

“Why, O Lord?”

Job 2:11-3:26

January 29, 2023

We are picking up our study of Job in chapter 2, vs. 11-13 and then we will move into chapter 3 as we continue our series, “Trusting God When Suffering Doesn’t Make Sense.”

As we saw last week, Job has been overwhelmed by a tsunami of calamity. In a single day this man of remarkable godliness and incomparable wealth has suffered the loss of everything. All of his livestock stolen or destroyed, his 10 children and servants killed, and his body overcome by unrelenting boils and sickness that leave Job in physical and emotional anguish as well as relationally isolated and spiritually oppressed. His dream life has become a nightmare!

And as we saw last week all this torment has come as brutal assault from Satan and as a test from God to prove the genuineness of Job’s faith in God. What is at stake is the glory and reputation of God through Job’s life. Like a tsunami, this onslaught of suffering came suddenly but its effects of devastation linger on. By the time Job’s closest friends can get the word and travel the distance to comfort him, Job has sat in his misery and the darkness of his grief for weeks and possibly even months. He’s been alone with his depressed thoughts and the more he ruminates the darker they become.

Who will comfort Job? Let’s pick up the story in [2:11-13]. For all the bad rap that these friends are going to get in the coming chapters for their simplistic and mistaken theology along with their terrible insensitivity to Job’s plight, what we see in vs. 11-13 is commendable and instructive. Their intentions are good. It’s only when they begin to speak out of their ignorance that they magnify Job’s pain (as we will see next week). For now, let’s take note of some helpful insights for comforting the suffering:

1. **Personal presence is premium in a ministry of comfort** (Job 2:11a).

“Now when Job’s three friends heard of all the evil (ra—adversity; calamity) that had come upon him, *they came* each from his own place...” (11). Nothing comforts like the personal presence of someone who loves you. When one of our family members has been in the hospital, we have received great encouragement from cards, calls, and text messages—they are all very good! But when a friend walks through the door of your hospital room it is like a wave of encouragement. Of course we need to be sensitive here, that not everyone has the same preferences—there are people who prefer more privacy in a hospital setting, yet most likely if you are a good friend, your presence, even for a few minutes, will be a source of strength.

2. **Comfort is active** (Job 2:11b).

“They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him” (11b). Notice the active coordination that had to take place. These friends do not live near each other, yet through their messengers they arrange for an appointed time and place to meet so that they can go together to personally sympathize and comfort Job.

It’s possible to feel empathy toward someone without expressing it. Empathy has to do with the feelings we experience in response to another person’s affliction. But comfort is active. It expresses itself. A comforter takes action toward their suffering friend. The Hebrew concept of comfort in this word *nacham* involves “speaking to the mind and heart of the sufferer” with an aim of bringing about “a change in how the sufferer thinks and feels about his or her suffering.”¹ For example, Joseph sought to comfort his brothers by alleviating their fear or distress (Gen 50:21). Boaz comforted Ruth by giving her hope and encouragement (Ruth 2:13; 2Chron 32:6-7). It would be wise for us to take a step from *feeling* sympathy to *actively* bringing the comfort of encouragement to a suffering or grieving friend.

3. **Comforters participate in another’s grief** (Job 2:12).

[vs. 12] What a statement about the severity of Job’s illness and grief, that his friends did not recognize him at first. And when they are confronted

¹ Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Preaching the Word), pg. 58-59.

with the reality of his condition, they too express their grief with tears, rendering their garments and throwing dust over their heads which was their way of showing deep sorrow for Job. They don't stand off at a distance, but they enter into the grief of their grieving friend.

4. **Comforters exercise uncomfortable patience** (Job 2:13a).

Vs. 13: "And they sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights..." Do you remember where Job was sitting in vs. 8? He was not only sitting on the ground, but in the ashes outside of town—in the place where they burn garbage, a place of lonely isolation. No comfortable couch with a cup of coffee. They sat outside on the ground for seven days and nights, patiently waiting for Job to speak. According to their customs it would have been rude to speak first, before the one grieving. This is what we might call the ministry of presence—and there is nothing like it.

Many of you have heard me tell of the night before our 6-year-old daughter was surgically fit with a halo for a medical neck injury. The anticipation of having this hardware screwed to her skull was traumatic. And that night our good friends Ken and Delaine came and sat with us. And for a long time before they prayed, they just sat and wept with us—no words. Just silent, tearful comfort that carried the weight of God's presence.

5. **Comfort begins not with what is said, but what is not said** (Job 2:13).

Vs. 13: "...for seven days and seven nights... *no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was great.*" There are times when you join the family beside the bed of one who is dying or one who is in great suffering, and there are no words that are appropriate to speak, not immediately. If you don't know what to say, then it is best to not say what you don't know. Silence may be awkward, but it may also be appropriate. There will come a time to speak—words of comfort and encouragement. And when that time comes don't be silent. I guess the lesson is that when we come alongside those in deep distress, O how we need to lean on God for wisdom. Yet as

sensitive and complicated as those times can be, don't neglect to come. Call a friend and go together. God brings comfort through His people, through their prayers, and through their hope in God's promises.

It's hard to imagine sitting on the ground for seven days in silence. But eventually the silence is broken as Job begins to speak. And what comes out of his mouth is shocking, dark, and disturbing. This brings us to chapter 3.

Chapter 3 is one of the darkest chapters in the Bible. It's particularly difficult to teach because it is not meant to teach, at least not directly. Job 3 is meant to be heard. It opens the door for us to begin to experience what was going on in Job's mind under the crushing weight of his suffering.

Have you ever sat with someone who was deeply, deeply depressed? Apart from having experienced that level of despair or despondency in your own life, you might find yourself thinking, "what's going on in their mind? How can they believe that life is so utterly dark and without hope?" Well, Job 3 is a window into a mind of despair. One who knows God, yet can't see Him. One who believes God is good, yet can't presently believe his own faith.

Let me just read Job 3 and then I will try to help us understand what Job is saying through this poetic language. As I read, listen to what Job is feeling, what he is experiencing and what he is longing for?

[Job 3]

There are two basic things taking place in chapter 3. First, in vs. 1-10 Job speaks a curse—he curses the day of his birth. Then, in vs. 11-26 he laments. A lament is an expression of deep sorrow or grief. For the sake of simplicity, I'm going to divide chapter 3 into 3 sections using three questions to summarize and capture what Job is saying.

1. **Why was I even born?**² (Job 3:1-10)

The question, of course, carries the weight of an exclamatory statement: "I wish I had never been born!" Job expresses this poetically by cursing the day

² David Allen, *Christ-centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Job*, pg. 52.

of his birth. Keep in mind that Job is yearning for something that can't possibly happen. He wishes that history could be rewritten and that the day in which he was conceived would be blotted out so that he himself would never have come into existence. **[vs. 3-6]** Notice the words that Job piles up to express how he wants to characterize the day of his birth: darkness, gloom, deep darkness, clouds, blackness, thick darkness. Or as he says in vs. 4, "May God above not seek it, *nor light shine upon it.*" In essence, Job is wishing that the opposite of what God did in creation. In Gen 1:3 God said, "let there be light." Here Job is saying, "let there be darkness." He is wishing the day had never existed so that he too would never have existed to experience such a painful existence.

In vs. 7-11, Job expresses how it would have been better if his mother had been barren and not able to conceive him. **[7-11]** Leviathan in vs. 8 was a mythical creature thought to live in the sea, who when aroused, would wreak all kinds of havoc and destruction. Job wishes that Leviathan could be riled up to destroy the day of his birth.

Of course, none of this is possible. One cannot rewrite history. Job is simply expressing deep pain. One commentator captured it this way: "Life is so painful that Job wishes...God would rewind the tape of creation and undo the part that led to his existence."³

Notice that in cursing the day of his birth, Job does not actually curse *God* as Satan hoped he would. But he comes close as he calls into question the wisdom of his Creator in bringing him into this painful existence.

2. *Why didn't I die at birth?*⁴ (Job 3:11-19)

[vs. 11-19] From vs. 11 to the end of the chapter, Job will ask that common and treacherous question, *why*. Yet Job does not ask why this suffering has come upon him. His question is far more pessimistic: why did I not just die at birth. In other words, it would have been better to die at birth or to have

not been sustained by his mother's nursing than to live this miserable existence.

Job longs for the rest and relief that death would bring. His reference to kings who rebuild ruins for themselves in vs. 14 probably refers to tombs that they had built and filled with gold and silver, now deteriorating because those who inhabit them are lifeless and powerless.⁵ Job goes on to reflect on how "death is the great leveler of all people in society" including kings, masters, and oppressed servants. In Job's mind, at least the wicked can no longer oppress others in death. He's seeing death as preferable.

3. *Why can't I just die now?*⁶ (Job 3:20-26)

In the final portion of Job's lament, he continues to glorify death as the only hopeful relief to his situation. **[vs. 20-23]** Job has come to believe that death is the only way to be happy—death is the only positive future he can see (20-22). He wonders why light is given, that is, why God sustains a man only to live in bitterness (20, 23).

In vs. 23, Job feels as though God has hedged him in to not be able to escape a life of pain. Notice this is the opposite of what Satan said of Job earlier in vs. 1:10, that God has put a hedge around him on every side so that no harm would come to him. But now Job feels as though he is trapped unable to escape harm. Have you ever felt trapped by pain?

Finally, Job concludes his lament by expressing the endless state of his misery. **[vs. 24-26]** Instead of food being Job's constancy, now his only constancy is sighing (lit. shrieks) and groaning—he's "feeding on his grief."⁷ "I have no rest, but trouble comes" (26). At this point in Job's life and mind, the only thing that could make his suffering worse is to not die before tomorrow—to have to face the horror of his life yet another day and night. This is the toll that Job's suffering has taken on him as he sat alone with his dark thoughts. All he can see everywhere around him is despair.

³ Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Preaching the Word), pg. 72.

⁴ David Allen, *Christ-centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Job*, pg. 52.

⁵ John Hartley, *The Book of Job* (NICOT), pg. 97.

⁶ David Allen, *Christ-centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Job*, pg. 52.

⁷ Warren Wiersbe, *Chapter-by-Chapter Bible Commentary*, pg. 284.

Amazingly, as most commentators point out, Job does not consider taking his own life. He still reveres God enough to let God have his way in his life, even if it means a painful providence. Job's faithfulness to God "lies in the fact that he does not step outside the limits God has placed on him and so does not do for himself what God will not do."⁸ Notice, the fact that Job is still struggling with God, is a glimmer of hope in his soul, though he himself cannot see it.

So, what might we glean from Job 3? Certainly, our goal is not to follow Job into his despair and stay there with him. So how can Job's despair instruct us in our own battle against despair?

Let me suggest several implications from our text:

1. **Beware that suffering is always accompanied by the temptation to become self-focused.** We saw last week that often the same experience of suffering that God uses to test our faith, will also be exploited by Satan to tempt us to sin. Not only does pain make us self-aware, but rarely (if ever) does God test our faith when Satan is not also present to tempt us. And he knows that our hearts are naturally inclined to love self more than God. In our suffering, we must be conscientiously aware of becoming self-absorbed. We must learn to think of others in our suffering and contemplate often, the selfless sufferings of Christ on our behalf.
2. **Pain can blur our vision of God.** If this could happen to Job, "a blameless and upright man who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1), then we too must not wait until severe suffering comes to establish deep convictions and a robust view of God's character. When you find yourself in the midst of a deep trial or a season of grief, you need to surround yourself with others who can see more clearly and remind you of the true, pure, holy, gracious character of God. Seasons of affliction are seasons when you cannot afford to not go to church, Bible study, 180, or life group.

3. **Genuine believers may be led by God through times of deep and dark despair.**⁹ Be very careful not to question the genuineness of a person's relationship with God too quickly, simply because they are going through mind-numbing depression and despondency that takes them to the brink of despair. Job was affirmed by God as a believer *before the darkness* (1:8), he remained a believer (though a struggling one) *through the darkness*, and he was vindicated by God *after the darkness* (42:7).¹⁰
4. **We can speak our honest thoughts and cries to God from painful hearts of reverence.** It is not inherently sinful to honestly express our feelings, questions, and grief to God. I do not believe (as many in popular Christian culture do) that it is ok to be angry with God. We should not charge God with wrong (Job 1:22). Yet, God welcomes our deep cries. How else can we entrust ourselves to God in such times? I don't want anyone at Trinity to get the idea that "worshiping our way through suffering" means pretending to be happy and that everything is ok. Worshiping our way through suffering means dealing honestly with God about our pain and disillusionment while refusing to let go of the character of God. Job did not deny, dilute, or medicate his pain—he poured out his heart to God.¹¹ And if Jesus could offer up prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One who was able to save Him from death, and this with a heart of reverence (Heb 5:7), then we can do the same.

Finally, and I believe this is the key life-principle from Job 3:

We must evaluate our circumstances through the lens of God's character rather than evaluating God through the lens of our experience lest we become ensnared by a self-centered and God-distorted perspective that drives us to despair.

This is so important. When we evaluate God on the basis of our circumstances, we elevate personal experience to the place of supremacy rather than God. Personal experience can become idolatry.

⁸ David Jackson, *Crying out for Vindication: The Gospel According to Job*, pg. 55.

⁹ Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Preaching the Word), pg. 66.

¹⁰ Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Preaching the Word), pg. 67.

¹¹ Daniel Estes, *Job* (Teach the Text Commentary Series), pg. 23.

It is the world's god which will lead to true despair. But God's character (unlike circumstances) is unchanging and therefore produces hope.

Daniel Estes said it so well:

“Like job, we need to learn and remember that God's [wisdom] is infinite, far above our finite human understanding, so we will never be able to comprehend all that he is doing in our lives. Instead of viewing God through the lens of our limited understanding we need to learn to trust him humbly, even when we cannot understand what he is doing, remembering that the Bible teaches that God is always great, good, and in control... [We must not look] through the wrong end of the binoculars. By perceiving God through the lens of...experience, [we may see] God has uncaring. [But] if...[we] view our experience through the lens of the character of God, [we] would see things in a far different way...*We are prone to diminish God when we let our feelings about what is happening in our lives become the measure by which we evaluate God.* We need to remember that whatever our circumstances, God's character is unchanging.”¹²

This is what Jesus did for us. He never betrayed His confidence in the character of His heavenly Father even when He felt forsaken by God. He walked through the darkest of dark and the deepest of despair, enduring the crushing weight of God's wrath for our sin, so that we need never despair ultimately. The blood of Christ extinguished the flames of hell for all who trust in Him. So in your suffering, remember the One who suffered for you to guarantee that your suffering will come to a glorious end.

¹² Daniel Estes, Job (Teach the Text Commentary Series), pg. 24.