

# DAILY BIBLE READINGS

## WEEK 2

### *The mystery of suffering*

This week's readings centre on the book of Job, writings possibly even older than Genesis. Again we are in the realm of myth, as the first two chapters make clear, portraying goings on in heaven of which the earthly protagonists have no idea. And we are definitely in the realm of mystery, as Job, his wife and friends have no more understanding at the end than they had at the beginning, as to why his terrible sufferings came upon him. The question of why God allows suffering has been a huge issue since the earliest humans first talked around a camp fire. The logical assumption most ancient people came up with was that if someone was suffering, they must have done something to deserve it. The book of Job exists to refute that idea.

#### DAY 1

*'Shall we receive good at the hands of the Lord and not evil?'*

##### Read

Job 2: 1-13

##### Understand

Job's terrible sores were the last in a multiple series of catastrophes. Raiders had taken his 500 oxen, 500 donkeys and most of his servants. Fire had destroyed his 7,000 sheep, other raiders made off with his 3,000 camels, and a tornado had killed his ten children. Nevertheless, Job understood all these as a gift from God, and so he uttered those familiar words spoken over coffins a million times since: 'The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.' Satan reckoned that if you put someone in enough physical agony, then any faith they once had will be stripped away. But still Job in his desperation clung to his belief. Just as he had no intrinsic right to escape poverty, so, he believed, he had no right to escape pain.



##### Reflect

Most of us, I suspect, believe ourselves to be exempt from suffering, unless or until it comes upon us. Then we have a choice of how to react, and it is in that choice that strength of character is revealed. It is not a choice to pretend pain and loss don't exist, rather to decide that they need not alienate us from God.

##### Pray

Lord God, help me to accept what life throws at me, to allow myself to weep and mourn, but not to resent and blame, to learn gratitude for what I've had, rather than despair for what is lost.

#### DAY 2

*'Miserable comforters are you all. Have windy words no limit?'*

##### Read

Job 16:1-5 and 16:16-17:1

##### Understand

Job's friends got it right the first time. To begin with they simply sat with him for seven days and nights and 'no one spoke a word to him, for they saw his suffering was too great'. It goes downhill after that. As Job pours out his grief, they feel it necessary to try and explain, and their explanation is that it must be punishment for something. 'Who that was innocent ever perished?' asked Eliphaz (4:7), a question that makes you wonder what ivory tower he' (1

been hiding in. Next up was Bildad who perhaps made it worse by suggesting Job's children were to blame (8:4). Zophar's unhelpful prescription was simplistic self-help: 'If you direct your heart rightly your life will be brighter than noonday' (11:13 and 17). No wonder Job was exasperated.



### Reflect

Even had these words been true and wise, and they certainly weren't, Job was in no state to receive them. Speaking to those deep in grief is incredibly difficult. It's almost impossible to know the 'right' thing to say. But avoiding them for that reason is even worse. Our attempts to care will often be clumsy, but my we must: listening rather than speaking, finding practical helps that speak for themselves, praying, waiting - just being there.

### Pray

Lord God, I feel so helpless in the face of others' grief. May I learn wise ways to respond, not claiming to understand when I don't. Keep me from windy words.

## DAY 3

*'Where then does wisdom come from? It is hidden from the eyes of all living.'*

### Read

Job 28:20-28

### Understand

It is Job who asks this question and he who answers it; in doing so, demonstrating why God felt able to put trust in him. Job realises that humans are not inherently wise. Clever, yes, knowledgeable, yes - but wise, not so much! For even the cleverest and most knowledgeable are finite, limited by time, space and brainpower in what they can know. There is only One who stands outside time and space, Job asserts, and only this One who can show the way. Wisdom comes not just from education or philosophical thinking (though these have their place), but from a very different source: a choice of humble submission to the One who knows best. Wisdom comes from willpower, not brainpower.

### Reflect

Do you think you are wise? If so, beware. (And I'm aware that the very act of writing these words puts me in the danger zone!) Do you think you are weak or ignorant? If so, no problem, for acknowledging it can be a wonderful first step towards opening you up to wisdom from beyond the human sphere, brought by the Holy Spirit of God.

### Pray

Lord God, give me a healthy mistrust of clever words. Help me to crave wisdom from a deeper source. If it comes from the deep pain of human experience, then so be it, Lord. I submit to your will



## DAY 4

*'Have you commanded the morning since your days began?'*

### Read

Job 38: 1-1 2

### Understand

'Were you there when I laid the foundation of the earth?' No, no one was, not even Stephen Hawking. The best his mammoth mind can do is calculate what might have been. Have you ever made the sun rise? No, no one has, not Copernicus, not Newton, not Einstein. The best these scientific geniuses could do is try to understand how it happened. True, humans have learned how to make light appear at the flick of a switch, to unlock energy sources from the earth's crust, or harness the power of winds and waves. But even these giant leaps are only utilising what was already there, waiting for us to discover. All these achievements show that God designed us with amazing

capabilities, but remind us that even the most brilliant of us cannot create life or matter out of nothing.

### **Reflect**

Here is a simple practical suggestion. One day this week get up a little earlier to allow time to sit and watch the dawn. You may not catch an actual sunrise, but even so, watch with wonder the way light returns and colour seeps back into the greyness. Perhaps you'll notice the singing stars or the swaddling clouds, the rain, or the hoar frost. Be amazed.

### **Pray**

Lord God, shake me loose from what I take for granted. Prise me free from dull self-absorption. Give me child-like wonder and open my eyes to marvels I'd forgotten.

## **DAY 5**

**'I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me.'**

### **Read**

Job 42: 1-10

### **Understand**

In the face of God's thunderous questioning, there is only one response. Job needs to shut up. His understanding has been radically altered. 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.' Experiencing something you had only been told about before - childbirth, the Grand Canyon, love, pain, death - changes your perception forever. And no experience changes you more deeply than an encounter with the living Creator God. It happens to a few in great dramatic intensity, to most as a fleeting moment barely understood, but it can throw into question all you thought you knew. The story of Job concludes with a happy ending. Job's fortunes were fully restored, even his friends' folly was forgiven. I'm sure, however, that none of them were ever quite the same. What, I wonder, was the difference?

### **Reflect**

How can you ensure you do not speak things you don't understand? Here are some suggestions. Listen more and speak less. Listen to what you say, listen out for platitudes, sweeping generalities, jargon that has solidified into habit. Identify those things you need to understand more. Learn to say 'I don't know' and 'I was wrong'. Learn to laugh at your absurdities.

### **Pray**

Lord God, keep me from foolish words. May I not rush to fill a holy silence. May I look and listen carefully and acknowledge my mistakes. May I sit humbly, prayerfully and patiently with those who suffer.