

Three

JOB AND HIS SUFFERINGS—I

THE ALMIGHTY BATTLE

We now have one almighty battle on our hands. The whole sovereign holiness and goodness of God is at stake, in what is happening in this person Job—and also in us, when we suffer similarly. Everything for all of us hinges on that. If God's sovereign goodness and holiness can be impugned, then we've all had it. So issues of cosmic dimensions are being fought out, and Job is caught in the thick of it.

IS JOB AN ANGRY MAN?

In what now follows, we need to remember: 'In all this Job did not sin with his lips' (1:10) If we read things later on that we think is Job sinning with his lips, we need to remind ourselves of this verse. Job did not suddenly change between Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. (Some scholars attempt to drive a wedge between these chapters by saying that they come from different sources, but we are going to find the value of taking the entire book together as a consistent whole.) We also need to note God's own judgement on Job in 2:3: '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 holds fast his integrity.' That does not change, to the end of the book. 'He still holds fast his integrity.' He does not charge God with wrong, he does not sin with his lips, he still fears God and turns away from evil. That is the context in which we need to see what Job is saying now. This is not contradicted by anything that Job now goes on to say.

We shall also see that Job's loyalty and integrity do not mean that he must be tight-lipped and stoical about his sufferings. We will see that he gives them full and articulate expression. But we must be careful not to misrepresent what Job says, and how he goes about it. Some of us, or perhaps all of us, may be angry people, and so when we hear Job speak we may automatically think that is what he is doing: that he is sounding off, that he is giving vent to his anger. There is a teaching abroad today, that is very common and widely accepted, that it is good to give vent to your anger, to express it in some way. Professional counsellors even encourage this as a form of therapy—they get you to yell and scream and abuse. They say that to express your anger helps you to get rid of it. I very much doubt that, and the value of that. Far from getting rid of your anger, it could be perhaps a loose and undisciplined excuse to justify and perpetuate your anger, to entrench yourself more solidly in it, or to transfer it onto someone else. You may think you've got rid of your anger by shouting and screaming and getting it out, but it will pop up again somewhere else. Because anger is in the human heart, and expressing it does not get rid of it—it only shows that it is there. Expressing it may even encourage it and root it more deeply. I do not know. As far as I can see, the only thing that can take away anger is a vision of God's grace that shows that all your angers are groundless, and that you have no reason for them. It is a powerful revelation, when that comes. What I do know is that venting anger is not what Job is doing here. He is onto something that has much more strength and integrity than that. 'He holds fast his integrity.' He is not justifying himself—that is not what it is saying. Mind you, Job is not bottling anything up, as we shall see, nor is

he being coldly calculating and detached—he is right in the thick of the battle, and he gives full and articulate expression to the full range of his thoughts and feelings. But as far as I can see, reading it carefully, anger is not one of those. Passion, yes—he is deeply and committedly passionate—but there is no trace of cheap, self-pitying anger.

So Job is not one of your angry young men. We may find one or two of those among Job's comforters before we are through, but that is not Job. Actually, Job is not young at all—we saw from Chapter 29 that in fact he is a man of age and wisdom and experience, and highly regarded in the community. And so it is worth respecting him ourselves, and paying attention to what he says. I believe he has gone beyond and left behind merely giving vent to his rage. He is concerned about deeper issues than that. We will misunderstand the Book of Job if we try to read into what he says any anger we may still have hanging around, and we will miss its message, which is God's words to us. I speak from my own experience of coming to the Book of Job with perhaps some of that in my own heart in earlier years.

COMPASSION AND SILENCE

So let us see what happens:

2:11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. 12 When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognise him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. 13 They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

These three friends come from different parts. Job's connections and friendships extended far and wide—he was such a great man in all of that region. They had a genuine concern, having heard of Job's misfortune and sufferings, and they decided: We need to get together and go and see Job. So that is what they did: they made an appointment together to come and condole with him and comfort him.

When they found him, they saw him so changed from his earlier condition. He was now sitting in the ashes and scraping himself with a chunk of pottery, his fine clothes and all his possessions gone. They scarcely recognised him. And they raised their voices and wept, tore their robes, and threw dust on their heads, to express their sorrow at this. That may seem a little strange to us, because that is not the way we usually express our grief or alarm. But they were doing the right thing there, in the way that etiquette required of them. I have conducted a number of funerals for Aboriginal people when I was in the north of South Australia: it is the thing to do there, to weep and to wail. There were a number of women, particularly the older women, who would especially wail at the time of the funeral. You might have thought, this is a bit disturbing, a bit distressing—where is their faith in Christ? And maybe there was an element of lack of faith there, as there might be with any of us. But we need to respect that weeping and wailing as a genuine cultural expression of grief. This is what these men were doing. We don't do that, because we have been trained to have a 'stiff upper lip', but maybe it wouldn't hurt for us to do a bit of that sometimes too.

Verse 13 speaks volumes about the depths of Job's suffering and the impact that it had on them, and their appreciation of that. 'They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his

suffering was very great.' They may have spoken a few foolish things later—they have plenty to say as they go on—but they started well, and we can learn from them. For people who are suffering or bereaved, just being there and saying little or nothing can be more helpful and important than a flood of words. They spent seven days just saying—nothing.

JOB'S LAMENT

In the coming sections we are going to look at what each of these three friends had to say to Job, and how he answered them. But first we are going to look at what Job himself had to say about his situation.

1 After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. 2 Job said:

3 "Let the day perish in which I was born,
and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived.'

4 Let that day be darkness!
May God above not seek it, or light shine on it.

5 Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.
Let clouds settle upon it;
let the blackness of the day terrify it.

6 That night--let thick darkness seize it!
let it not rejoice among the days of the year;
let it not come into the number of the months.

7 Yes, let that night be barren;
let no joyful cry be heard in it.

8 Let those curse it who curse the Sea,
those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan.

9 Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
let it hope for light, but have none;
may it not see the eyelids of the morning—

10 because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,
and hide trouble from my eyes.

11 "Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire?

12 Why were there knees to receive me,
or breasts for me to suck?

13 Now I would be lying down and quiet;
I would be asleep; then I would be at rest

14 with kings and counsellors of the earth
who rebuild ruins for themselves,

15 or with princes who have gold,
who fill their houses with silver.

16 Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child,
like an infant that never sees the light?

17 There the wicked cease from troubling,
and there the weary are at rest.

18 There the prisoners are at ease together;
they do not hear the voice of the taskmaster.

19 The small and the great are there,
and the slaves are free from their masters.

20 "Why is light given to one in misery,
and life to the bitter in soul,

21 who long for death, but it does not come,
and dig for it more than for hidden treasures;

- 22 who rejoice exceedingly,
 and are glad when they find the grave?
23 Why is light given to one who cannot see the way,
 whom God has fenced in?
24 For my sighing comes like my bread,
 and my groanings are poured out like water.
25 Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me,
 and what I dread befalls me.
26 I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
 I have no rest; but trouble comes.”

It is pretty clear what Job is saying there: he wishes he was dead (see particularly verses 20–22). He says that being dead would have to be better than what I am going through now. Sometimes we come across old people who feel that they are suffering in life, and they just want to die. And we tend to say, Oh no—you mustn't think like that! Well, maybe they shouldn't. But that is certainly one of the things that can come with suffering. That is what Job is saying here, and he is saying it very clearly. Even more than that: he wishes that he had not lived at all—that a life that comes to this would be better off not happening. And so he says, the day on which he was born should be cursed. Remember his wife had told him to curse God and die (2:9). He never curses God. But he does curse the day of his birth. It is almost as if that day still has some existence somewhere, and he is saying it ought to be blotted out—it ought to be wiped out of the calendar, it shouldn't have ever been there, and if it is still around somewhere let it get its just deserts! The night when he was conceived, and the day when he was born: if it ever had any light, let it be blotted out as darkness, let God not have anything to do with that day in terms of showing His favour upon it, with no light shining on it, and let it be swallowed up in gloom and deep darkness, and let it be covered with clouds, and let it be terrified by blackness. The night, when all this happened: let thick darkness seize it, and let it not have a place among the days of the year—out of the calendar—and let it not come into the number of the months. Let it be stricken off, and let nothing more ever happen that night, and no joyful cry be heard in it—why should there be a joyful cry if it gave birth to me, that has resulted in what is happening now? If you've got any clever wizards that are good at cursing the day, well let them have a go at it too: those who 'rouse up Leviathan'—those who conjure up the sea monster, who embodies all the terrifying powers of nature—get your best wizards and magicians on the job to curse that day. When the sun starts to come up on the dawn of that day (speaking as if it still has some kind of existence), even the stars that are shining before the sun comes up—let them be blacked out. Then, when the light starts to show in the sky, let that not happen. When the 'eyelids of the morning' begin to open—when the sun's rays just start to appear over the horizon—let that not happen either! So that that day is no more, or, if it is, it's in darkness.

POETIC EXPRESSION

We are starting to get into the poetic part of the Book of Job now: thirty-eight chapters or so of pure poetry. So we can expect these kinds of expression. This may not be the way we would normally express ourselves, but when you are talking about deep things poetry is the appropriate form of expression, not just prose and normal conversation. There are some things that you cannot express satisfactorily except by poetry. We would not normally be going around talking about cursing the day I was

born. Yet, when you see it, it is very powerful. It tells you something about what is going on inside Job that really could not be put any other way. How he feels about his whole life, and how he particularly feels about what is happening to him now. So don't be perplexed or puzzled by some of the forms of expression. I have been reading in the commentaries that in the original Hebrew it is very tough and difficult often even to translate, because it is so very incisive, terse, and contracted in the words, and in the words missing: words kind of thrown together. The English can't really express the intensity of the feeling that is coming through in the original language; we can only pick up something of that. Because this day did not shut the doors of his mother's womb—because it let him be born to this deep suffering.

BIBLICAL LAMENTS

Perhaps we should just look at some of the other expressions of similar things in the Bible, before we go on to the next verses. Jeremiah experienced suffering particularly through persecution at speaking the word of God, and we find with him sentiments very similar to those Job is expressing here:

Cursed be the day
 on which I was born!
The day when my mother bore me,
 let it not be blessed!
Cursed be the man
 who brought the news to my father, saying,
 “A child is born to you, a son,”
 making him very glad.
Let that man be like the cities
 that the LORD overthrew without pity;
let him hear a cry in the morning
 and an alarm at noon,
because he did not kill me in the womb;
 so my mother would have been my grave,
 and her womb forever great.
Why did I come forth from the womb
 to see toil and sorrow,
 and spend my days in shame? (Jeremiah 20:14–18)

We might say he is asking a philosophical question there, as it might appear that Job is: these things happen, and why is this, and why is life at all? But I don't think that is what these words are saying. They are giving expression to very deep anguish. They are not raising a philosophical question at all. They are saying: My suffering is very intense, and I can make no sense of it. If we turn over to the Lamentations of Jeremiah, it is speaking there of the city of Jerusalem in its desolation, after it had been destroyed, and also of the prophet himself speaking there, and the sufferings of the people of God:

I am one who has seen affliction
 under the rod of God's wrath;
he has driven and brought me
 into darkness without any light;
against me alone he turns his hand,
 again and again, all day long.

(See how these expressions of suffering in the Bible go straight to God: *You* are pressing against me, turning *Your* hand against me.)

He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones;
he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
he has made me sit in darkness
like the dead of long ago.
He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has put heavy chains on me;
though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;
he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.
He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;
he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;
he bent his bow and set me
as a mark for his arrow.
He shot into my vitals
the arrows of his quiver;
I have become the laughingstock of all my people,
the object of their taunt-songs all day long.
He has filled me with bitterness,
he has sated me with wormwood.
He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;
so I say, "Gone is my glory,
and all that I had hoped for from the LORD." (Lamentations 3:1–18)

The sufferings that are depicted in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, the sufferings of Jerusalem and its prophet, also have an enlightening forward reference to the sufferings of Christ himself. So once again, as we study the sufferings of Job, we are brought to look towards the deep sufferings of Christ, which of course were no less than the sufferings of Job, in fact a good deal more.

I WISH I WAS DEAD

How does Job give expression to his sufferings? 'Why did I not die at birth?' Birth is a happy occasion, but there is no way that Job can see that. Even the baby suckling at its mother's breast: Job says that is no longer something that is attractive or happy to me. He says he would rather have died: 'For then I should have lain down and been quiet, I should have slept, I should have been at rest . . .' Ever felt that? When you would rather just lie down and go to sleep than face what you've got to face—this can be a common expression of depression. That is what Job is going through: I'd rather just not bother with all this. But it is the sleep of death that he is longing for there. He goes through a number of inhabitants of the realm of death: kings and counsellors who engaged on great projects—but they don't have to worry about that any more—princes with gold and silver, rich men who had all those financial responsibilities—death brings an end to all of those. Up to here he has been saying, why didn't I die

after I was born. But now he goes on to say, it might have been better if I had died before I was born, while I was still in the womb. Jeremiah said the same thing. Why was I not as a stillborn child? Then back to the state of death again: whether you are good or whether you are bad—rulers, or the wicked, the prisoners and the slaves consigned to hard labour—it all comes to an end with death, and they don't have to worry about it any more. All of those inequalities of life have now become irrelevant in death, and the turbulence of life has settled. It is interesting that the Egyptians thought that maybe the nobles had a chance of a good life in the afterlife, and that is why they built the pyramids and stocked them up with all sorts of goodies, but the peasants did not have such a chance. The Hebrew understanding was that the small and the great were together in that realm of death. As I once heard someone say, in a very Australian way, when someone had been putting on airs and graces: 'We all stink the same when we're dead!' Not quite what Job is saying here, but death is the great leveller, and this is what Job is looking towards here. He would be really glad to see death: he is one of those 'who long for death, but it does not come, and dig for it more than hidden treasures'. And yet, as we shall see, for Job there is no question of suicide here, because he knows that life and death are in God's hands. If he is going to die, it will have to be God who takes away his life. There are times when he prays that God will do that, but it doesn't occur to Job to take his own life. No doubt he is going through what many people who do contemplate suicide go through. We are told that it is not so much that they want to die but that they can no longer bear to live, and that is the only way out as far as they can see it. Note also that there is no concept here of heaven or hell or judgement in death. As far as Job is concerned, it is just the end, the lying-down, the rest, the finish. For people who are in suffering, and in internal torment too, death appeals to them. I was talking with someone who spends some time in psychiatric hospital from time to time—there are a number of people who do that—and even though the care-givers in that situation would not want to know that this is what happens, this person said that at just about every meal there are discussions around the table as to how would you commit suicide, or have you got enough pills stashed away to do it—they might just be joking to try and cope with it, but some of them are serious, and some of them actually do that. That is part of the depression that can occur. So we can sense something of what Job is going through here.

NO WAY OF KNOWING

Job raises some deep questions: 'Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?' Not just for Job but for all of us: what is life all about, if it is going to be this difficult? Would it be better if it never happened? These are questions that can't really be answered, because life is, and we are born, and these things do happen. I don't think Job is really asking these questions at all, as such. What we do see is that Job is suffering deeply, and that it fills his whole vision—he can see nothing else—and all he can think of at the time is how much he would like to be free of it. And that's the way we are in intense pain and suffering.

Our Lord Jesus was the same in his suffering on the cross: he cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' He was not saying: Now, God, I want to sort out this deep theological question of the abandonment of God in suffering, and how that comes about. No—he was saying, '*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*' He asks 'Why . . .?' because he did not know, because at that point

he was right in the middle of the suffering, and the deepest suffering is that you do not even know or understand what is going on, or why: there is no rhyme or reason to it. You are not really in the depths of suffering as Jesus was until part of that suffering is not knowing why, or not having any understanding of what is happening to you; it being completely outside your control. Jesus knew why he had come, he knew what it would involve, he knew that he would go to the cross—he spoke about it plainly many times before it happened, and gave a detailed description of the sufferings that he would endure. He knew why it was going to happen, and what would be the outcome. But while it was happening, and when he was in the middle of it, he had no way of knowing, and no way of working it out.

This is not the time to address those kinds of questions. Job's comforters in the beginning were doing the right thing by saying nothing. I deal with people in bereavement at the time of a funeral, and sometimes they say, 'Why has this happened?' I have found it a good thing just to say nothing, not try and come up with any explanation. I might even have a reasonable explanation, but that is not for them at that time. That is not really what they are asking for. Perhaps that is the mistake Job's comforters made as they went on, by trying to give theological and philosophical answers to Job's suffering. In the middle of it, the answers are by no means clear. If they were, you would not yet have come to the depths of suffering as Jesus did, and as Job did. If you could still work it all out, you would not be in that place. Any answers that may be proffered, however true they may be, are not likely to be helpful at that point, as we shall see. They don't hit the spot. They are likely to appear and to be rather academic and unrelated to reality. Or they may be our own attempts to shield ourselves from that experience of suffering. If we can come up with tidy phrases like 'It's all in God's will', while there may be a time for saying something like that in comforting, it may be a way of saying, 'We don't want to be a part of this', and of actually leaving people in their suffering, and locking them into it on their own.

All we can really say from Chapter 3 is that Job is suffering deeply, it fills his whole vision, and naturally he longs to be free of it. We should respect all that, and be prepared to face that reality of suffering ourselves.

Prayer:

Lord, we thank You that when You saw our suffering, You did not hold Yourself back from it, but entered into it with us. You sent Your Son to enter into our flesh—the flesh which we have given over to sin and its deep suffering. We thank You that he did not only sit with us there, but that he did what no other comforter could do: You made him to become our sin, to bear our sin in himself, and to suffer Your condemnation of our sin in his flesh, even to the ultimate suffering of deep darkness and not-knowing, to take it all away, and to bring us to Yourself holy and blameless. In this great saving comfort by which You have comforted us, make us true comforters of others. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.