

Job: Where is God When Life Hurts?

Job 3:1-26

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Job has grieving for seven days. Three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar have joined him, but have thus far said nothing (2:13). There are times when words fail. There are times when silence is the best therapy.

But then comes chapter 3! Here we encounter a darkness of the soul that will shock some who read it. "Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth" (3:1).

What is this? Can a child of God really do this? Is this something that Old Testament believers found themselves doing because they lacked the fullness of New Testament revelation on Jesus Christ? Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote a poem in which he said,

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

Does our understanding of what a Christian is include such feelings as these? Before we answer, we need to recall that Jeremiah used almost identical language to depict his own *Dark Night of the Soul* in Jeremiah 20:14-18. And some of the Psalms, especially Psalm 88 paints as gloomy a picture as Job does here. As Hopkins suggests, those "who ne'er hung there" may well judge Job (and Jeremiah and the Psalmist) harshly. They may find it difficult to believe that Christians can speak like this.

Calvin once wrote about the Psalms that they contained "an anatomy of the parts of the soul." The human soul is capable of a variety of moods and responses, including the dark and somber tones of this chapter. Denial of this will lead to a distorted view of humanity; but, more importantly, it will lead to a distorted view of the gospel which ministers to such responses.

Job is giving vent to how he feels and before we rush in and condemn, we need to listen to him. We need to ask ourselves, have we felt like this? We need to

note the patience of God in dealing with His servant (1:8; 2:3).

In particular, we need to ask a fundamental question: What are we to make of that time in Jesus' life when he began "to be deeply distressed and troubled" (Mark 14:33)? Are we not being led to an understanding of human psyche that includes a dark side? Before we rush into accusation of sin on Job's part, we need to pause and reflect a little.

As we examine this chapter, several things emerge that call for some comment.

1. Certain things happen that cause Job to express certain difficult feelings.

What are they? What particular circumstances exasperate Job's circumstances. Why the sudden change of tone from that which had been expressed in 1:21 and 2:10? What has happened?

Several things.

First, time has passed by. A week has transpired since the great confession of Job to his wife in chapter 2. Time can often change our perspective on things. Many Christians have themselves upheld at the moment of crisis, proving God's power to respond with grace and equanimity, only to find that as days and weeks pass by things change. What appeared so utterly right then, appears less so now. Questions which never surfaced at the time now bubble up from somewhere within: dark questions, terrifying questions, accusatory questions.

Second, Job's friends have arrived. We shall have more to say about them later, but chapter 2 has introduced them to us as those who desired to "sympathize" and "comfort" (2:11). They had said nothing so far, in contrast to what is to come. In some ways, this is in their favor. There is a need for folk to empathize before attempting to heal. But, they had also suggested that Job was near death in their response. They had wept aloud and tore their clothes and sprinkled dust on their heads (2:12). All of this signaled a funeral: that Job was near to death. They were mourning, not so much for Job's children as for Job himself. Their body language signaled no hope for Job. And Job had begun to believe it himself and wish for it.

Third, perhaps his wife had been right after all. Perhaps, he should curse God and die. Get it over with as soon as possible. End this misery now. Call on God to take him away. For seven days and nights he had perhaps not slept, but pondered the unthinkable. The sorrow engulfing him, his weakness making the temptation to despair easier.

Fourth, God had thus far been silent. He had said nothing! And it is the silence that screams at us more loudly than do words. The silence from "outside" has caused Job to internalize his grief. Subliminally, he gives vent to cynicism, to a

spirit of nihilism, to despair, resentment and regret that borders on guilt. In the grieving process, Job has moved on from confident trust to a nagging fear that he may have been duped. "Where is God" cried C. S. Lewis a month after his wife had died as he recorded his soul's journey through the dark chasm of loss.

And Job is feeling this, too.

What feelings?

2. job's expresses certain feelings: a desire for death, a feeling of pointlessness

Job curses the day of his birth (3:1). He wishes that the day of his birth be removed from the calendar (3:6), that the great sea-monster, Leviathan, swallow it up (3:8), the night in which the mid-wife said, "It's a boy" (3:3). May the joy of that night be taken away (3:7). He calls upon soothsayers, whose job it was to pronounce curses, to curse that day which has brought nothing but trouble (3:8-9).

Every chapter in Job mentions death in some way. Here, Job depicts it in familiar terms as a "shadow" (3:5). We recall how Psalm 23 depicts it this way, too, speaking of "the shadow" it casts on the valley through which we sometimes walk (Psa. 23:4). Here in Job 3, Job wishes that this shadow engulf the day of his birth once more that he may never exist (3:5).

Job wishes that he'd never been born!

Why? Why should Job feel like this? The answer is obvious, of course. His life tastes "bitter"; it has become a "misery" (3:20). His life is full of "sighing" and "groans" (3:24). His worst nightmare has become a reality (3:25). "I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil" (3:26).

In verses 21-22 he depicts his desire for death with the same anticipation that a grave-robber might have had. Grave robbery was a lucrative business, particularly in ancient Egypt when the dead were buried with many valuable possessions. They "rejoice when they come to the grave" (3:22), he says.

"Why do you keep wretched people like me alive?" Job asks.

Are you shocked by this question? There are many more such questions in Job that we will uncover.

Do you think I made of stone or metal? (6:12)

If life is short, does it also have to be miserable? (7:1-10)

What did I ever do to become the target of your arrows? (7:20)

You are the One who created me, so why are you destroying me? (10:8)

Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy? (13:24)

One of things that we need to understand and appreciate here is that God allows us to ask questions like these! They may be mistaken. They may be the wrong questions? They may even come from faulty motivations? But we are allowed to ask them?

Joni Eareckson Tada has written:

"...make no mistake, Job's questions to God weren't of the polite Sunday School variety. They were pointed, sharp and seemed at times on the border of blasphemy...Tough, searching questions. Job's friends were horrified...

And that, to me, is the comfort of the book of Job. What meant the most to me in my suffering was that God never condemns Job for his doubt and despair. God was even ready to take on the hard questions. Ah, but the answers? They weren't quite the ones Job was expecting."¹

Do you remember when Elijah, following the great context on Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18 against the prophets of Baal, finds himself utterly dejected and broken in the very next chapter? He had been instrumental in displaying the utter impotence of Baal to ignite so much as a spark on the sacrifice that had been prepared, despite the antics of his followers. But the God of Israel had answered by fire that consumed the sacrifice despite the gallons of water that had made things even more difficult. But in the very next chapter, Elijah is convinced (wrongly to be sure) that he is going to die, and rather than have Jezebel, Ahab's wicked wife, have the glory for it, he asks God to take away his life that the honor of the kingdom of God might be maintained, even in his death. "I have had enough, Lord," Elijah prayed, "Take my life..." (1 Kings 19:4).

Do you remember, too, how utterly pastoral God was in dealing with Elijah? No lectures! No sermons! No recriminations! Just sleep... (1 Kings 19:5).

The point is that God knows the weakness of our frame. He understands our frustrations and problems. Even when we step over the boundary, there are times when discipline must wait.

And God is patient with Job's desire for death. That, too, is part of his ministry to

¹ Joni Eareckson Tada, *Secret Strength* (Amersham-on-the-Hill, Bucks: Scripture Press, 1989), 169-171.

his servant. He understands his fragility, his vulnerability.

We need to acknowledge that this is a part of the Christian life, too. In response to those whose understanding of what it means to be a believer does not allow for these dark times, we need to point out the examples of Job and Jeremiah and Elijah. If these three great men felt like this, we need not be surprised if many more of God's children experience it, too. Spiritual depression, to give it a lose and inexact name, is a very real phenomenon.

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? (Psa. 42:11)

...my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave... You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend (Psa. 88:1, 18)

The point of these passages in Scripture may well baffle us, but if we have no place for them in our understanding of the Christian life, we are seriously deficient. We cannot counsel that which we do not appreciate. If we cannot appreciate that some Christians will "sing the blues" we will not be in a position to help them. This, in many ways, was the error of Job's friends. It is precisely for this reason that Jesus is portrayed for us in the Gospels as one "made like his brothers in every way" (Heb. 2:17). He of whom it is written that he was "deeply distressed and troubled... overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Mark 14:33-34), understands the complexities of human psyche to a degree that is altogether sublime. As B. B. Warfield comments on this passage: "In these supreme moments our Lord sounded the ultimate depths of human anguish, and vindicated on the score of the intensity of his mental sufferings the right to the title Man of Sorrows. The scope of these sufferings was also very broad, embracing that whole series of painful emotions which runs from a consternation that is appalled dismay, through a despondency which is almost despair, to a sense of well-nigh desolation."²

And there is more. Because Job now feels that God has turned against him. God has become his enemy.

"Why do you keep wretched people like me alive?" Job asks in effect. God has "hedged" him in (3:23). He is imprisoned. A captive to these nightmares. When fiction has become reality. Job is a prisoner. There is no way out in this life. The *joie de vivre* has gone from his life. "I have no peace... only turmoil" (3:26).

This is where we find Job at the end of chapter 3. Is there any light at all? Can we see in this chapter any faint spark that will help him? Only this: that Job is being utterly honest. Listen to Joni speak again:

² B.B. Warfield, "The Emotional Life of our Lord," in *The Person and Work of Christ* (Nutley, J.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1970), 132-133.

"For some odd reason, however, it comforted me to realize that God did not condemn me for plying Him with questions. I didn't have to worry about insulting God for my outbursts in time of stress and fear and pain. My despair wasn't going to shock Him. God, according to the book of Job, is never threatened by our questions.

And so... did I find answers? Answers for the deepest darkest questions about a life of total paralysis?

Just one. But it is enough. I think I'll let Paul put it in his words:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom. 11:33-36)"

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