



The Anatomy of Loneliness

Grappling with God: The Gospel According to Job #3

Job 2:11-3:26

David Sunday

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My Lord, You are our Help. You are our God and because You are worthy of our service and devotion, we will find rest nowhere but in Your will. This is true even when Your will remains unspeakably, inexplicably beyond our highest notions of what You are doing in our lives. God, help us as we come to what may be the bleakest chapter in Job's dark journey. Help us to remember the words of the song:

Why do I mourn and toil within
When it is mine to hope in God?
I shall again sing praise to Him;
He is my help; He is my God.

([As the Hart Longs](#) by Danna Harkin, 1975)

We know this is true because You have given us Your Son. If You did not withhold Him from us, how will You not also with Him graciously give us everything (Romans 8:32)? We trust You, Lord. In the name of Jesus—Your Son, our Savior. Amen.

Last year a brilliant columnist in the New York Times named Ross Douthat wrote an article entitled "All the Lonely People." It began with a very sobering fact.

Over the last decade, the United States has become a less violent country in every way except one. As Americans commit fewer and fewer crimes against other people's lives and property, they have become more likely to inflict fatal violence on themselves.

Between 1999 and 2010, we have seen in our nation a 30 percent increase in the suicide rate among middle-aged people. It is especially drastic among men. For men in their 50's the suicide rate has risen by 50 percent. A leading factor in this epidemic is the loneliness caused by

weakened social ties. When people—especially men—get disconnected from society’s core institutions—things like marriage and religion—and when their financial prospects take a dive, there is a marked increase in the suicide rate.

Douthat continues:

There are public and private ways to manage this loneliness epidemic—social workers, therapists, even pets. And the internet of course promises endless forms of virtual community to replace or supplement the real. But all of these alternatives seem destined to leave certain basic human yearnings unaddressed. Increasingly today, not enough Americans have a place—a community that knows them intimately, a community to lean on, a strong network in the time of trial. And absent such blessings, it’s all too understandable that some people enduring suffering and loneliness would end up not looking for help or support but rather for a way to end it all.

That gives us a little insight into the culture we are in and the mission we have as followers of Jesus in this world. We are called as God’s people to be on the lookout for all the lonely people to shine gospel hope and light into the darkness of despair. We are called to cultivate a community of care where loneliness is fading because the gospel is shining. This is a fellowship where the Holy Spirit is knitting alienated people into a body where everyone is becoming known and feeling less alone. This requires skill and sensitivity. Glib, trite platitudes will only lead to greater isolation and loneliness.

Thankfully, the Word of God does not leave us with superficial answers to the painful reality of loneliness. Thomas Wolfe authored a book called The Anatomy of Loneliness. He wrote, “The most tragic, sublime and beautiful expression of loneliness which I have ever read is the book of Job.” We will turn to Job 3 and hear Job express his sense of isolation and alienation. I trust God wants to use this dark chapter to help us become better soul-physicians to one another in our times of darkness and grief. He wants to use this chapter to help us be more alert and aware of our neighbors and loved ones who don’t yet know God as their refuge and strength, their very present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1).

Before we read the chapter, remember what we’ve learned so far. Job is a righteous man. Three times in the first 32 verses of this book—twice by the Lord Himself—we are told that Job is a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. That verdict does not change throughout the book. Job is a man with a character of unimpeachable integrity. He is a man who knows and walks with God.

Yet there has been an assault on Job from Satan—the adversary, the accuser of the brethren. Satan has appeared in God’s presence and accused Job of fearing the Lord only because of all the good things the Lord has done for him. In essence, this is an assault on God’s glory. Satan is saying to God, “No one loves You just for Who You are or worships You only because You are God. They married You for the money. They are only in it because You do all these good things for them.” So Satan proposes a test: “...*touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face*” (Job 1:11).

Job passed that test. After he lost all his wealth, possessions and children—bankrupt and bereaved—he fell down on the ground and worshipped. “*Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord*” (Job 1:21). That was Satan’s first loss.

Then Satan says, “Strike Job in the flesh—in his own skin—and he will surely curse You to Your face.” Satan has given him bankruptcy and bereavement, now he is going to give him boils all over his body. Again Job responds with submission to the sovereignty of God: “*Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?*” (Job 2:10). It’s a brilliant example of worship and trust. No one responds to a trial like this unless—like Job—he has been rehearsing for it his whole life. Job doesn’t know what’s happening behind the scenes. He has no warning or explanation for this sudden devastation. Even when His will is inexplicable and utterly beyond Job’s highest notions of what God is up to, Job believes that God is God and is worthy of his worship, devotion and service.

Job 2:10 says, “*In all this Job did not sin with his lips.*” James 3:2 says this about our speech: “*And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.*” Job is a righteous man. We would love it if the story could end here. This could become a nice series of three messages. I could wrap things up in a nifty package tied with a bow. I could say, “Job suffered, he trusted and worshipped God, and so should we. End of story.”

However, we are not even close to the end of the story. There are 40 more chapters in this book. It gets raw. The ride will be bumpy and we may get battered and bruised in the process. Satan has not finished his assault on Job with this physical trial—covering him with loathsome boils. I would argue that Satan—after striking Job’s livelihood, his children and his skin—is now going to get under Job’s skin. He’s going to assail, batter and bruise Job’s innermost being. He’s going to torment Job’s mind and heart.

We must not soften what Job goes through in this dark episode of his life. We need to brace ourselves for the staggering honesty of this book if we really want to be armed for the

spiritual conflict we are in and to become instruments in God's redeeming hands to help lonely people in this world.

Let's read the story as it unfolds in the anguished, agonizing lament of a very godly man. I'm going to begin reading at Job 2:11. I won't say much about the last verses of chapter two until later sermons. Let's worship God as we listen to His holy Word:

¹¹Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. ¹² And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him.

You've probably had this experience. You know someone you love has gone through a terrible ordeal yet you haven't been able to visit them. When you do see them face to face, you realize something has changed because you hardly recognize them. They have gone into a world of their own which you have never entered. You know something is deeply wrong.

Job's three friends don't even recognize him when they see him from a distance on the ash heap.

¹² And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. ¹³ And 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.

Job 3 *After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. ² And Job said:*

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

*⁴ Let that day be darkness!
May God above not seek it,
nor light shine upon it.*

*⁵ Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.
Let clouds dwell 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 Behold, let that night be barren;
let no joyful cry enter it.*

- ⁸ *Let those curse it who curse the day,
who are ready to rouse up Leviathan.*
- ⁹ *Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
let it hope for light, but have none,
nor see the eyelids of the morning,*
- ¹⁰ *because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,
nor hide trouble from my eyes.*
- 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?*
- ¹³ *For then I would have lain down and been quiet;
I would have slept; then I would have been at rest,*
- ¹⁴ *with kings and counselors of the earth
who rebuilt ruins for themselves,*
- ¹⁵ *or with princes who had gold,
who filled their houses with silver.*
- ¹⁶ *Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child,
as infants who never see 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 hear not the voice of the taskmaster.*
- ¹⁹ *The small and the great are there,
and the slave is free from his master.*
- 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?*
- ²³ *Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
whom God has hedged in?*
- ²⁴ *For my sighing comes instead of my bread,
and my groanings are poured out like water.*
- ²⁵ *For 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."*

This, my friends, is God's Word. Because it is God's Word, I don't need to apologize for reading it out loud in church.

Yet are we really allowed to say things like this in the good company of Christian people? Are we allowed to talk to God like this in church? What if Job showed up in your care group? What if you asked him to share a little bit about his life and he said, “I wish I had not been conceived, or if conceived, that I had died in the womb. I wish I had not been born, or if born, stillborn. Since I am now a man, I wish I would die soon. I don’t want you to ever sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to me. The sooner you can come to my funeral, the better.”

What do we do with people like this in the church? How do we answer that? Do we argue with them, rebuke them or distance ourselves from them? Are we embarrassed and find it awkward? How do we handle the lonely, broken people in this world?

Job’s words are no less shocking than those of our imaginary care group participant. He spent seven days of utter, eerie silence in the presence of three friends who didn’t speak a word. In light of Job’s sufferings, they did not know what to say. Job breaks the silence with these words: “A curse be on the day of my birth.”

Life is Intolerable

In Job 3:3-10, he complains that life is intolerable for him. When God created the world out of nothing, he said, “*Let there be light*” (Genesis 1:3). Instead, Job is saying, “Let there be darkness over the day of my birth” (Job 3:4-5). He wants to rewind the tape of creation and bring his life back to the place of utter chaos, primeval darkness and non-existence.

In Job 3:6-10, he turns to the night of his conception—a night which would have been filled with joy, laughter, warmth and hope. He wants it to be a spiritually dark night like the plague of darkness over Egypt. Instead of fruitfulness, he wants barrenness to characterize that night. “*Behold, let that night be barren; let no joyful cry enter it*” (verse seven).

In verse eight he refers to leviathan, who will also show up later in this book. Leviathan was the great sea monster of chaos. In the ancient near East, Leviathan symbolized the enemy of the Creator—the dragon whose evil purpose is to destroy the order and beauty God has made. It is as if Job is asking the best magicians to come pronounce a curse that would summon Leviathan to destroy the very night of his conception so Job’s very existence would vanish—erased from the annals of history. Job wants that day wiped off the calendar like February 29th but without its return every four years.

Why? “[That night] *did not shut the doors of my mother’s womb*” (verse ten). “That night did not prevent my conception and trouble is all I can see.” Life is intolerable for Job.

Death is Desirable

In verses 11-22, Job argues that death is desirable. Job asks a series of questions to which you will find no answers this side of heaven. He asks, “Why, oh Lord, can I not die?”

*Why did I not die at birth,
come out from the womb and expire?
Why did the knees [my parents] receive me?
Or why the breasts, that I should nurse?
For then I would have lain down and been quiet;
I would have slept; then I would have been at rest...*

(Job 3:11-13)

In other words, “I wouldn’t know about bankruptcy, bereavement, the inner turmoil of the mind and the torment I am feeling. I wouldn’t know what it is to wrestle with a God Who seems hidden from me. I could just be at rest.”

For Job, death represents the end of life’s miseries. He is not giving us a theology of the afterlife or thinking about justice and retribution after death. He is not telling us how we should think about heaven, hell and judgment. Rather, he is longing for the misery of this life to be over. This is what death represents for him. *“There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest”* (verse 17). This will happen to everyone, for death comes to all.

When he was only 19 years old, Jonathan Edwards preached a powerful sermon called “The Nakedness of Job”:

Perhaps when you read the history of Job, you read it as a strange thing that happened but once in the world, but, for the time to come, read it as a thing that happens daily, and frequently, for every man at death is as much deprived of all his worldly goods as Job was... The history of Job is only a shadow of death; it is no more than happens to every man in the world... We cannot think too often of our latter end... Death serves all alike; as he deals with the poor, so he deals with the rich; is not awed at the appearance of a proud palace, a numerous attendance, or a majestic countenance; pulls a king out of his throne and summons him before the judgment seat of God, with as few compliments and as little ceremony as he takes the poor man out of his cottage. Death is as rude with emperors as with beggars, and handles one with as much gentleness as he handles the other...

Job recognizes that death is the great leveler. He knows there are many oppressed people who experience misery and oppression their whole lives under oppression to cruel tyrants.

*There the prisoners are at ease together;
they hear not the voice of the taskmaster.
The small and the great are there,
and the slave is free from his master.*

(Job 3:18-19)

Friends, when we read this, we really need to recognize that this world is a cruel place for many. For many there is no peace, rest or hope in this life. For many right now, death seems sweeter than life. There are people in our neighborhoods, prisons, families and even in our church for whom Job 3:21-22 is an all too apt description:

*Who long for death, but it comes not,
and dig for it more than for hidden treasures,
who rejoice exceedingly
and are glad when they find the grave?*

They are not rejoicing in death because they rejoice in the hope and glory found only in the gospel. Rather, it is because they are shrouded under a cloud of despair. There are people like this in our lives right now.

God is Unavoidable

Finally, Job reveals that even in his darkness, God is unavoidable. “*Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?*” (verse 23). The word ‘hedge’ was used before by Satan in Job 1:10 when he said to God, “You have put a hedge of protection around Job and around everything he has.” That hedge of protection was a good thing. Yet in Job 3:23, Job refers to this hedge as a razor wire put around his life to imprison him. It was not a protective hedge of blessing but a means of keeping him imprisoned in a miserable life from which he was longing to escape. Commentator David Atkinson writes, “He is in God’s trap, and there is no way out.”

Yet there is a glimmer of hope here. Even though God’s ways are baffling and bewildering to Job, he hasn’t forgotten or cursed God. He has cursed his birth and his life but hasn’t cursed God or contemplated taking his own life.

Commentator Francis Anderson writes:

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the startling sentiments expressed in this speech do not mean that Job has cracked under the strain. There is no hint that Satan has finally made his point... Job is a man bereaved, humiliated, and in pain. His skin is festering and his nerves are on fire. A man of stone or bronze might remain

unmoved, but a real man is all turbulence. The Lord's testing is not to find out if Job can sit unmoved like a piece of wood.

Stoicism is not the Biblical response to suffering and grief. Job is wrestling. Job 2:24 says, "His bread is sighing." The word for 'sighing' means much more—it indicates 'shrieking.' His daily food is shrieking. "...[A]nd my groanings are poured out like water" (verse 24). The word 'groanings' is used of the growlings of a lion. Job is saying, "Everything I ever had apprehensions about or dreaded in life has happened to me" (verse 25). The chapter ends with these punctuated words: "I can't rest or find any ease or quietness." "*I have no rest, but trouble comes.*"

We read in Isaiah 30:15, "*in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.*" Job can't find that right now. He is restless—tossing and turning—because he is wrestling with the inscrutable ways of God. God's ways are hidden from him and His presence seems to have departed from him. Yet he remains imprisoned in God's trap.

Job's friends surround him like a corpse at a wake. They have nothing to say because Job is like a dead person. He sat for seven days and nights wishing that the skeleton with this faintly ticking pulse would finally expire. But as much as he wants death, God keeps him alive. Right now, this does not feel like goodness, mercy or compassion to Job. "*You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, that the Lord is compassionate and merciful*" (James 5:11). We've seen that in Job's life but Job has not yet seen the purpose of the Lord. He doesn't know why any of this is happening to him.

I wrestled with this chapter. It's here for a reason and we need to hear it. But why? Here is what I've been pondering. What if Job came among us and entered New Covenant Bible Church? **Do we have room in our church for people like Job?** What happens when one of our own experiences the kind of dark despair with which Job wrestled? What do we do and how do we respond?

I know we don't talk like this. We don't say the things Job said or pray like this in our prayer meetings, at least not out loud or with as much poetic fluency. But have you ever thought, "I wish I'd never been born," or said—under your breath or out loud—"I hate my life"? Have you ever looked back on your life and felt nothing but regret or looked forward and felt nothing but dread? Have you ever found yourself so restless that you could not concentrate on what is good, true, beautiful and praiseworthy anymore?

Isn't Job simply putting into words what we actually say and think in our hearts sometimes? Could it be that Job is articulating truth we wouldn't dare say in church but which we whisper behind closed doors? Doesn't Job know what you worry about, wrestle with and fear;

what you say in your tears and despair? **Do we have room in our theology for believers to experience dark despair?**

Is this statement from Christopher Ash true or false?

A true Christian believer may be taken by God through times of deep and dark despair. This may happen to a man or woman who is affirmed by God as a believer before the darkness, who remains a believer in the darkness, and who will finally be vindicated by God as a believer after the darkness. He or she may be taken through this darkness even though he or she has not fallen into sin or backslidden from faith in Jesus Christ.

True or false? This is a very important truth. Embracing the reality of this truth is part of what will make us, a community of believers, able to weep with those who weep. It is the cultivation of tolerance for the outpourings of dark despair from the lips of our brothers and sisters in Christ without condemning or too hastily correcting their words.

Did you know that William Cowper, the author of the song “God Moves in a Mysterious Way”, struggled with depression throughout his life? He said close to the end of his life, “I feel unutterable despair.” Did you know there are men and women who have real faith, deep love and abiding joy in Jesus who nonetheless battle dark depression and anxiety? They would say, “It’s bad enough that I feel depressed and anxious. On top of that I feel guilty, for I ought not to feel depressed as a Christian. Yet I wrestle.”

Let us not too quickly judge or correct our fellow believers without carefully listening to the outpourings of their hearts and trying to understand the pain of their experience. Let us realize there is a sense in which those who suffer suffer alone. Every heart knows its own bitterness and no stranger fully shares its joy. There is an isolation, an alienation that inevitably accompanies suffering. When we too quickly or glibly talk over it, we only intensify the loneliness people feel.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, a 17th Century English poet, said:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.

We can look cheaply at the distress others are experiencing and discount it when we’ve never walked in their shoes. When we don’t take seriously the terror, bewilderment and temptations to despair our fellow believers are feeling just because we have not experienced what they are experiencing, we cheapen their trials and intensify their loneliness.

I want to close by asking what we can say to them. I'm going to suggest that seven days and nights of silence was a bit much. It would have perhaps been more comforting if these friends had something to share with Job that would have shone some light into his darkness.

But What Can We Say?

Often in suffering and trouble, this idea is being tested: "Do I believe in God or just believe in my beliefs about God?" We all have things we believe about God, but then suffering comes and tests us. Do you really believe in God or merely in your beliefs about God? Job had beliefs about God: God is great, God is good. Then his trials and calamities came. He couldn't figure out how to put his beliefs together with this great suffering. "If God is great, how am I seeing His goodness in this?"

Do you believe in God or just believe in your beliefs about God? What will happen when your beliefs in God's goodness and greatness seem to be on a collision course in your life? Is there anything you can say or hold on to that makes you certain—no matter how bleak or baffling your suffering becomes—there is hope, joy and peace? How would you help this man? What would you say to minister in this bleakness?

There are a lot of things we should not say. All our philosophies and theories are like a searchlight in the night—they can reveal certain things in the darkness that are true. But there is a truth which comes like daylight into the darkness and reveals a hundred things which the searchlight could never show. Human reasoning cannot get to the bottom of the problem of suffering. There are no simple answers.

The one thing we can say is true and can hold on to in the midst of this deep darkness is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is a Savior Who faced utter loneliness in the Garden of Gethsemane. He then went to the cross and took our questions of despair on His own lips and made them His own when He said, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46). He trusted, worshipped and lived for God while on the cross.

We can say in the words of Helmut Thielicke, a German theologian, "At the bottom of every abyss He [Jesus] stands beside me." There is a Redeemer. Because of Him, we must not remain silent with one another in our seasons of grief and suffering. We have a hope that reaches far beyond death—the resurrection life of Jesus. Sometimes that is all to which you can hold. You have to boil it down and make it very simple. There will come times in your life when nothing else makes sense. Yet you can say, "I have a Redeemer—Jesus. I know that My Redeemer lives."

I received an illustration of this when my Nana Hazel died in 2013. She was 91 and loved Jesus better than just about anyone I've ever known. Her life was difficult, even Job-like at many seasons. She knew poverty, bereavement and rejection. She knew what it was to be betrayed and abandoned by a husband, to be a single mother and have to figure out how to raise children without much.

She had one request for her funeral that she wanted to be sure I fulfilled. She wanted me to play her life song, "Jesus Loves Me, this I Know." I'm going to ask us to do something we probably never do in adult church. I want us to affirm this simple truth:

Jesus loves me, this I know
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong
They are weak, but he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
The Bible tells me so.

(Jesus Loves Me, This I Know by Anna Bartlett Warner, 1860)

Lord Jesus, when darkness veils Your lovely face may we rest in Your unchanging grace,
knowing this is true.

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