

Our readings this week are all concerned with God's faithfulness in the face of suffering, and how God's promises are more certain than the problems that confront us from time to time.

The basics of the Book of Job are generally well-known. Job is attacked by Satan and loses everything, and his belief in the goodness of God is tested to the maximum. Nevertheless, the themes of the Book are complex, and its teaching not easy to describe.

For our purposes this week, the most important thing to explain is the figure of Satan. The Hebrew word 'Satan' means 'the accuser'. This has different meanings. One of them is what we see in this passage: Satan is the one who tries to convince God that we are base and worthless. He literally 'accuses' us of sin. Yet it may also be that Satan accuses *God* himself, tries to convince us that God is *not* good, and should not be trusted. This interpretation links back to Genesis 3, where the serpent – either identical to or closely related to Satan – successfully convinces Adam and Eve that a) God did not really mean what he appeared to command, and b) that God is jealous of humanity and its potential to rival him. Lastly, Satan is 'the accuser' because he accuses us before ourselves, trying to convince us that we are worthless or beyond forgiveness.

Yet as the story of Job makes clear, Satan has little to no power. His power is restricted by God, and he depends upon the permission of others to achieve his aims. He is – to quote a popular phrase – a 'mouse with a megaphone', who manipulates others rather than having direct control over them. This is why Jesus calls him 'the Father of Lies' (John 8: 44)

It is not ultimately the weakness of Satan that is our hope however (!), but the faithfulness of God. This is brought out well by our passage from Habbakuk. Almost nothing is known about the prophet, except that he was writing approximately 600BC, and predicted the rise of the new empire of the Chaldeans. The

book is also notable for its fine language and hymn of praise to God (from which our reading is taken). For this reason, some commentators suggest that Habakkuk may have been from the tribe of Levi which helped with worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. In any case, because he knows that God is faithful, after relating a series of woes (which in an agrarian context could all have meant death) Habakkuk is able to continue rejoicing in the Lord.

Yet why is this? Well while not a direct example of the phenomenon, Habakkuk's attitude is closely related to the idea of the 'prophetic perfect tense'. Despite sounding a bit complex, this is the idea that if God has promised something *will* happen, it is so certain that it has effectively happened *already*. Thus, if we look out and see total desolation and ruin all around us, because God has promised that we will be saved in the end, we can rejoice *in spite of* the problems facing us. God is faithful, and his faithfulness is stronger and more sure than any fleeting misfortune.

This brings us to our last reading from Paul from his second letter to the Church in the ancient Greek city of Corinth. Paul helped bring the Corinthians to faith and establish their church. Yet some of their number have now rejected him in favour of others, and have cast doubt on his teaching. Because of their poor treatment of him, and because of the other misfortunes he has faced in his ministry, suffering is an important theme of the letter.

In this – particularly beautiful – passage, Paul reflects on all the pain he has suffered, and why it ultimately doesn't matter. Importantly, he uses the same word used by Habakkuk – *yet* – to describe the simultaneous experience of suffering while still believing in God's faithfulness. Yet this is not wishful thinking. Instead, as he explains, his hope in God's faithfulness is that his life – his true life – is in Christ, who lives in him and he in Christ. This is the 'inner nature' that no suffering can touch. Our 'outer nature' – things like health, success, circumstances, relationships etc – can come and go, often being terrible. Yet this is not our true

nature or identity: our true nature and identity is found in Christ, who has raised us from sin and death, and is conforming us to his glorious likeness 'day by day'. When the end comes, he and we will be revealed for what we truly are: free from death, sin, suffering and failure, living eternally in the perfect love of Father, Son and Spirit.

Job 2:1-10

2 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord. **2**The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' **3**The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.' **4**Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. **5**But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.' **6**The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.'

7So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. **8**Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

9Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.' **10**But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

1. Do you find it hard to understand why people with faith like Job should suffer in life?

2. 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' How do you respond to Job's point of view?

Habakkuk 3:17-18

¹⁷Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.

3. Has there ever been a time in your life when you've been suffering, and *yet* have felt moved to praise God?

2 Corinthians 4: 8-12, 16-18

⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. ¹²So death is at work in us, but life in you.

¹⁶So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

4. What do you think Paul means by our 'outer nature'? What does he mean by our 'inner nature'?

5. Activity: Thinking about Paul's teaching in relation to our own lives, take a piece of paper and make two headings 'Outer nature' and 'inner nature'. Write down in each column things in your life that might fit the bill for each of these.