

Job's Despair: Job 3
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, September 20, 2009

In God's good providence we find ourselves in a study of the Old Testament book of Job. Last week we looked at chapters 1-2 where Job loses his wealth and his children, and is discouraged by his wife as she tells him to curse God and die. However, in response to these afflictions Job did not heed this advice, and he did not act according to Satan's prediction, but instead blessed the Lord. In 1:21 he said, "Naked I came from my mothers womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." And in 2:12 he says to his wife, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" This attitude is to be commended and emulated. This should be our attitude in the midst of suffering. We grieve, as Job did, but we also worship. Our hearts ache at the loss or trial that has come upon us, but we cling to the fact that God is sovereign and God is good. We trust the promise of Romans 8:28 that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." And we trust the promise of 1 Peter 5:10, where it says, "after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

This morning we come to chapter 3 of Job, where Job's tone changes for the worse. What we're going to see in this chapter is a very honest and raw expression of Job's despair that he faces as the severity of these trials set in. God provided grace in the moment of loss in chapter 1 and the moment of physical affliction in chapter 2. And God will continue to provide grace for Job as he wrestles through these hardships. But what we can appreciate about this chapter is the fact that we see things as they are. This is what intense grief can look like, and it may look like this in your life right now. The book of Job is not a whitewashed account of a man who suffered much but whose faith never faltered. This is not a story of man who maintained great hope and peace at every moment throughout his suffering. And it's precisely because we see Job's despair and Job's questions that this chapter can be such an encouragement to us. Maybe you can identify with Job today. And, if so, you can take great comfort in the fact that God was patient with Job, even as Job fell into utter despair, cursing the day of his birth and questioning the value of his life. God allowed Job to endure these trials, and the despair that accompanied it, and through it all blessed Job's life tremendously.

Job's Friends (2:11-13)

We'll begin with the last three verses of chapter 2. Here we read about Job's friends who come to visit him. After reading the conversations between Job and these men in the subsequent chapters, it may not seem that the word "friends" is the best way to describe these men. But that is what the text calls them. And we should recognize that they had good intentions. Even if their counsel was faulty, they did go to great lengths to travel and meet together in order to be with Job in the wake of these harsh events. Their purpose was to sympathize and comfort him, as it says in verse 11. When Job came into sight, the three friends did not recognize him. Remember in verse 8 it said that Job "took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in ashes." So he was sitting in ashes, he had sores all over his body, and the only thing he could do to alleviate some of that pain was to scratch his sores with the broken piece of pottery. And as Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar approach, who were used to seeing Job in fine clothes and good health, they now did not even recognize him.

They entered into Job's grief as they wept, tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads, all symbols of mourning. And then they sat with Job on the ground, and they remained silent for 7 days. This is another thing to be appreciated about these men. They understood that in some circumstances one's mere presence is the best comfort. And in this particular situation, it would have been better if they had remained silent permanently. Job says to them in chapter 13, "Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom!" (13:5). For the first 7 days this is what they did. They sat with Job in silence.

Job is the one who breaks the silence in chapter 3. He is the first to speak, and his words are shocking. I'm not sure what Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar expected Job to say, but I imagine they were surprised by these dark words of despair. And for us who have read the previous chapters, the hopelessness and questioning of chapter 3 seems to be in stark contrast to Job's response in chapters 1 and 2.

I'll talk about three aspects of Job's lament in this chapter: Job curses his birth, Job desires death, and Job questions life. Then we'll consider how we ought to deal with this kind of despair when we experience it in our own lives.

Job Curses His Birth

First, Job curses the day of his birth. It's important to notice here what Job curses, and what Job does not curse. Remember, it was Satan's prediction that Job would curse God as a result of these afflictions. But Job does not curse God. He does,

however, curse the day of his birth. He wishes that he had never been born.

Most of us celebrate our birthdays, but Job's despair in the midst of suffering causes him to curse his birthday. He reasons that it would have been better if he had never come into existence. He is effectively saying that the suffering he is experiencing right now outweighs all the good God had done to him up to this point. His vote, then, would be to forfeit life altogether.

The prophet Jeremiah, in similar depths of despair, cursed the day of his birth as well. "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, 'A son is born to you,' 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 out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?" (Jeremiah 20:14-18). This is the kind of despair that can set in when a severe and lasting trial confronts a person's life.

This shows us in a very dramatic way some of the effects of the Fall. What God created was good and beautiful and pure, but since sin entered the world all of creation has been tarnished. Life in this world is not what it was in the Garden of Eden, and it is certainly not as desirable as life in the garden. There is now suffering and pain due to sin. It is a cursed, depraved universe. And it is only in such a universe that a person would curse the day of their birth. Yet we understand from this book that even this fallen world, and the pain and suffering and despair that exist within it, is all part of God's plan. Even sin and Satan are under God's sovereign control. And while Job knew that God had brought this calamity upon him, and Job was even able to bless the name of the Lord after it, he is now cursing the day of his own birth. Job was covered by a dark cloud and could not see the smiling face of God looking down upon him.

In the storyline of the Bible, we think of creation, fall, and redemption. But Job, at this point, was not looking to the redemptive purposes of God. He was caught in the misery of a fallen world and simply wanted to escape. But if we look through the lens of God's gracious redemption through Christ, then we can bless God for our birth, no matter what the circumstances. And we're especially grateful for our *new* birth. We can look with hope to the future, knowing that these light and momentary afflictions are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Job Desires Death

In verses 3-10 he states all of these wishes, desiring that his birth be entirely eclipsed. Then in verse 11 he turns to questions, and in verses 11-19 asks, if he had to be born, why he couldn't have died at birth. Job has cursed the day of his birth, and we also see here the sentiment behind that cursing, which is his desire for death. Verse 11, "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?" In the grave, he would at least have rest. He wouldn't have to endure this agony. That's the rationale of these verses.

This raises a question for us: Should we desire death, or shouldn't we? We certainly desire to go and be with the Lord, which will happen at death for those who belong to Him. But that is different than what Job is expressing here. Job is expressing despair. He desires death as an escape from his misery, and that is not a demonstration of faith in God. So this is an important balance. On the one hand, we should not fear death, and we should even look forward to death in that we will then be taken to heaven. But on the other hand, we must not desire death as a mere escape. We must not adopt Job's attitude here and long for the grave simply as a way of being rid of the trials we are facing in the moment. This is not to minimize Job's suffering in any way, or the suffering that you may be going through. But Job's attitude here reflects a very narrow view of things. We must be patient in suffering. We must endure, by God's grace. We must wait on God to see what good He has planned to produce through this hardship. And in the midst of the pain, we can look forward to the day when we will be with Him, when we will rest in Him completely and enjoy Him all the more because of the trails that refined and purified us in this life.

Matthew Henry says it well: "To desire to die that we may be with Christ, that we may be free from sin, and that we may be *clothed upon with our house which is from heaven*, is the effect and evidence of grace; but to desire to die only that we may be quiet in the grave, and delivered from the troubles of this life, savours of corruption. Job's considerations here may be of good use to reconcile us to death when it comes, and to make us easy under the arrest of it; but they ought not to be made use of as a pretence to quarrel with life while it is continued, or to make us uneasy under the burdens of it. It is our wisdom and duty to make the best of that which is, be it living or dying, and so to *live to the Lord and die to the Lord*, and to be his in both, (Romans 14:8)."¹

¹Henry, Matthew: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody : Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, S. Job 3:11

He also says, “Grace teaches us, in the midst of life’s greatest comforts, to be willing to die, and, in the midst of its greatest crosses, to be willing to live.”²

So we do look forward to being with the Lord. But ultimately our life of faith is a matter of submitting to whatever the Lord has for us now. If it is death, we face it without fear. If it is life, we seize it with gratefulness. If it is suffering, we endure in humility and submission to Him.

Job Questions Life

In verse 20 Job goes a step further in his questioning. He questions life. He questions why he must go on living in this misery. “Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not . . .” Then in verse 23, “Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?” Job is feeling confused by the sudden new direction that his life has taken, and he feels trapped in these circumstances. In 1:10 Satan spoke of God putting a protective hedge around Job, but here Job is resenting the fact that God has hedged him in. But this is the truth of what Job, himself, stated in 2:10, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” God’s hedge around us will sometimes be comforts and joys, and at other times it will be pain and sorrow. We need to trust that His hedge around us is always good. It’s always what is best for us. Job, though, in this moment is asking God why he must go on living.

We should ask a question here about questions. Is it alright for us to question God like this? We remember that Jesus, in His agony on the cross, voiced a question to God: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). And in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus even asked that He might be spared this terrible trial. But He then added something that is very important, and something that is not evident in Job’s speech in chapter 3. Listen to what Jesus prayed. He said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36). You see, Jesus was suffering greatly, and was facing a trial far worse than Job’s. And He had a desire to avoid it, yet He submitted Himself entirely to the Father’s will.

That’s the difference we see here between Job and Jesus. Job, in his misery, questioned God with a sense of unwillingness to endure God’s plan for him. Jesus, however, questioned God with

²Henry, Matthew: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*. Peabody : Hendrickson, 1996, c1991, S. Job 3:20

an absolute willingness to submit to God's plan for Him. I pray that in our suffering, we can come to God with a submissive and humble spirit—that as we ask for Him to relieve our pain, we will also acknowledge our willingness to endure whatever He has planned for us. May we say, as Jesus did: Remove this cup from me. Yet not my will, but what you will.

We should also observe here God's patience with Job. God patiently allowed Job to vent his frustration and to voice these despairing questions.

Joni Erickson Tada, whom many of you know of, found hope in this as she lay paralyzed after a diving accident. She has written, "One of the first places I turned after my diving accident was to the book of Job. As I lay immobilized in the hospital, my mind swirled with questions. When I learned that my paralysis was going to be permanent, it raised even more questions. I was desperate to find answers. Job, I reasoned, had suffered terribly and questioned God again and again. Perhaps I could find comfort and insight from following his search for answers." She goes on to say, "did I find the answers? Answers for the deepest darkest questions about a life of total paralysis? Just one," she says. "But it is enough." And then she quotes Romans 11:33-36, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."³

What trials are you facing right now? What kinds of questions are you asking God? In what way are you asking those questions? We should ask our questions, and we can be grateful that we have a God who is gracious and longsuffering. But we cannot expect to receive the answers that we might like, or even answers that we can fully understand. In the end we must submit to His will and trust in His wisdom. We don't know the mind of the Lord, and we certainly cannot presume to be His counselor. So we humbly bow before Him, and trust that His grace will see us through whatever trials He has ordained for us.

For Unbelievers

We've seen how Job curses the day of his birth, how he desires death, and questions life. Now I want to consider further how we ought to deal with this kind of despair when we're faced with severe anguish. And I want to direct this question first to unbelievers. If you are not a Christian, and you are in such pain

³ *Secret Strength*, pages 169-171. Quoted in Derek Thomas, *The Storm Breaks*, pages 64-66.

that you desire death, you must understand that your continued life of struggle and hardship is a profound mercy. For consider the infinitely greater agony you would face if you were to die apart from Christ. You may think of death as a relief, but if you are not a Christ-follower—if you are not repenting of sin and trusting in Him—then death will not be relief. Death will mean hell for you if you are not forgiven through the blood of Christ. C. H. Spurgeon said, “It may be hard for you to live, but it would be harder far for you to die, and then to live for ever in a death that never dies. God grant that, you may never know that awful doom!”⁴

I plead with you, then, if you are an unbeliever and are saddened by the trials of life, do not desire death, do not desire to enter eternity without the hope of Christ. Instead, see that God is showering you with mercy by allowing you to continue living, and by allowing you to suffer, so that you might repent and turn to Him. I pray that whatever trial you are going through right now will bring you to your knees before the One who is sovereign over your suffering. May this hardship be the wrecking-ball that finally crushes your pride and self-reliance, to bring you into a humble and joyful reliance on God.

I must tell you that trusting in Christ will not make your trials go away. In fact, we are promised that we will experience trials and persecution as we follow the Lord. But trusting in Christ will cause you to see those trials in a whole new way. For Christians there is no need to despair, because God is using these trials for our good.

For Believers

This is how I want to encourage us as believers in how we ought to respond to trials. Trust God’s plan for you. Submit to His plan for you. As difficult as it may be, direct your attention constantly back to the sovereignty of God and the goodness of God in sending His Son to die for us. In our trials we never need to ask, “Why is God punishing me?” because He is NOT punishing us. The punishment that we deserve was completely paid for by Jesus Christ on the cross. So for those of us who are united to Christ by faith and forgiven through His blood, there is not one ounce of punishment that God will ever inflict upon us. His design and purpose in our suffering is entirely for our good.

That may be hard to see in the dark cave of severe suffering. But it is true, whether or not we can see it. It is true, and our battle will continually be to strain our eyes and to remove the things that obstruct our vision so that we can see the glorious light of the sure hope we have in Christ. We must be immersed in God’s Word. We must be surrounded by Christian fellowship.

⁴ Sermon on Job 3, found at www.biblebb.com

We must be crying out to God in prayer. We must preach to ourselves these foundational truths of God's sovereignty over suffering and God's goodness to us in suffering.

To quote Spurgeon again, he said, "it would be better to be whipped all the way to heaven than to be carried down to hell 'on flowery beds of ease.'"⁵ You may feel this morning like you are being whipped. You may feel like your life has been a story of disappointment and hurt and pain, like you have faced one trial after another. But to put these things in the appropriate context, consider eternity. You are infinitely better off living a life of trials that will prepare you to enjoy heaven, than to enjoy the momentary pleasures of this world as a preparation for eternal agony.

Let's look to Jesus, trusting in Him and following His example. Isaiah 53:3 says, "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." Jesus knows trials. Jesus knows suffering. And Jesus knows the power of looking through the trial to the joy that is held out for us. As Hebrews 12 encourages us, "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1b-2).

⁵ Sermon on Job 3, found at www.biblebb.com