



Wisdom in the face of suffering

'Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell on the ground, and worshipped, and said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord' (Job 1:20–21)

The sufferings of Job were very great. In the short section from verses 13 to 20, everyone that Job held dear was taken from him, and all his wealth was carried off. Only he and his wife remained. We know the cause: Satan had effectively called into question the very basis of Job's faith. The devil implied that Job was merely basking in blessing. The Lord permitted him to test Job's faith, so that the devil would know the difference between false and true faith. The former will melt away under trials. The latter, though it might struggle at times, will at last shine forth, giving testimony to the reality of our love for the Lord, and our confidence in his goodness towards us.

The verses before us speak of how Job reacted. In the present uncertainty over illness, economic decline and social stress, his example provides us with a model of how the child of God ought to conduct himself. Let us seek the Lord's blessing in turning to his word, that we also might be guided, taught and blessed in our souls.

Note, in the first place, that Job was deeply touched by his afflictions

This is an important point. If we are untouched by the trials that come over us, or if we are unmoved by the suffering of others, there is something wrong with us. It would be hard to imagine that a father, hearing of the deaths of all his children in one blow, should remain unmoved. It is hard to imagine that a man, blessed with vast wealth but hearing of its loss in such quick succession, should remain unmoved. It is impossible to imagine anyone, hearing both of these things, remaining unmoved. Job felt in his innermost being the anguish brought by these events. He was overcome with grief, and not in an unreasonable or self-indulgent manner. This is the response of a well-adjusted, reasonable man of faith.

In particular, Job showed the outward signs of his inward state. He tore his outer garments and shaved his head. He was not ashamed to express his grief. In our culture the accepted expressions of grief might differ, but the fact of expression does not. Bereavement is a solemn matter, and the removal of earthly stays is a genuine cause for concern. Note also that Job lost, not only his flocks and herds, but nearly all his faithful and loyal servants as well. His was grief almost without measure, and in all Scripture there has been only One whose grief has been greater.

The act of grieving is said—and no doubt with very much truth—to be necessary if we are to be able to cope with loss and suffering. But it is something else as well. Grief is us confessing our sense of loss, and it is a measure of our love for the thing or person we have lost, and it indicates the extent to which we relied upon that one or thing. We are unlikely to give a second thought to a lost penny, and probably not to a lost pound coin. But lose a banknote, and things begin to be different. Get scammed out of hundreds, never mind thousands, and the pain is real. As we get older grief becomes more inevitable, for we all draw closer to the inescapable end of all flesh.

Note, in the second place, that Job grieved in the presence of his Lord

Job fell down and worshipped. He prostrated himself before the Lord. He brought his grief to God in prayer, and gave glory to God for his actions in all that Job endured.

This is a measure of genuine faith. Here is one who had all his priorities in order. Yes, his beloved children were taken from him, and he felt the loss so very deeply. Yes, his flocks, herds and servants, had been killed or carried off, and he was left with nothing in the world but his health and his wife—and, as the narrative will go on to show, he would lose one of those and find the other a trial to him. But in all this he saw the hand of the Lord, and he blessed him. What moved Job to speak like this? On what did he set his answer?

Job understood that man is not to be measured by the things he has. This includes both family and wealth. He said, 'Naked came I out of my mother's womb.' That is, Job brought nothing into the world, as Paul reminded Timothy (1 Tim. 6:7). We did not come possessing anything, but everything we have has come to us from the hand of the Lord. Whether we are blessed with great intelligence, such that we can make money; whether we are blessed with great skill, such that we can manufacture goods; whether we are blessed with rich parents, such that we inherit wealth; the same fundamental point remains. We brought nothing into this world. We came naked out of our mother's womb. David spoke very wisely when he prayed, 'All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee' (1 Chron. 29:14). Pride makes us think that we have right and title to what our wisdom or strength has brought us, as if God had no part in the matter. This is reflected by such things as the refusal of most of the world to thank the Lord for the food they eat. 'I earned the money to buy it, and I expended the time and effort in shopping for it,' says one. 'It was my labour that worked the soil, carried the water and drove off the birds that would otherwise have eaten up all I have grown,' adds another. But neither consider for a moment that it is the mercy of a gracious Creator that made us in such a form that we can work, and who made the soil fertile, the rain benign and the sun gentle to warm and ripen what grows. It is the Lord who made the seed to grow, and who gave man the wisdom to farm and cook. 'All things come of thee,' and this applies, not only to our goods, but also to all the blessings of this life.

Job understood also that the things we gather in this life are only for this life. 'Naked shall I return thither.' Job did not think that he would return to his mother's womb, but that the one who gave him life would require it from him one day. All he gathered, gained and acquired in life would be left behind. 'It is certain we can carry nothing out,' continued Paul to Timothy. There are no pockets in a shroud, as has been observed by many. Wealth is no bar to death; wealth may sustain us a little more comfortably, with better food, better shelter and better health care, but it cannot shield us from the summons to our long home. We cannot buy off death, nor bribe time to add even a second to our span. What is the point, then, in trusting in things that can only help us while we live, when our greatest need is to consider what will become of us when we die?

All we have comes from the Lord's hands, and therefore it is his to do with as he pleases. This applies to our wealth, our family, our health. True faith recognises this, and accepts the hand of God in dealing with us as he sees fit. After all, he is God, with all that this means. Let us give him his due as God, and honour him in all he does.

Let me now briefly apply some this to our present situation.

1. We are not to try to act as if we are untouched by what is happening, and this for two reasons.

First, because we cannot tell where this present disease will go next, nor who will be affected, nor what will be the final consequences of its coming. Only a fool would believe that present safety must equal long-term deliverance, and we are not to be fools. Those who have suffered, and who are suffering, are no more worthy to suffer than we are. As with the eighteen who were

killed by the collapse of the tower at Siloam (Luke 13), it is wrong to apportion guilt on the basis of suffering, since there is a randomness to it. It is very easy, usually, for us in the West to look on the rest of the world and be thankful that we do not have to live with their reality—drought, famine, disease and the obvious lack of so many modern amenities we take for granted. But when we face the same problems they face, then we begin to see that there is really no difference between us. Money may make our response a little more effective, and better healthcare may save a few more lives, but the truth is that we are all alike: disease is no respecter of race, religion or nationhood. Our prayers must be for all people. After all, Paul did exhort that ‘supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men’ (1 Tim. 2:1).

But, secondly, we must confess that this disease is from the Lord. It is he who sends the pestilence, as Psalm 78 reminds us. He does so when people refuse to heed him, humble themselves before him, and repent of their sinful ways. He does so, not in order to destroy all living as once he did in Noah’s day with the Flood, but that those who experience such things should be forced to acknowledge him. No doubt there were many in Egypt whose first response to the turning of water into blood was to think of incidents from the past that had seemed serious but had proven not to be. They will have decided not to worry, and just to wait for the trouble to pass. It did not, but grew steadily worse. At the last Pharaoh was ready to send Israel away, but even then he changed his mind and sent his army after them. Worse, when Israel was in the wilderness they forgot what the Lord had done to Egypt, and they sinned as well. They refused to repent, and went on sinning, time and time again. And so the Lord sent various plagues, pestilences and trials their way, so that by death they would learn to fear him who has the power of life and death, and become obedient instead.

This leads us to the next point:

2. We are to take this disease as a warning to repent of our sins.

This repentance must be seen in three areas:

First, we must repent individually. Sin is a personal affair, and has been since the days of Adam. He alone sinned in the name of others, in that his sin brought death on all his progeny. Our sins kill us, even if they affect other people. It is right, therefore, that we repent of our sins. What are our sins? These will vary from person to person, but let me suggest some areas for self-examination.

First, we have little regard for the word of God. We do not read the Scriptures as we ought, nor meditate on them. In short, we do not feed upon the word of God, which is given to us as daily bread. Therefore our knowledge of God and his word is far less than it ought to be. Of course, an illiterate person has some excuse in this—but we are not illiterate, so we have no excuse. Read the Scriptures.

Secondly, we make light of prayer. It is a privilege honoured, for the most part, in the breach. There is nothing to prevent us from offering up prayer to God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ. And yet we fail to exercise this privilege often or deeply. This is a sin, and indicates a coolness of love for our heavenly Father, and a serious weakness in our faith. Let us repent of this, and let us give ourselves to prayer.

Thirdly, we have little interest in the pursuit of personal holiness. That is, we are not particularly troubled by our disobedience, our worldliness, and our readiness to please ourselves rather than our Father in heaven. Our Sundays are spent unprofitably. Our free time is squandered in meaningless things. Our energies are expended in frivolities. There is no seriousness about our spiritual health or state, and we are the worse for it. Just now, we are being encouraged to wash our hands frequently. Let us consider how much more important it is that we cleanse our lives by the word of God.

Fourthly, we do not enter into the spirit of worship as much as we should. Many come to church ill prepared to meet with the Lord. We come to meet friends, but we do not come to meet Christ. We are happy to chat with others, but we hold back from communion with the Lord in prayer. We would be quite content to read a book or watch a TV programme, but we cannot concentrate when the Scriptures are being read, or when the sermon is being preached. If we would begin to understand that we come to meet the God of might and power, and that we worship him as a gracious privilege through his mercy, we would be more serious about it. This is, in part, our public confession of faith: and it is, in part, our necessity as individuals who need to commune with the Lord as a company of believers.

Secondly, we must repent as a church. That is, the whole church must repent. The judgment of God comes on those who are meant to know him. Read the Scriptures, and see how it is always those who know the truth but refuse to do it, who face the wrath of God. This is true of Israel throughout her history. This is true of the church throughout its history. When we look at the present state of the church we see many reasons why it should repent. Theological error is rife. Compromise with false religion abounds. Promotion of unbiblical behaviours is everywhere. The church is too quiet about the social evils all around us—abortion, divorce, the breakdown of family life, and the corruption of our children through the things being taught in schools. The church has largely abandoned the preaching of the gospel in favour of social action. In the past, it was faith in Jesus Christ and a thorough commitment to the gospel that drove social action: now, the one has simply replaced the other.

We can add the decline in standards of worship as another matter for which the church must repent, in that, all too often, what passes for worship is merely the indulging of the flesh and of the emotions. There is little sense of the holiness or majesty of God. There is little notion of our utter dependence on grace and mercy, nor our constant need of Christ and his presence. The church must repent of all these things, and more beside.

Thirdly, we must repent as the human race. Man is made in the image of God, and yet delights to not know him. Man is made to be a worshipping creature, and yet prefers to worship according to his imagination and not according to revelation. Man loves violence, cruelty, greed and selfishness, rather than any of those things to which God calls us in his word. The world is suffering, and the world must repent.

But how will the world repent, unless the church begins once more to preach the everlasting gospel? And how will the church begin to preach the everlasting gospel unless its members themselves return to a true love and understanding of that gospel? And how will we regain a proper love and understanding unless we repent of our lack of faith in Jesus Christ the only Saviour?

This is the great hope of the world—not a cure for the Coronavirus, but the cure for sin. That cure is the blood of Christ, shed on the cross, to wash us from our sins. If we are in Christ, united to him by faith, then the death of the body is not a burden greater than we can bear. But if we are not in Christ, and have not faith in him, then the condemnation of the soul to hell will be a punishment far worse than we can imagine. Let us repent while we may, and return to the Lord our God. AMEN.