

Job's Lament

Job 3

Intro: When I decided to preach a sermon series on the book of Job, I knew it would be relevant; God's Word always is. But in light of current events it seems to be particularly so. It is very possible that we will face some difficult and dark days ahead. We may face loss in our lives - loss of certain privileges, maybe loss of employment, maybe loss of a loved one – maybe our own life.

Two weeks ago, when we studied chapter 2, I mentioned that Job 2 is one of the most frightening chapters in the Bible. Job had already suffered tremendous loss in chapter 1. But he held fast to his faith. He did not curse God but blessed Him! And if we were writing the story, it would have ended there. But God is writing the story of Job's life, as He is writing ours, and God determined to continue the suffering into chapter 2.

Chapter 3 doesn't get any better. In fact, Job 3 is one of the darkest chapters in all of Scripture. There is no light here. Only darkness, only heartbreak and weeping, only the deep bitterness of soul caused by unimaginable loss.

Cristopher Ash: "Job 3 is a very important chapter for contemporary Christianity."

His reason is that many contemporary Christians do not have a theological category for God-ordained suffering. The fastest growing movement in the church over the last 10 years is the prosperity gospel: whether that be health/wealth teaching of a man like Joel Osteen, or the motivational gospel promoted by someone like Rachel Hollis. The gist of these teachers is that Jesus died to bring God's blessings – whether that be material riches or emotional healing or relational flourishing. God wants you to thrive! His intent and will for his people is prosperity, however you may wish to define it.

The nasty backside of these doctrines is that if you are a Christian and are not thriving – you must be doing it wrong. Well, that doesn't fit with Job 3. Job wasn't doing it wrong – he was doing it exactly right: more righteous and God-fearing and faithful and obedient than any other man on earth. And yet he ended up on an ash heap scraping the rotting skin from his body with broken piece of pottery. And God has given us this chapter because it is important for us to learn the lessons of despair. What does faith look like on the ash heap?

The chapter divides neatly into two parts – a curse (1-10) and a lament (11-26).

I. The Curse

"After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth."

We need to first understand the idea of a "curse". We generally associate the word with "cussing", using bad language. But in Scripture, a curse is a prayer or statement of malediction or blight against someone or something.

Gen 3 – 'cursed is the ground because of you'. COVID-19 is a result of that curse. Job wishes a curse upon the day of his birth. In other words, he wishes, as deeply and profoundly as humanly possible, that he had never been born. He curses the reality of his own existence.

Job has seen his entire life ripped to shreds in a moment and for no reason. His future lies dead and buried under the rubble of his eldest son's house. His life is as shattered as the pottery he uses to scrape his loathsome skin. And he invokes the spirit realm to wipe out the day of his birth.

3-6 "Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man is conceived.' Let that day be darkness! May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Let clouds dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it. That night - let thick darkness seize it!

When God created the heavens and the earth, he said "let there be light". But Job says, "turn the lights off". Let the day of my birth be uncreated, unformed, turned back into nothingness and void.

In verse 7-9 Job curses the night he was conceived.

7 "Behold, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry enter it."

9 Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning,

Why?

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

We might struggle with words like these. Job doesn't sound very..... spiritual here. What about "Give thanks in everything, and "count it all joy when you face trials of many kinds"? I've listened to several sermons on this chapter and have been surprised by how quickly men move to condemn Job here. He is sinning, they say. He shouldn't say these things. Does he think he is wiser than God? The moral of Job 3 is that we need to be careful when we are hurting or we might say things we shouldn't say.

I would just point out two things:

1. Nothing in the text says that Job sinned. God doesn't say he sinned. In fact, God affirms Job's righteousness at the beginning of the book and again at the end.
2. To make Job 3 a moral lesson is to disastrously miss the point and to align yourself with Job's friends. They rebuke Job precisely for this very thing, for his speech.

Before we try to fit Job's words into our understanding of what Christians should or should not say – it's important to just hear them. Job's words are ripped from the anguish of his soul. This is a godly man wailing in grief, released into the howling wilderness of unspeakable anguish and crushing loss.

Before we judge him, let's just listen. We have brothers and sisters around us who find that these words express what they've thought – and most likely have been afraid to say. Some of you know the grief and bitterness of the ash heap. You've experienced these dark nights of the soul. You've wished maybe that you had never been born. You've loathed you own existence. Death has seemed preferable. That's clearly how Job felt.

II. The Lament

We are not well-versed in the genre of lament. Some of you have been reading Mark Vroegop's excellent book, *"Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament"*

"A lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust."

A lament is a prayer in pain. That's exactly what we have here. These are the words of a deeply godly man pouring out the anguish of his soul before his God. Job hasn't abandoned his faith – he just doesn't have any idea of how to reconcile what he is experiencing with what he had believed about God and the life of faith.

Laments in Scripture are usually filled with questions, questions ripped from the soul of a wounded saint, questions that often begin with "why"?

Psalm 42:9 I say to God, my rock: "Why have you forgotten me?

Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"

Job's lament is filled with "why" questions.

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

12 Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts that I should nurse?"

Life seems unbearably vain, meaningless, pointless. And death seems preferable.

13 For then I would have lain down and been quiet, I would have slept, then I would have been at rest.”

Some of you know exactly what this deep sadness and despair is like. Some of you have seriously considered that death would be preferable to life. Death would make the pain go away.

¹⁶Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light?

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

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

¹⁹The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master.

Scripture is not condoning suicide, nor is Job considering it. There is nothing whatsoever in the text to suggest that Job ever considered taking his life. That would, in its own way, be cursing God. Murdering yourself is still murder and a direct offense against God who alone is the Lord of life.

But we need to recognize that there will be times when suffering seems to mock us, and God doesn't make sense. This is Job's bewilderment. Why would God rip everything, absolutely everything away from him – and yet leave him alive? It seems like a mockery. Why force him to endure this misery?

²⁰ “Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul,

²¹ who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures,

²² who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave?

In this moment of devastating loss and sorrow, God's ways seem senseless to Job. Why does He give light to mock my misery? Why must I go on?? What's the point? This is not an “un-Christian” question. Jeremiah the prophet took up these very words, quoting this chapter nearly verbatim in Jeremiah 20 to express the grief of his own soul.

C.S. Lewis, “A Grief Observed”, wrestled with these sorts of questions when he lost his wife, Joy, to cancer.

“The most precious gift that marriage gave me was this constant impact of something very close and intimate yet all the time unmistakably other, resistant – in a word real. Is all that work to be undone? ...O God, God, why did you take such trouble to force this creature out of its shell if it is now deemed to crawl back in – to be sucked back – into it?” (31)

God's ways didn't make sense. Why give such joy only to rip it away? Does God torture his children? Does he take pleasure in crushing them?

"Not that I am in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So, there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'" (19)

If the ways of God have never confounded you, it may be because you simply haven't been paying attention to the heartache of this world. There IS a profound vanity in this broken, sinful and fallen world. Things are **not** as they should be.

Ash, "In St. Nicholas' church, in the village of Moreton in Dorset, England, there is a beautiful window engraved by Laurence Whistler. It is a memorial to a local fighter pilot shot down and killed in the Battle of Britain. It shows the broken propeller of his plane, and on it are two pairs of initials, his and his young wife's, with the years of their marriage – 1939-1940. What did that premature death do to that young widow? What happened to all the potential and hope with which their marriage began – the children they might have had, their future together? ...In those initials and those dates is such a compression of grief." (74)

This is the world we live in. It's a world where heartbreaking, impenetrable tragedies happen every day – and not just to other people. Job 3 is here to teach us the prayers of lament.

Mark Vroegop points out that the Bible is *filled* with laments. Nearly a third of the 150 Psalms are laments. And he asks the revealing question: If 1/3 of the songs of Israel are about pain – why are songs of lament so infrequent in the contemporary church?

"Could it be that our prosperity, comfort, and love of triumphalism are reflected in what we sing?"

One of the best arguments for singing the Psalms is that they teach us songs of lament – so that we have words to sing when we are in pain.

But how do we sing Job 3? There is no comforting conclusion to his lament. There is no new resolve of faith or rediscovery of hope. It ends as darkly as it began.

²⁵For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me.

²⁶I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, but trouble comes."

What do we do with words like this? With feelings like this? Can a child of God say and feel these sorts of things?

This is where it is very important to understand who this man is. Job 3 is not simply a portrait of a suffering man; it is a picture of the deep despair of an **innocent** and **righteous man of God** who has been utterly, completely and thoroughly devastated by God. In every way except the most literal – Job lost his life. And now he is afloat in a limitless ocean of grief and despair and doesn't know where God went. The "why" questions of his lament are not meant to resolve a simple question – but a seeming deception. Why is God destroying him?

And in the dark despair of Job 3 we have what may well be the clearest insight into the grief of our Lord Jesus on the cross. For there was a man who was in every way innocent, in every way righteous – never once having committed any sin. And yet the thing he dreaded came upon him. As he faced the cross his soul had no rest but he gripped the ground, pleading, "My God, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But it did not pass. All the agonies of divine wrath were poured over his sinless body and soul. And in the darkness of his sorrow, it seemed that his Father had abandoned him. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

This, ultimately, is the meaning of Job 3. It's meant to point us to the cross of Christ! Jesus, the very Son of God, has entered this world of suffering and sorrow and death – and he suffered. He suffered as no man ever has – not even Job. God entered our sorrows not to primarily to sympathize but to save, to redeem. And that makes all the difference. When we find ourselves asking "Why this", Why me? Our faith points us to the cross and says – "why that? why Him"?

And the answer is – love. No matter what we might think or feel in our suffering – the cross speaks the truth. God has not abandoned us – he has joined us in Jesus Christ who came to us and for us – to suffer deeper agonies than we will ever know in order to reconcile us forever to God. The cross says we have not been abandoned at all. We have been loved. We are not alone. He is with us.

Joni Erikson Tada

"I remember, one day Ken driving me home from chemo-therapy, I was in the back of the van tied down and I could watch him in the rear-view mirror and as we were traveling down the 101 Freeway, we started talking about how suffering is like little splash-overs of hell. When you suffer, it should be your cue to remember the hell from which you were ultimately rescued because of Christ. And so we're discussing this and how amazing it was that God allowed splash-overs of hell in our lives to wake us up out of our spiritual

slumber and then when we pulled up in the driveway, he turned off the ignition and looked at me in the rear-view mirror, "Well then what do you think slash overs of heaven are?" And I thought, "Well are they easy-breezy bright days where everything is going well?" We discussed this. Is it times when all the bills are paid and there are no trials, tests, no chronic pain? And in the silence we said no...no, those aren't splash-overs of heaven. Splash-overs of heaven are finding Jesus in your splash over of hell. There's nothing more poignant, nothing sweeter."

Why was the Apostle Paul so willing to suffer? Beatings, shipwreck, imprisonment, stoning....why? Because he experienced Jesus there.

"I want to know Christ and the fellowship of sharing in his suffering."

Whatever trials God intends to lead us through in the coming days and years of our life – we can know that Jesus will be there – if we look for him. May God grant that we do.