

Order of Service 10th October 2021

Leaning on a Spider's Web

Welcome

Hello and welcome to Hearsall at Home for 10th October 2021. Today is the second of our series on Job, *Leaning on a Spider's Web*. If you want to read along, try to cover chapters 18 - 24 before next week. For now, let's be still and wait on God.

Call to Worship

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6

We sing our opening song, *Be still...*

Hymn (BPW 5) **Be Still**

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the holy One, is here.

Come bow before him now with reverence and fear.

In him no sin is found; we stand on holy ground.

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;

He burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned.

How awesome is the sight; our radiant King of light!

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace.

No work too hard for Him. In faith receive from him.

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

Opening Prayers (adapted from 'Crumbs of Hope' by Clare McBeath and Tim Presswood)

Let us pray together.

In the middle of the darkest night
when I'm lying wide awake tossing
and turning, trying to get comfy,
You are there.

When I have to try something new
and I'm frightened of failing, afraid
of looking silly;
scared of myself,
You are there.

When the pain seems overwhelming,
when I feel I can't go on,
when the sadness fills my heart
and thunder rages in my head,
You are there.

You are with me in the good times,
You are with me in the bad times;
You are there when I am happy,
You are there when I am sad.

You are there when I am good,
You are there when I am bad;
You are there when I feel kind,
You are there when I feel cross.

So we meet today to say thank you,
Thank you for being with us,
Thank you for being our friend,
Thank you for loving us
whatever we do,
wherever we go,
whoever we are.

Praise you Lord, companion of our living.
Jesus says, Come
Follow me.
We say,
In a minute, I just need to finish my work.

Jesus says, Come
Follow me.
We say,
Can't you ask someone else? I've got so much to do.

Jesus says, Come
Follow me.
We say,
But you're not going
The way that I want to go.

When we walk our own paths,
Forgive us,

When we choose death over life,
Forgive us,

When war seems easier than negotiation,
Forgive us,

When profit comes before justice,
Forgive us,

When greed makes us squander resources,
Forgive us,

When we walk our own paths,
Forgive us.

Jesus says, Come Follow me.
Lord, we come.
Amen

The Lord's Prayer (version)

Eternal Spirit, Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer,
Life-giver, source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all.

Loving God, in whom is heaven.

The hallowing of your name echoes through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the earth!

Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.

In times of temptation and test, spare us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.

Amen

Sometimes we feel desperate to find the love of God. Sometimes we simply have to trust that his love is always present for us. We reflect on this as we share a couple of worship songs...

Songs (WT 22 and 410)

(WT 22) **As the Deer Pants for the Water**

As the deer pants for the water,

So my soul longs after you.

You alone are my heart's desire

And I long to worship you.

Chorus

You alone are my strength, my shield.

To you alone, may my spirit yield.

You alone are my heart's desire

And I long to worship you.

You're my friend and you are my brother,

Even though you are a King.

I love you more than any other,

So much more than anything.

Chorus

You alone are my strength, my shield.

To you alone, may my spirit yield.

You alone are my heart's desire

And I long to worship you.

I want you more than gold or silver,

Only you can satisfy.

You alone are the real joy-giver

And the apple of my eye.

Chorus x2

Song (WT 410) **The Steadfast Love of the Lord Never Ceases**

The steadfast love of the Lord never changes;

His mercies never come to an end;

They are new every morning,

New every morning.

Great is Thy faithfulness, O Lord,

Great is Thy faithfulness.

Repeat

They are new every morning,

New every morning.

Great is Thy faithfulness, O Lord,

Great is Thy faithfulness,

Great is Thy faithfulness.

Offering

Generous God, we praise and bless your holy name for every good gift we receive from your hand. Receive all the gifts we share; may they be expressions of your endless mercy and gracious love. Amen

Our prayers of intercession this week are led by Sandra Noel.

Prayers of Intercession

Father God, we come to you now knowing that you love us and care for us every moment of our lives. So Father, we put our hands in yours and come close to you. We bring to you our hopes, worries and concerns, not just for ourselves, but for all your creation.

As we listen to our weather forecasts we realize how much our climate is changing — with floods in many places, droughts in others, and extreme heat causing wild fires. Forgive us for the damage we have caused over the years. Help all nations to listen to the scientific evidence and change our ways to stop further damage.

Father, we bring to you our wonderful N.H.S. — doctors, nurses, porters, cleaners, catering staff, so many working extremely hard to bring healing and comfort to many, especially during the Covid crisis. Give them the resources they need and a good staffing ratio, so that all may have time to rest after a busy working shift.

We bring to you too, all those involved in the distribution of our daily supplies. The lack of drivers and also the fuel crisis means that there are shortages in our stores. Father, may this problem soon be solved so that adequate produce will be available for people's needs.

Lord, you tell us to love our neighbour as ourselves. Yet there are those in our society who cause harm to others through stabbing and shooting for no reason. Father, heal their minds so that they respect each person they meet. Give support to those who have been victims. Take away their fear and give them confidence as they face each new day.

We bring to you Afghanistan now under Taliban rule. Give those in power respect for all people, especially women and girls. May other governments attempt to have influence on them for the good of all.

And now Father, as we will later go to our homes, we pray for those who are homeless – refugees living in large camps. May all aid agencies have the resources to help support them, bringing them a glimmer of hope for the future, especially for their children.

We pray for our church and the fellowship here. Bless David as he brings to us God's message in the Book of Job.

We will now have a time of quiet as we pray for those who have lost loved ones, those who are sad, and those who are in pain. Bless those who support them when they are feeling low.

Father, hear our prayers, for we ask them in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. AMEN

We're grateful to Sandra for those prayers and now we hear our Bible readings from Job and from Philipians.

Bible Readings

Job 8: 1 - 22

Bildad

8 Then Bildad the Shuhite replied:

2 'How long will you say such things?

Your words are a blustering wind.

3 Does God pervert justice?

Does the Almighty pervert what is right?

4 When your children sinned against him,

he gave them over to the penalty of their sin.

5 But if you will seek God earnestly

and plead with the Almighty,

6 if you are pure and upright,

even now he will rouse himself on your behalf

and restore you to your prosperous state.

7 Your beginnings will seem humble,

so prosperous will your future be.

8 'Ask the former generations

and find out what their ancestors learned,

9 for we were born only yesterday and know nothing,

and our days on earth are but a shadow.

10 Will they not instruct you and tell you?

- Will they not bring forth words from their understanding?
- ¹¹ Can papyrus grow tall where there is no marsh?
Can reeds thrive without water?
- ¹² While still growing and uncut,
they wither more quickly than grass.
- ¹³ Such is the destiny of all who forget God;
so perishes the hope of the godless.
- ¹⁴ What they trust in is fragile;
what they rely on is a spider's web.
- ¹⁵ They lean on the web, but it gives way;
they cling to it, but it does not hold.
- ¹⁶ They are like a well-watered plant in the sunshine,
spreading its shoots over the garden;
- ¹⁷ it entwines its roots round a pile of rocks
and looks for a place among the stones.
- ¹⁸ But when it is torn from its spot,
that place disowns it and says, "I never saw you."
- ¹⁹ Surely its life withers away,
and from the soil other plants grow.
- ²⁰ 'Surely God does not reject one who is blameless
or strengthen the hands of evildoers.
- ²¹ He will yet fill your mouth with laughter
and your lips with shouts of joy.
- ²² Your enemies will be clothed in shame,
and the tents of the wicked will be no more.'

Philippians 3:7-14

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

Wherever life may be taking us right now, Jesus is with us. We sing, *For the joys and for the sorrows.*

Song (WT 96) **For the Joys and for the Sorrows**

For the joys and for the sorrows;
The best and worst of times,
For this moment, for tomorrow,
For all that lies behind;
Fears that crowd around me,
For the failure of my plans,
For the dreams of all I hope to be,
The truth of what I am:

*For this I have Jesus,
For this I have Jesus,
For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus.*

For the tears that flow in secret,
In the broken times,
For the moments of elation,
Or the troubled mind;
For all the disappointments,
Or the sting of old regrets,
All my prayers and longings
That seem unanswered yet:

*For this I have Jesus,
For this I have Jesus,
For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus.*

For the weakness of my body,
The burdens of each day,
For the nights of doubt and worry,
When sleep has fled away;
Needing reassurance,
And the will to start again,
A steely-eyed endurance,
The strength to fight and win:

For this I have Jesus,
For this I have Jesus,
For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus.

And now may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

Leaning on a Spider's Web

If you're reading Job along with me, it's an understatement to say that you'll have noticed the bleakness of Job's complaints. His days are *swifter than a weaver's shuttle*. He tires of God's presence and longs for God to leave him be. He wishes he has never been born and longs for the comfort of death. God brings terrors to him; he is like an assailant. Job suggests that God is the one who is responsible for corruption and evil on the earth.

In the midst of his complaints and concerns, Job expresses some deep truths.

- Both deceived and deceiver belong to God - God is above all the games that people play.
- Animals, birds and fish share his own experience; suffering is integral to life.
- God turns our human ideas of who is good and who is bad inside out:
revealing the deep things of darkness and bringing utter darkness into the light.

Job's picture of God is at once awesome, thrilling, terrifying and perplexing. His God is no nursery-school Jesus blessing do-gooders and telling off the baddies. He is the God who cannot be constrained or described by mere human concerns.

He is the Maker of the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the constellations of the south. He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted. When he passes me, I cannot see him; when he goes by, I cannot perceive him.

As for his friends, they are *miserable comforters*. They continue with the old model of faith, insisting that Job must have sinned and brought his downfall upon himself. Their maxims, thinks Job, are *proverbs of ashes* and he demands to be heard by God directly. But Job calls for the ear of his friends:

*I have a mind, as well as you.
I am not inferior.*

And in a passage that could have been written for ministers and counsellors alike, we hear this:

*... I desire to speak to the Almighty
and to argue my case with God.
You, however, smear me with lies;
you are worthless physicians, all of you!
If only you would be altogether silent!
For you that would count as wisdom.*

So Job longs to argue his case directly with his Lord. And this suggests there's a vital role for a Christian friend, or a pastor of a person in dire need. Listen to them, so that they can express how they feel towards God! Job is facetious when he says that for his friends, *silence would be wisdom*. But in fact, silence can truly be the sign of wisdom and compassion. Silence allows another soul to chart the reality of their experience without being closed down by theories, questions and the stories of the listener. To support someone spiritually is a gentle and delicate affair, and if we listen well, we have the privilege of bearing witness to the work God is doing in the soul of another.

Bildad, one of those 'miserable comforters', is onto something, though. He asks:

Can papyrus grow tall where there is no marsh?

Can reeds survive without water?

While still growing and uncut,

they wither more quickly than the grass.

Such is the destiny of all who forsake God;

so perishes the hope of the godless.

What they trust in is fragile;

what they rely on is a spider's web.

They lean on the web, but it gives way;

they cling to it, but it does not hold.

We may notice those who forsake God doing very nicely thank you. For a whole lifetime they may thrive. But they, too, will find their days are *swifter than the weaver's shuttle* and they too will find that the thing they lean on - their wealth, status and possessions - ultimately amount to a mere *spider's web*.

So Bildad points us in an important direction. The wicked may seem to thrive like a well-watered plant spreading its shoots over the garden, but no plant endures forever and the garden may continue to thrive long after any particular plant has been forgotten.

But Bildad still applies the old model:

Surely God does not reject the one who is blameless

or strengthen the hands of evildoers.

So Job retorts that he is no evildoer, and yet has suffered many tokens of rejection from God. And, as we well know, evil people can prosper for long periods. Callous dictators may live into their nineties.

So Job continues to reject the idea that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. He, a good man, talks of God in rather strange terms. Can the friends allow Job to chart the truth he is experiencing? Can they hear words such as these:

But as a mountain erodes and crumbles

and as a rock is moved from its place,

as water wears away stones

*and torrents wash away the soil,
so you [God] destroy a person's hope.*

This is the truth of his experience.

He had hoped in his huge agri-business: nearly twelve thousand animals, and they had been swept away in a day.

He had hoped in his family - ten children - but all of them taken in a single disaster.

He had hoped in his health - but his body has been afflicted with painful sores.

He had hoped his wife would stand by him, but she thinks he should curse God and die.

He had hoped his friends would support him, but they stick with religious rules rather than giving him lovingkindness.

God, it seems, has eroded his hope as the weather erodes a mountain. What seemed utterly solid has been worn completely away. God, he says, is the destroyer of his hope. What had seemed so solid turned out to be a mere spider's web.

Earlier in chapter 9 we hear this fascinating yearning from Job, talking about his relationship with God:

*If only there were someone to mediate between us,
someone to bring us together,
someone to remove God's rod from me,
so that his terror would frighten me no more.*

God has reduced Job to a mere heartbeat in an infested skin. His world is hopeless. And he cries out for someone - anyone - who will connect him with God; anyone who could mediate; someone who could remove God's rod from him.

Within most religions and worldviews there is no such figure. Job cries out for someone who can be a bridge between himself and God. An advocate. A negotiator. A priest.

Now Jewish religion involves rich explorations of God's lovingkindness and faithfulness. His holiness and awesome power are dramatically explored. A prophetic cry for the poor is integral to its laws and religion. It fashioned a sense of belonging to God by developing an interlaced culture composed of laws, festivals, customs, traditions, songs, poems and commandments.

But here in Job we peer into a psychic corner of Judaism which, in effect, cries out for a Christ. Job has delved into Judaism's darker depths and found a fertile soil in which Christian faith could grow.

Job foreshadows here the famous declaration of 19:25:

*I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.*

It's not that Job was written to point to Christianity, but the character here yearns for a great high priest, a vindicator, a mediator, a bridge, a Redeemer. I hope that Jewish friends would understand if we say - we think we have found him in Jesus of Nazareth.

Now this is not only of background interest for us as Christians and I'll explain why. Our reading from Philippians has Paul describing how all the things that were gains to him, he now considers losses. The stupendous wonder of actually knowing Christ Jesus as Lord means that nothing in any religion, and no moral behaviour, and no human achievement and nothing at all that this world can offer can compare with the surpassing wonder of knowing Christ - the bridge, the High Priest, the Redeemer, the Saviour, the advocate in heaven, who prays for us and brings us the Father...

All the things in which Paul might have hoped - they are regarded as so much rubbish! To lean on them was to lean on a spider's web. His love for Jesus is the spiritual equivalent of falling in love - nothing else can hold a candle to the delight and wonder of knowing Jesus as Saviour and Lord. So Paul forgets what was behind and strains to what is ahead.

Now sincere Christians sometimes find that many or all of their own hopes are dashed. They longed to be given a role in church. They used to love singing great Christian songs. They used to find it easy to do the right thing, and feel the joy of God in reading the Bible, going on retreat, saying liturgies, sharing Holy Communion. There were so many ways in which they experienced the love of God.

But sometimes, like Job, sincere Christians can get a sense of the things in which they hoped being slowly eroded. Particular plans might come to nothing. Spiritual

activities begin to seem empty and unsatisfying. A carefully planned act of worship seems like a mere spider's web.

Why might God allow such a thing to happen? The answer lies in this: God wants to wean us off a reliance on things associated with Christianity, in order to teach us that he, in his very self, is sufficient to meet our needs. In the end, only a simple trust in the reality of Christ's love carries us through the mystery of death. To really know that, we have to learn that we have been leaning on a spider's web.

One of my favourite Christian books is called 'Beyond the Mirror', by Henri Nouwen. It's a sort of spiritual autobiography of an accident, an accident that transformed Henri's life.

Henri was a well-liked Roman Catholic priest, and a successful author and teacher, and he had become increasingly drawn to work with people with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

One week he was living in one house, but every morning was to drive to another house, to provide care for a disabled young man. He woke one day to find the long driveway from his house was completely covered with ice. Unable to take the car, and desperate to complete his caring work, he set out on foot.

When he reached the public highway, realising he was going to be hopelessly late to complete his caring work, desperate to complete his journey, he entered a crazy brain space, beginning to expect that passing motorists really should stop and give him a lift; his mission was so important. After getting irritated with some people at a garage, he was recklessly walking in the road down an icy slope in the dark before dawn and was struck in the back by the wing mirror of a passing van. He was knocked flat.

The driver stopped and took him to the hospital. Then Henri Nouwen entered a different mental space. He began to feel calm and, in the hospital, both quite sick and yet also very cared for.

He was told his spleen was bleeding and would have to be removed, but that this was a safe thing to do, and not particularly dangerous and he would recover. But he

felt things were rather more serious than that. Henri had got it into his head that he might be seriously ill and could die.

During the operation he had a vision of Christ and a sense of the inexpressible love of God surrounding him and upholding him. He felt he really could die; he quite wanted to die; and was wonderfully drawn to this sense of heavenly love.

The one thing that made him think he perhaps should not die was a concern for people with whom he was not at peace; people he had had disagreements with. In particular, he thought about people who may not have forgiven him for offences he had committed; and indeed, people he may not have forgiven himself.

As he emerged from the anaesthetic, the nurse said he needed to be thankful to 'him'. Henri thought she meant the surgeon; in fact she meant the Lord. Later it emerged that his condition had proved to be much worse than expected, and that he could indeed easily have died, as his instinct had suggested.

Gradually returning to regular life, he did so with a completely fresh and unmanufactured sense of the unconditional, strong and universal love of God. He was entirely unafraid of dying and knew with an emotional certainty that there was a Redeemer, an advocate, one who turned the rod from him, one to plead his case, one to introduce him to Father God, and that he was utterly safe and that he was called back to earth to minister this unconditional love and transcendent peace to all, and especially to any he might have offended.

Bad things happen to good Christians! You will experience losses and disappointments, sicknesses and setbacks.

Strange spiritual reverses can happen to good Christians! Truths we were sure about seem less clear. Dogmas are less certain. Hymns and songs, prayers and the like can seem a little empty. God may seem to be eroding some of the very things that used to bring us to him. Even a worship song may seem like a mere spider's web.

But it's for a reason: to awaken a deeper spiritual sensibility within us. A person who has graciously been drawn on a journey such as this has discovered that the love of God is so sweet and precious and good and true that we can learn to love God for God's own sake, and that God loves us for our own sake, just as we are.

We needn't go quite to the existential edge as Job did, but we may get close, and, when we do, the secret is to hold our nerve, stick to our course and simply wait on God in the silence. In time the Redeemer will come, perhaps not in the guise of a favourite hymn, a trendy new song or a charismatic preacher, but simply in the silence that underpins all cultural expressions about God. Without the core reality of divine love, all hymns, creeds, songs and theologies are just a spider's web.

If God takes you to a dark place, stand firm; the true light that gives light to all people will come into your world. Old worship material may seem rather dim, but the bright light of certain love will be kindled in your soul.

If God takes you to an empty place in which everything you hold dear seems a bit vacuous, stand firm and wait on him; for the God who fills the whole universe will come and fill you. Your hands may remain quite empty for the rest of your life, but your soul will embrace an entire universe.

In the words of 1 Peter 1:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Our closing hymn is *Tell out my soul...*

Hymn (BPW 391) **Tell Out My Soul**

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord:
unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name:
make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age to same;
his holy name - the Lord, the Mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might:
powers and dominions lay their glory by;
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word;
firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore!

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
And the love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, evermore.
Amen

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you;
May he guide you through the wilderness;
Protect you through the storm;
May he bring you home rejoicing
At the wonders he has shown you;
May he bring you home rejoicing
Once again into our doors.