came to save us. He came to reach us and bring us back.

And as Jesus came and died and rose again for our salvation, that was never, ever because Jesus wanted your stuff.

It's because he wants you. I want you to imagine a conversation, a bit like the conversation that we read of at the start of Job.

Imagine a conversation between Satan and Jesus, where Jesus says, these are my people. I love them. I delight in them. And the devil says, yeah, but wait till they forget about you.

[24 : 25] Wait till they betray you, ignore you, insult you, and disobey you. Will you still love them then? And Jesus replies, watch me.

And he proceeds to leave heaven, go to the cross, and die in our place so that our failings might be atoned for.

Jesus never wanted your stuff, doesn't want your money or your talents or whatever. He wants you. He wants you.

And it's all reminding us that our deepest cravings, our deepest longings are never going to be suffered by, satisfied by stuff, even by the stuff that God can give.

And our suffering is never going to be healed by stuff. Our deepest, deepest thirsts are only going to be quenched by knowing God, knowing His glory, beauty, grace, and love.

[25 : 38] Secondly, we demand answers from God, especially when we suffer. So when we experience suffering, especially when that suffering is not our fault, we often try to find healing by looking for a full explanation, and we want God to provide that explanation for us.

So sometimes, you know, we'll look at something that's happened and we think, ah, it's because of this. That's why that happened. It's so that this could happen, and it meant that that could happen. And sometimes we do that in a positive way, so we think, oh, this, that, and that happened to me, so it means that I can do this, that, and this in a positive way.

Other times we do it in a negative way, we think, yeah, this happened because I made that mistake before, and I'm just getting what I deserve. And sometimes we might be right to a certain extent, but one of the key truths emphasized by the Book of Job is that sometimes God doesn't give us a full explanation, and that's okay.

Because God doesn't actually owe us an explanation. That's part of the reason why he asked all those questions of Job. Where were you when I made the universe? Showing that God has a level of knowledge and sovereignty that is just way beyond us.

And it's reminding us that we don't always need a full explanation, and so often we can exhaust ourselves trying to look for one. And we must never forget that sin doesn't do sums. Sin does not do sums.

[27 : 09] Now, what I mean by that is the fact that we often try to put sin and suffering into neat equations where we try to analyze everything, and we want all the positives and negatives to add up, and we think, well, this happened, but this happened, but this happened, but this happened, and we try to line it all up so it all adds up neatly. That is not how sin works.

Sin is so much crueller and messier than that. But the amazing truth of the Gospel is that over all that mess, God reigns, and God has the power, the knowledge, and the wisdom to work out his unbreakable purposes over a world that's very broken.

And that sometimes means that we will experience things now that don't make sense, and we'll experience things now that we don't have a full explanation for. I remember hearing an amazing example of this. There was a radio news program that was speaking about the troubles in Northern Ireland, and it was speaking to an old woman who had lived through the worst of the troubles, and she was a Christian, and they were talking about the different ways in which they were investigating all the things that had happened, all the violence and difficulty, and the reporter said to her, do you not want answers for everything that had happened?

And she gave a magnificent example. This was on the BBC national radio, and I was like, well done, old woman in Northern Ireland, because she said, one day I'll meet God, and then I'll get all the answers I need. One day answers will come. I don't need them just now.

And I thought that that was a beautiful attitude, because right now we just won't always get all the answers. So often suffering, unjust suffering, doesn't have a clear explanation. However, there's one exception, one big exception.

[29 : 09] There's one crucial example of unjust suffering that does have an explanation, and in fact it's the biggest example of unjust suffering of all.

It's the cross. On the cross Jesus suffers the greatest injustice of all history. The perfect Son of God nailed to a cross and executed and rejected as though he was a despised criminal.

That's the biggest injustice of all, the greatest unjust suffering, but it has an explanation. It has a reason. The reason is you.

It was all to save you. And that's where we see just how amazing the Gospel is. So often we demand answers, jobs reminding us not to do that.

Thirdly, job is teaching us an interesting lesson that often we default to karma in relation to God and in relation to suffering.

[30 : 23] Jobs three friends were basically of the view that if you suffered it's because of something that you've done. In other words, it was your fault. And today we would call that karma. I don't think they would have used that word all those years ago, but it's a mindset that we can default to very, very easily.

Usually we only apply it to people we don't like. So something bad happens to someone that we don't like and we think, ah, that's karma, they deserve it. And there's a kind of sense of satisfaction in that. I want us to recognize that karma is one of the most disgusting religious principles ever invented.

And the reason it is so appalling is because it's saying that everything bad that happens to someone is their fault. And that's sickening because as children suffer in Gaza, it's not their fault.

If a wife gets abused, it's not her fault. When a couple have a stillborn baby, it's not their fault. Karma says it is. And thank God it's not true.

It's also horribly judgmental. And Jobs three friends were so guilty of just coming to him with a predetermined conclusion. They weren't really interested in what Jobs was saying. They were just convinced you've done something to deserve this and we can so easily do the same.

[31 : 54] And here the Gospel is so helpful because it doesn't have such a simplistic, cold, cruel understanding of sin and of good and bad.

The Gospel has a far more robust doctrine of sin recognizing that the brutality and complexity of sin is such that people's actions can have an awful knock on effect onto so many other people's lives.

Sin is far more messy, far more cruel and horrible than we realize. And the fallout of it means that so many people who don't deserve it can get caught up in the terrible mistakes and terrible decisions that people made.

The Gospel helps us to see and understand that. But even more so, the Gospel is so beautiful because the Gospel replaces karma with grace.

Grace is the principle that lies at the very heart of the Gospel and it's the very opposite of karma because grace is all about giving you what you would never deserve.

[33 : 00] Giving you far, far more than you could ever earn. Giving us far more than we could ever imagine.

And there's two really important lessons for us in our day to day lives. In our interactions with family, with colleagues, with friends, particularly with people who are difficult and frustrating.

Our hearts will gravitate towards karma. We need to replace that with grace. So if somebody is difficult this week, if someone is frustrating, we mustn't think, well I'll get them back. Or we mustn't delight to see them suffer.

We just want to show them grace. Show them the love and support and kindness that they don't deserve. But that's just a tiny measure of what Jesus has done for us. We need to replace that karma attitude with an attitude of grace.

Even more so importantly, in our relationship with God, we also gravitate to this kind of thinking where we have a legalistic mindset whereby we think that if I do good stuff, God will like me.

[34 : 09] Or because I've done bad stuff, God's going to hate me. We need to remember that God has replaced karma with grace as well.

I mean that's not really accurate because he never had karma at all. He's always been the God of grace. And we don't earn God's favour by impressing him on the pluse God's favour by stuffing up.

Instead we come on the promise, the relentless promise of God to love us and care for us and keep us. When we experience suffering that is rubbish and unfair, it's so easy to feel angry because we desire God's stuff more than him.

It's so easy to feel confused because we demand answers and it feels like they're not coming. God's not explaining himself to us. And we can very easily become judgmental because we default to karma in our relationship with God and with others.

The Book of Job warns us against all of these things and instead Job gives us one big lesson that we need to come back to again and again and again.

[35 : 20] Remember the whole of Job is set in the context of the fact that we know something that he doesn't. And when he discovers in the end that actually he hadn't caused it by his own mistakes or sin, we've known that all along because we've known the full story.

And the thing that we are being reminded of again and again and again as we read this book and the thing that we need to remember especially when life feels rubbish and unfair is that we just need to keep trusting God.

Keep trusting him because he will always be dependable. He'll never let you down. Job is telling us to keep trusting God.

And of course that's the one thing the Gospel asks us to do. It all makes perfect sense. Amen.