

# INTRODUCTION

January 20, 2020 marked the first laboratory confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States. As I write this in May 2022 more than 83 million Americans have become ill, almost 1 million have died from the pandemic. The statistics are staggering, but the losses they represent are up close and personal for many. Grief, heartbreak, and even ruin, are in the stories of many who have been impacted by this virus. Loved ones are gone, plans for the future have been shattered. Some may have recovered from acute illness, but now suffer chronic, and even debilitating challenges. The loss of jobs, businesses, even careers has run rampant. People of faith cry out to God looking for relief, asking for miracles.

Our Old Testament readings have a great deal to do with sickness and death, with confusion and desperation. They speak of men dealing with catastrophe and failure, men perplexed by their circumstance and desperate for answers. Continuing in the book of Job, and beginning 1 Samuel, there is much with which we might identify and much we can learn.

Job's wealth, his health – and his children were taken from him. Ten children; having experienced the devastation in losing one of my own three children, Job's loss of all of his in one horrific blow is beyond anything that I can comprehend. In the chapters we will read together this quarter, Job pleads to hear from God; no doubt, many have struggled and longed for answers that they felt did not come.

In 1 Samuel, Eli, a high priest, values his own peace more than he honors God, and as a result, God rejects him and his entire household; their priestly reign will be ended forever. The Philistines capture the ark of the covenant, slaughtering thousands of Israelites in battle. And, Saul, chosen by God and anointed to be king of Israel, fails miserably. Disappointment, grief, confusion, failure, consequences for family – all part of the stories of these men – stories with which we can identify.

Going to the New Testament we read about Jesus suffering many of the things you and I might face today. And we can see strife in the Corinthian church that, while stemming from issues perhaps different from those we deal with today, have caused division – something many of us can see threatening our own fellowship, friendships, and even our effectiveness in carrying out God's call for our lives.

As we continue with Matthew in his gospel, he tells about Jesus, his compassion, his love, his power, and of warning his disciples about persecution, fear, and division. Jesus is misunderstood and ignored, and yet he continues on to carry out his Father's will, healing and teaching wherever he went.

Having received reports of quarreling in the church at Corinth, Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians. Claiming his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ, he responds to the troubling news of contention within the church that has caused jealousy, strife, and division. Paul encourages them all to remember who it is that they truly follow, to whom they really belong. He is writing to a congregation, but is reaching out to the hearts of its individual members.

Old Testament and New, we see many kinds of struggles, but we also see God's intimate attention and his purposes accomplished. Over and over, we see God's love, care, and ultimate victory. May we be encouraged to see the reality of God's presence and provision in Scripture – and in our own lives.

## SCRIPTURE UNION'S BIBLE READING METHOD

- PRAY** that God would speak to you from the Bible passage.
- READ** the Bible passage slowly and thoughtfully, perhaps more than once.
- REFLECT** on what you've read.
- APPLY** what you learn from the Bible to the situations in your life.
- PRAY** again, using your discoveries from the Bible to guide your prayers.

# SPIRITUAL PAIN

Dame Ciceley Cicely Saunders, the founder of the hospice movement, coined the term ‘total pain’ to describe the emotional, psychological, and spiritual distress which may accompany the physical pain of a serious illness. The book of Job gives us an insight to spiritual pain. It tells the story of a good man, with a strong faith in God, who loses everything. We share his distress as he and his friends struggle to make sense of his situation and its implications for his faith.

I am writing these notes as the COVID-19 pandemic takes hold, another situation in which people struggle to make sense of suffering. The book of Job does not give us an easy answer, but it does enable us to see why some solutions fall short.

The first two chapters set the scene and give us background not available to Job and his companions. The rest of the book of Job, apart from a brief epilogue, comprises speeches made by Job, his companions and, finally, God himself. Over the next few days, we will hear from Job and two of his companions.

Each speech is a carefully crafted poem; it may help to read them aloud, or to listen to them from an audio Bible (there are several versions available on the internet). ‘The book as a whole illustrates that a full understanding of God’s reasons for events is not a prerequisite for faithfulness amid terrible suffering.’\*

\*ESV Study Bible, Wheaton: Crossway, 2008, p870

## GOOD NEWS IN DARKNESS

As I write, much of the world is still responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. As many have pointed out, it's an unprecedented time in history! One thing's for sure, this situation demands a response from us all.

From the start, as we'll see in our next readings in Matthew's gospel, Jesus provokes reaction. The crowds respond instinctively to his compassionate authority because it's backed up by practical power and hope-filled promises (9:35,36, 11:28-30). These are unprecedented in a nation under Roman occupation, with a religious elite preferring strict rule-keeping over mercy. Jesus is the best-ever good news story in a time of darkness. Even so, some only see the negative, responding with fear, denial, condemnation, even indifference (11:20). The Pharisees are hostile to the idea that God might work through anyone but themselves! Then, there are his disciples – a rabble whom Jesus calls family through their obedience (12:50). He has his Father's heart for relationship, rather than a lust for control.

Matthew carefully identifies Jesus with ancient prophetic promises (12:18-21). Jesus' radical new approach doesn't overthrow tradition; in sinless obedience and sacrifice he fulfills the Law and the prophets (5:17-20). If he doesn't look like the expected Messiah (Isaiah 9:6,7), it's because, as a suffering servant, he will liberate more than a single nation, becoming Savior and King of all. Let's not put God in a box, but give him free rein to do things his way, producing a greater harvest than any other way. Let's get ready to encounter the real Jesus.

## FAIR WEATHER FRIENDS?

We have met Job and his friends earlier in Discovery. You may remember that, in chapters 4-27 of Job, there are three rounds of their speeches. Here, we rejoin the to-and-fro between them toward the end of round one (chapters 4-14), and then continue through the second (15-21).

First, we will meet Zophar, 'the least sympathetic'\* of the friends, who sets out to correct Job's theology. Like his compatriots, he is wedded to a mechanistic view of God that cannot accommodate the kind of test Job is undergoing. They keep repeating their unquestionable truth: righteous people do not suffer like Job is suffering. The same old arguments come up every time the friends speak. They have much to teach us about how not to approach pastoral needs.

So, what is going on? The Parable of the Sower helps. It describes reactions to God's Word. Two images talk of starting well but failing to persevere. Rocky places show early promise but things 'fall away' when troubles come. Seed amongst thorns grows but is then choked, meaning unfruitfulness (Matthew 13:20-22).\* Is Job a fair-weather believer, righteous only when everything is favorable? How will he be when things go horribly wrong and his previously warm relationship with God is wrecked? It's heart-wrenching, and we wince at Job's laments while learning that this, too, is part of godly relationship. Don't expect straightforward answers here. Job longs for some response from God and finds a silent heaven. Sometimes we are left puzzled by life. Plot spoiler – he keeps trusting!

\*DJ Clines, Job, New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition, IVP, 1994

## GOD'S WISDOM FOR THE CHURCH

Have you ever had to confront someone about something they got wrong? How confident were you that you were right and they were wrong? How did you approach the topic?

What about a theological or lifestyle issue in the church? I am sure that I am not the only one who would just hope that the problem would go away, or even pray that God would intervene and sort things out, but feel absolutely inadequate to deal with it myself.

Paul is made of sterner stuff – he wrote the letter to the Corinthians to address some fairly serious lifestyle issues and theological misunderstandings. In these opening chapters to the letter, we see Paul getting straight to the point. Although he is telling the Corinthian church off, he does it in a positive way, focusing on God, who he is and what he has done, to help the church get things into a correct perspective.

As we spend time looking at this epistle over the next few days, it may be helpful to ask ourselves the following questions:

How focused am I on God?

How is my church doing at keeping God at the forefront?

When I get annoyed with others in my church, is my anger righteous or selfish?

Am I understanding what the Spirit is revealing?

How much of God's wisdom am I exhibiting?

## THE EVER-ACTIVE GOD

This year, I am reading the whole Bible using the same scheme as a friend, my small group leader and my son-in-law. Occasionally we share our reflections. It's an extra bonus that I'm reading the Bible in the company of others. During last year's Lockdown crisis, my vicar, his wife and teenage children read and recorded the Lectionary's Morning Prayer accompanied by clinking spoons on cereal bowls. Once it was up on the church website, I was able to meet God with others 'in community,' as we joined with this family. The Lectionary contains a set of daily Bible readings. Often, in an unexpected way, one of these passages sheds fresh light on another passage. The Spirit's inspiration!

The first chapters of 1 Samuel present God as an ever-active God, who never sleeps nor sits distantly observing the affairs of his created world. He is constantly engaged. Each reflection focuses on one aspect of God's activity. As I planned the notes, I connected with a psalm that shed additional fresh light. There was also a connection with the events of 1 Samuel when I wrote on the two Sunday psalms.

I hope that as you 'listen in' to 1 Samuel, you will rejoice with thousands of others meeting God through this same part of his Word. I also hope that in the process you perceive God's active involvement in and around you.

## THE HEAD AND SHOULDERS MAN

In 1995, I was given a set of cassette tapes (younger readers may care to conduct an internet search to understand what these were!); they contained recordings of a series of talks given at a Bible week in the north of England a decade or more earlier. The speaker, Ern Baxter, spoke about two Old Testament kings: Saul and David.

He referred to Saul, Israel's first king, as the head and shoulders man. This title was based on a couple of references to his physical presence (1 Sam 9:1; 10:23) and resonated with the name of a popular shampoo! Although Saul may have had a kingly presence, his character and spirituality were sorely wanting. Saul was Israel's first king. Until now, God's people had been governed by a series of leaders who had acted in God's name, most famously, Moses and Joshua. In recent memory however, the people had been led by judges; men and women endowed with special powers from God.

We will encounter Samuel, set apart since birth to serve God, and he was both a priest and a prophet. He was grieved when the people asked for a king and took it personally (1 Sam 8:6), and although God said that it was his rule that had been rejected, he consented to the appointment of a king. The people's reason for having a king was also made clear; they wanted to emulate neighboring nations (1 Sam 8:5). We are about to explore one of the most complex and tragic figures in the Bible.

## SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM

In Matthew's Gospel, the writer gathers Jesus' parables and miracles into a carefully structured narrative, often reaching back into the Old Testament. Written for a church made up mostly of converts from Judaism, its distinctive marks as a Jewish-Christian gospel relate to how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament hopes and prophecies. The 'kingdom of heaven' is a key theme that places Jesus in his theological and historical context as it is revealed, experienced, and understood. Jesus describes God's new kingdom, ushers it in, and embodies it – he is the king establishing his kingdom.

In these passages, Jesus is revealed and rejected as the Messiah. But how does the Son of God reveal himself in our own cultural contexts today? What does it mean for us to enter the kingdom of heaven – for Jesus to be our king? As we read, let Jesus come to life in your imagination. Picture him afresh through the eyes of the disciples as they work out who he is. He is a man with friends and family, who journeys, heals, and teaches, meeting thousands of people: he moves, speaks, breathes, walks, talks, eats. Let him come to life in your heart too as the risen and living Son of God, worthy of worship. His life on earth changed the whole of history, and his Spirit is still powerfully at work as we wait for his return and the complete fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven.