

The Voice of Suffering

Job 3

Think for a moment about your greatest fear in life. I'm not talking about spiders or public speaking or being scared of the dark. I mean your deepest, darkest fear—that thing that, were it to happen, would make you question whether life was still worth living.

What is it? (It's a bit of a morbid question for Sunday morning, but bear with me). What is it you fear more than anything else in life? Is it doing something? Experiencing something? Is it losing something? A job? A reputation? Some treasured person or possession? Think about it.

And then consider: what do you do if that fear comes true? Most of us can't even entertain the thought. But that's exactly what Job experienced. "For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me" (3:25).

As we looked at chs. 1-2 of Job's story last week we saw his worst nightmare come true. In a single day, he lost everything precious to him. His entire fortune, his family—all ten of his children. And in another day, he lost his health. His entire world fell apart.

What Job doesn't know is that his suffering was a test. A test to see whether his integrity was as true as God claimed it was, or whether the only reason he worshiped God was because of what he got out of it. When Job was introduced to us, the author emphasized two things about him: his wealth and prosperity, but more important than that, his character and personal integrity. Job was "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1).

But that character was put to the test when Satan accused Job before God, suggesting that the only reason Job worships God is because of what he gets out of it. His personal interest. Remove your protection, remove your benefits, and he will curse you to your face.

And so shockingly, God does. He allows Satan to strike Job without reason, not just once, but twice. More shocking still was Job's response in both cases: true grief and true worship. "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). Job showed us that God is worthy of our worship whether we receive blessing or disaster from his hand.

Now had the story ended there, which is as far as some people ever get through this book, we would have been left with what feels like a rather two-dimensional character. Job the stoic hero, unphased by the worst this world can do to him. A man who feels more like a stained glass window in a cold church, than real flesh and blood.

But this isn't where the story ends. In fact, this story is about to take us into some of the most uncomfortable territory in all of Scripture, by asking a question most of us are too afraid to ask out loud: *Is it better to die or never have lived than to face such misery in life?*

Just because Job responded righteously and refused to curse God doesn't mean he's not devastated and undone. The struggle is real—not in a clichéd way, but in a gut-wrenchingly honest way. As pastor and author Christopher Ash puts it, this is not “armchair” theology—philosophical musings on the causes and experiences of suffering from a safe distance; this is “wheelchair” theology—wrestling with suffering as one whose greatest fears have come upon him.¹

When his friends show up in ch. 2:11 to show him sympathy and to comfort him, they're taken aback by the severity of his suffering. 2:12:

And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. 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. (2:12-13).

No words to comfort. Nothing you can say to make this easier or better. So what then will Job say when he finally opens his mouth in ch. 3? What do you do when your greatest fear comes upon you? When what you dread befalls you and the world falls apart? This is what Job says. This is the voice of suffering.

The Voice of Suffering

“After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said: ‘Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, “A man is conceived.”’” (3:1-3)

Job does not curse God. But he does curse his own existence. *Can you do that? Is that okay to say?* What else can you say in such an experience?

What we find in ch. 3 is what's called a *lament*—a cry of utter despair, giving voice to the real pain he has experienced. There is no sugar-coating the situation. No platitudes. No putting a good face on it. This is raw, unfiltered self-expression, and it's right here in the Bible.

As an evangelical culture today we're not really sure what to do with lament, despite the fact that we find laments all over the Bible. Part of the reason is that we've made it our goal to create a Christian subculture that is “safe for the whole family.” We emphasize the positive aspects of Christianity so much, the parts that make us feel good and secure, that we're caught off guard when tragedy strikes and we realize we still live in a fallen world. Another reason we feel nervous with lament, that it's just a little too honest in how it complains, is that some of us have grown up in contexts where you can't say anything about God unless you're sure your theology is 100% right. We don't want to make God look bad, and we don't want to look bad, so we can't really be honest about what we think or feel.

¹ See Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 18.

Now theology matters. We're going to see that in this book. It matters whether what we say or think about God is true (that's what the word theology means—what we believe about God). But when you're doing theology from the wheelchair instead of the armchair, you're not as worried about getting it right on the first try. You're not doing theology to put on a show or impress others; you're doing theology because your life depends on it, and that life is currently hanging in the balance.

So Job is not only a model of faith in suffering, he is a model of honesty in suffering. In fact, as we follow his various speeches, we see in him the whole range of human emotion and grief when someone's world falls apart.

- *Loss of appetite:* Job 6:7. “My appetite refuses to touch them; they are as food that is loathsome to me.”
- *Sleepless nights:* 7:4. “When I lie down I say, ‘When shall I arise?’ But the night is long, and I am full of tossing till the dawn.”
- *Longing to go back earlier days before tragedy struck.* Ch. 29: “Oh, that I were as in the months of old . . . when the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were all around me” (29:2, 5)
- *Loneliness, feeling abandoned by family and friends (despite their best efforts).* Ch. 19: “My relatives have failed me, my close friends have forgotten me. . . . All my intimate friends abhor me, and those whom I loved have turned against me” (19:14, 19).
- *Feeling abandoned by God:* 30:20. “I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me.”
- *Which can easily turn into cynicism toward God:* 9:30-31. “If I wash myself with snow and cleanse my hands with lye, yet you will plunge me into a pit, and my own clothes will abhor me.”
- *And finally longing for death and escape from the pain.* 3:11: “Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?”

If you have suffered deeply, lost a loved one, lost your livelihood, lost your health, then you're likely familiar with any or all of these experiences. And Job shows us we can be honest with God when we experience them. He does not muzzle our complaints or silence our cries.

But it's this last reaction—longing for death—that Job starts with in his opening lament, raising the honest but uncomfortable question, wouldn't it be better to die or never have lived than to face such misery? Let's look at this poem and consider this question.

Is Death better than Life?

First, notice that what we have before us in fact is poetry. It uses a lot of imagery in order to get its message across, particularly the imagery of light and darkness: the darkness of death Job longs for, wherein he hopes to find rest, versus the light of life he is stuck living in, which offers

no rest but only trouble. And the poem is divided into three sections. The first section, vv. 3-10, is a curse on the day of his birth. The next two sections pose two questions related to that curse: first, why did I not die at birth? (vv. 11-19), and second, why am I still alive? (vv. 20-26).

Happy stuff. Look first at the curse with me, vv. 3-10.

A Curse on the Day of His Birth (3:3-10)

“Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, ‘A man is conceived.’” (3:3).

He starts with his main wish—that the day of his birth would vanish from history. And he then elaborates on that wish in some pretty colorful ways.

First, he wants it removed from creation (3:4). The phrase “Let that day be darkness!” in v. 4 echoes God’s first act of creation, only in reverse: “Let there be light.” He wants creation undone on that day, that his birthday might never exist.

Second he wants God to ignore it. Middle of v. 4: “May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it.” Instead, he wants darkness and gloom to consume it. Verse 5: “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!” (3:5-6).

Then he wants it stricken from the calendar. Continuing in v. 6: “Let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months.” Instead of his birth being a day for joyful celebration, he wishes it barren and joyless in v.7.

And then, he wants Leviathan, a mythical creature who represents the forces of chaos that work against God’s created order, to rise up out of the deep and swallow his birthday. Verse 8 pictures those whose job is to summon the chaos monster being invited to unleash it on that day, kind of like summoning the Kraken in *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Finally, Job wants the darkness of the day to be unending, for morning to never come. “Let the stars of its dawn be dark; let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning” (v. 9). The overkill of his curse would be comical if it weren’t so tragic. So deeply does Job despise the day of his birth that he will pile curse upon curse upon curse, wishing its utter destruction. Why? Verse 10: “because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes.” His logic is simple: were I never born, I would never have to face the crushing misery of my greatest fear coming true.

The whole thing is so jarring. So contrary to normal human experience. Birthdays are something to be celebrated, not cursed. They’re a big deal in most families—cake and balloons and presents. But such is the pain of Job’s situation. All of the memories of watching his children grow up, the savor of every meal, the comfort of his vast possessions, it would be better to have never experienced any of it, than to have tasted it and lost it. This is Job’s cry.

But of course he can’t go back and erase the day of his birth from existence. And so his curse turns to questioning in v. 11, still chasing the same point: wouldn’t it be better to have never lived than to face this much suffering?

A Question of Why He Was Born (3:11-19)

Verse 11: “Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse?” (3:11-12).

If I’m going to be conceived and born, then why couldn’t I have at least died then and there? Or better yet, v. 16, “why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light?”

If you’ve lost an infant, or experienced miscarriage, or had a stillborn child, then Job’s words can feel pretty calloused. No one would wish that experience on their worst enemy. There is no sadder moment in our own life than the loss of our babies. But Job is coming at it from another angle, an angle some of us ponder when we say things like, ‘Do I really want to bring a child into this crazy world? There’s so much pain and sorrow here.’ Compared to the suffering of this world, Job sees death as a place of rest. There you’ll find kings and princes, alongside the wicked and weary, all free from their troubles and toil of this broken place. “The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master” (3:19).

Job doesn’t seem to have a very developed understanding of the afterlife; that’s something God revealed progressively as the Scriptures unfold. From his vantage, to live is to risk loss and suffering. Indeed it is to make suffering inevitable. So wouldn’t it be better to die young than to suffer so much in life?

But of course he didn’t die young. He was conceived, he was born, he didn’t die at birth, and so now he comes to the final question of his lament: why am I still here?

A Question of Why He Is Still Alive (3:20-26)

Again—he’s still driving at the same point, now from a third angle. Verse 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? (3:20-23)

Notice how what Satan considered an advantage to Job in ch. 1, Job sees as a liability. God has hedged him in. He no longer wants God’s protection; would that God remove the leash entirely from Satan and let him be destroyed. Why? Verse 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." (3:34-26)

This is the voice of suffering. God does not silence our cries of despair. For Job it is raw, it is real, and it receives no answer in this chapter.

In fact for the next 34 chapters, Job’s complaint will go unanswered by God. His friends, who have been sitting and grieving with him, will try to answer. Try and fail, as we’ll see next week, while Job continues to long for an audience with God. And he’ll receive that audience in ch. 38, where God will answer him, though not the questions he’s been asking.

But what can we say about the question before us? *Wouldn't it be better to die or never have lived than to face this much suffering?* This is a real and critical question, especially in a day when suicide rates are at a 30-year high,² assisted suicide is becoming increasingly acceptable by the public, and abortion continues to prevail over our culture. It's a question we need to answer for ourselves before crisis strikes, because in the heat of sorrow it's so much harder to see clearly.

So is there anything we might draw from this chapter that might help us answer that question or make sense of whether death is preferable to life when suffering is so deep? I think there are two things that must be said—one from this chapter, and one from the larger biblical story.

Life and Death Are in the Hands of God

First, there is a sense in which God has already answered Job's question—is death better than a life of misery? The fact that Job is still alive *is* God's answer.

This is critical to remember. Life and death are in God's hands, not ours. He is the one who determines our days and years (Ps 139:16). If it were better for Job to die, God would take him. The fact that he hasn't taken him suggests that as deep as Job's sorrow is, God is not done with his life. But the critical thing to remember is that whether to live or to die is *not Job's call*. It's God's. He's the only one who has the wisdom and perspective to know when that day is.

You can't fault Job for asking. He's not the first person to long for death instead of suffering, and he certainly isn't the last. Think of Elijah, Jeremiah, and Paul—men of God who despaired of life and longed for death in place of the road God laid before them (see 1 Kgs. 19:4; Jer. 20:14-18; 2 Cor. 1:8-9). Just this past week I listened to an interview with Wheaton College President Phil Ryken, a godly man and gifted pastor and leader, sharing about his own struggle with suicidal thoughts.³ The temptation is real.

But it's not our call. It's not our decision to make. And being convinced of that makes all the difference when faced with such questions.

When Carissa's family was visiting a couple weeks of you, some of you had a chance to see our niece Leonie. Many of you prayed for Leonie before she was born. She was diagnosed with severe hydrocephalous while still in the womb. Nobody knew whether she would even live. And with that diagnosis came all sorts of pressure from the doctors to abort her. 'She's going to have a miserable life. She will suffer all her days; you don't want to do that to her, do you?' And as a parent, you don't. No one wants to see their child suffer. What carried Kaitlyn and Noe through that pregnancy was the conviction that *it's not their call*. Whether Leonie lives or dies is not in their hands, but God's.

² Sabrina Tavernise, "U.S. Suicide Rate Surges to a 30-Year High," *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 2016. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html?_r=0.

³ See Justin Taylor, "A Conversation with Phil Ryken about the Darkest Period of his Life: 'I started to wonder how I would end it all,'" *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, August 4, 2016. Available at: <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2016/08/04/an-interview-with-phil-ryken-about-the-darkest-period-of-his-life-i-started-to-wonder-how-i-would-end-it-all/>.

They still don't know the extent of her disability, nor will they for some time. But here is the baby whose life the doctors said wasn't worth living. Isn't she beautiful? Life and death are in God's hands, not ours. We don't have enough information to make that call. We don't know all that God is doing or will do. It's his decision, even in the face of great suffering.



The second thing that needs to be said as we ask this searching question, is that our suffering, no matter how raw, how deep, how devastating, is not unfamiliar to our Savior. Hebrews 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

One of the most moving passages in all of Scripture is when Jesus takes up the lament of David, the lament of Israel, the lament of all suffering humanity, as he cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; cf. Ps. 22:1). Jesus knows what it's like to suffer unspeakable pain and sorrow. He knows what it's like to lose everything precious to him. To be abandoned by his friends and family. To wrestle with God in prayer. He knows what it's like—he more than anyone else—knows what it's like to have the Father turn his back on him. That's what happened in that dark hour as God poured out the full weight of his holy anger against all sin on his precious, beloved Son.

And why did he share in our humanity and take on our suffering? Hebrews continues:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that *through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. . . .* Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb. 2:14-15, 17-18)

God does not silence our cries of despair. Neither does he ignore them. Instead he answers through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. The one who died, and is alive forevermore, and who holds in his hand the keys of Death and Hades (Rev. 1:18).

So do not silence your cries when suffering comes. God can take it. But to live or die is not your call; it's his. And he will always make the right decision.