

"Big Question 1: Does God really care?"

**Sunday 11 January 2009
Rev Brian Senior**

Readings:

Exodus 1
Psalm 80
Luke 1:67-79

Sermon

In this series leading up to Easter, we are taking a look at some of the Big Questions people often ask about life, God and the Christian faith ... questions concerning issues around the meaning and purpose of life, the problem of suffering, the nature of freedom, evil, forgiveness and love.

We decided to examine these questions in relation to the early chapters of the book of Exodus, to ground them in the experience of God's people as they struggled to become a nation after years in captivity in Egypt.

We mustn't let the years of history dull us to the reality of their situation. These were real people facing real questions, sometimes in the harshest of conditions.

Hundreds of years before the events of Exodus chapter 1, God had called Abram to leave Ur of the Chaldeans, in present-day Iraq, to take the long journey around the fertile crescent to Canaan, where he promised to establish him and his descendants as a great nation. Together with Abram's nephew Lot, Abram and Sarah his wife settled in the land of Canaan, and God established a covenant with Abram, re-naming him Abraham.

Despite God's promise, they had a long struggle with Sarah's childlessness, and enormous family tensions involving Sarah's maid Hagar who bore Abraham a son, named Ishmael. But Abram and Sarah did, in due course, have a son of their own. God tested Abraham through Isaac, by asking him to sacrifice the boy as a burnt offering, but then provided a ram at the last minute ... a picture of the sacrifice which God himself would make many years into the future, when his own Son was sacrificed for us, with no last-minute escape.

Isaac, in turn, grew up to become the father of twins, Esau and Jacob. Jacob was the one who tricked his brother Esau of his birthright, but was tricked himself by his uncle Laban. Laban made him work for seven years for the hand of his daughter Rachel, only to slip her sister Leah into his tent at the vital moment. Genesis 29:25 says:

"When morning came, there was Leah!"

Jacob had to promise Laban another seven years work, in order to get Rachel as well.

Jacob, famously, became the father of 12 sons, one of whom was Joseph. Joseph was his father's favourite, but deeply unpopular with his brothers. Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt, where he was imprisoned on false charges. But because God's hand was upon him, he rose to become second in command to Pharaoh the King, and to save Egypt from the dire consequences of seven years of famine.

Did God care that Abram had to leave all that he knew to come to Canaan? Did God care that he slept with his wife's maid? Did God care about how Isaac felt about being almost sacrificed, or that Jacob tricked his brother? Did God care that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, or that Joseph was hated by his brothers?

Does God care at all about the details of our little lives?

When the famine which Egypt suffered also hit Canaan, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to find food, and were eventually reunited with Joseph and reconciled to him ... and so they brought the whole family to Egypt under the protection of Pharaoh.

After four hundred years, Joseph's family had grown into a large nation, and the situation in Egypt had changed ... which is where Exodus chapter 1 picks up the story.

The situation of the Israelites in Egypt went from that of honoured guests, through tolerated aliens, to distrusted slaves. The growth of the nation made the Egyptians nervous ... they had within their borders a sizeable foreign power, who they feared could turn against them at any time, and as so often occurs, suspicion and distrust leads to fear and persecution.

Memories are short ... and four hundred years was plenty of time for the Egyptians to forget that Joseph had saved them from disaster. Once they had oppressed and enslaved the Israelites, they got into a position where they both feared them and needed them – feared them, in case they turned against them ... and needed them, because they came to depend on their labour to support their building programmes.

The more the Israelites were feared, the harder they were oppressed. Eventually this led to the programme of mass infanticide which Pharaoh decreed ... the edict that every male child born to the Israelites was to be killed at birth ... and later, when this didn't work, that every male baby was to be thrown into the River Nile and drowned.

The suffering of the Israelites at this point was not entirely unlike that of their suffering during the Holocaust of World War Two. Pharaoh was not quite working towards their extinction, but they were certainly regarded as expendable.

It's not a pretty story, is it? No one could accuse the Scriptures of being dressed up and sanitised ... instead this is real, gritty, human stuff.

We can look back through the convoluted history of mankind, and we may be tempted to think that either God chose some pretty poor raw material to work with, or that he didn't much care what humankind got up to or what happened to them ... and consequently that he doesn't much care about our lives either.

The reality is, of course, is quite different. Humanity, created in perfection but with freedom to choose, quickly chose the path of rebellion against God, and is deeply flawed. Although each of us still is made in the image of God, sin and rebellion have distorted the image, and we are very much in need of saving ... but then that, after all, is why Jesus came.

So throughout history, God has been at work, working through people despite their failings, seeking to draw them back to himself, and back to a right way of living. Time and time again he has broken in on the chaos of man's creation to offer his people a new beginning ... always looking forward to the point in time when he would send his Son to redeem the world ... and beyond that to the time of his Second Coming to judge the world.

For the Israelites in Egypt the situation was desperate ... but tough as it was, God had not forgotten them. In the midst of the horror, God not only cared, but was at work.

We read in verse 20:

"So God was kind to the midwives, and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own."

Even in the bleakness of their suffering, a spark of faith and hope remained ... and as we shall see over the next few weeks, God was planning to fan that spark into life, because he had decided to set his people free.

There are many situations around the world which may lead us to ask the question:

"Does God really care?"

We have watched on our television screens over the last few years as the situation in Zimbabwe has gone from bad to worse. We have seen how injustice, cruelty and fear have become the everyday experience of so many people, as their once-prosperous land has descended into chaos. People there are suffering through lack of food, clean water and medical supplies, and it all seems so unnecessary ... and so wrong that one man's obsession with power can lead to so much suffering.

And we ask: "Does God really care?"

Then there is Iraq ... a nation torn apart by violence, supposedly in the cause of peace and the defeat of terrorism ... where soldiers have died while trying to bring help, and children have lost limbs because of land mines ... where even mentally handicapped people have been persuaded by evil men to become suicide bombers, and where Christians have been terribly persecuted because they are thought to be associated with 'the west'.

Does God really care?

... or consider Afghanistan ... a nation where for so many years now, every hope of a new dawn has been snuffed out by further suffering, where women's lives have been cruelly restricted by the Taliban, and many live in fear that it could all so easily happen again.

And again we ask: "Does God really care?"

While we have been aware of these situations, it seems as though the world's media have barely noticed the ongoing horrors in the Democratic Republic of the Congo ... and the terror-stricken lives of people in Darfur which were daily on our screens a few years ago are now, more or less, completely ignored ... and there are many other places besides.

Those of you who keep up with news of the Persecuted Church may be aware of the terrible suffering of Christians in North Korea, in India, in Pakistan, and in many other places ... where Christians can lose their jobs, their families, their homes, or even their lives for the cause of the gospel ... but it is easy for most people to forget.

Does God really care about their suffering?

And then, of course, at present, there is Gaza ... and we are horrified by video images of burned and broken lives, of children wide-eyed with fear, of a desolate husband

who's wife and children are all dead, and of the weary suffering of people who have for so many years had so very little, and yet stand to lose even the little they have.

And we may ask ourselves – Does God really care?

Some people have an image of God .. or what, in their imagination, they think God ought to be like ... which is a sort of cross between Father Christmas and the Fairy Godmother in Cinderella. Rather than trying to discover what God is really like, they are disappointed that God is not as they would like him to be.

When we try to make God in our own image, the real God is bound to be a disappointment. If we think that God should do everything which pleases us, then we are going to struggle with a God who makes demands of us, and expects us to take responsibility.

God doesn't work like a slot machine, as if we could put in our coin and get what we want. When we pray for something, we need to be aware that God's answer may be very different to the answer we were seeking ... or he might even call us to be the answer to our own prayers.

It is no good asking God to help the hungry unless we are willing to offer them food.

It is no good praying for someone who is lonely, unless we are willing to befriend them.

It is no good praying for the poor, unless we are willing to open our wallets.

God cares ... he cares passionately about the enormous needs in the world, and he cares about how we live our lives ... but that doesn't mean that he is going to step into every situation and just 'make it better'. God's heart breaks for the suffering people of Zimbabwe, but he challenges hearts that need to be changed in order for things to improve there. God's heart breaks for the people of Gaza, but he will hold to account those on both sides whose choices have led to the current bloodshed.

God cared about the Israelites enslaved in Egypt ... but hearts there needed to be changed, too ... not just the heart of Pharaoh and the Egyptians, so that they would be willing to let them go ... but also the hearts of the Israelites, who needed to be willing to trust God and to follow him faithfully ... lessons which they would still be learning forty years later.

Having said all this, there is still a place for crying out to God for mercy ... recognising our failures and throwing ourselves on the compassionate love of God, and then trusting in the justice of his answers. In Psalm 80, the Psalmist appeals to the character of God:

'Who lead Joseph like a flock'

... and dares to call on God to *"awaken his might; come and save us."*

Notice how he questions God about what he is doing:

"O Lord God Almighty, how long will your anger smoulder against the prayers of your people?"

... and how he also reminds God of what he has done:

"You have fed them with the bread of tears; you made them drink tears by the bowlful."

There is tremendous honesty here – the Psalmist recognises that the sovereign God has at the very least permitted his people to go through tough times, whether he has brought this upon them or whether they have brought it on themselves by their own actions – but he also hopes and prays that God will act to change their circumstances:

Verse 14: *"Return to us, O God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see!"*

Verse 19: *"Restore us, O Lord God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved."*

Sometimes we get anxious about something for which we have prayed, but for which our prayers don't seem to have been answered ... and we may mistakenly think that God doesn't care. But we need to understand that there is not a mechanistic connection between prayer and the result.

Prayer is about a relationship with God. It is about entering into a conversation with him ... and recognising that while we see only a small part of the picture, and understand little, God sees the whole picture and understands all ...and is able to take the long view. So the Psalmist is able to pour out his heart, and say it how he sees it ... but then trust God to do what is right and just.

When we ask whether God really cares, we have to try to see our concerns from God's eternal perspective. When Zechariah prophesied following the birth of his son John, he spoke of God having come and redeemed his people ...

"He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David."

His prophecy was partly about his own newborn son, who was to be the forerunner of the Messiah, and partly about Jesus himself, who was yet to be born ... and yet he speaks as though God had already done it.

There was a lot that was going to happen before Jesus' death on the cross became the means of Salvation for sinful mankind:

- The Roman forces of occupation were still in control.
- Herod's brutality would see infant boys in Bethlehem slaughtered.
- His own son John would be beheaded in the dungeons of Herod's palace on a whim.
- Jesus would be rejected by many of those he came to save.
- Even after Jesus' resurrection, huge numbers would die within a generation, as a result of the Romans crushing the Jewish uprising.

God really does care ... about the things which happen to us, about the choices we make, and about our eternal destiny. He loves us even to the point of sending his only Son to die on the cross so that we can be saved ... but that doesn't yet mean an end to the sorrows of fallen humanity ... not yet ... not until Jesus comes again in his glory.

Life is complicated ... but we have the blessing of knowing the love of God in the midst of life's troubles, and the certain hope of a future in which all will truly be well. To end with the words of Zechariah regarding Jesus:

"... the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in the darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."