



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Let the Day Perish

Job 3:1-26

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It's not easy to really understand something you haven't experienced. I'd love to be able to hand the book of Job over to someone else—someone who has a greater grasp of suffering than I do. As we get to Chapter 3 we transition from the prologue into the dialogue between Job and his friends. The Lord will eventually, near the end, enter the dialogue, too. But it begins with a great lament from Job. And I'm not sure that any of us can grasp the depth of Job's lament, although I'm sure there are some of you who can grasp, who know that kind of lament, better than I do. Job has expressed his faith. "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" (1:21). And, later, when his wife told him to give up, to curse God and die, Job responded, "Shall we not receive the good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" (2:10). We're told that in all this, Job did not sin. But that doesn't mean he wasn't upset, that he didn't lament, or that he didn't ask the big question: Why?

I can't say I've ever struggled all that deeply with that question. In the times that bad things have happened to me and I've asked "Why?", it doesn't usually take much introspection to realise that the answer is that I did something dumb and brought my problems on myself. Personally, the deepest I think I've ever come to lament was on the birth of our stillborn daughter. It wasn't until the nurses brought her back to us, dressed in an outfit made by volunteers, and left her with us to grieve that the life and death of this little person—my child, but still a stranger—was real. Veronica was still sedated from the surgery, but I was left there with this tiny, lifeless child and had to ask, "Why?" But I can't

pretend that my asking the big question was anything as deep as Job's asking or that my lament was nearly as deep as Job's lament. He'd lost everything, including his ten adult children, and was afflicted himself from head to foot. It's not surprising that as I've been making my way through the commentaries on Job, I've found the evangelical ones tend to be rather shallow, while the best I've found have come out of Judaism—from a people who have known deep loss and suffering. There seem to be a lot of Evangelicals who struggle to deal with Job's questions. How can a faithful person ask the things Job is asking? But people who have truly known suffering have usually asked those questions of God themselves and they understand.

So that's where Job's at as we get to Chapter 3. His friends have come to comfort him, but they're so struck by the situation and by his appearance when they find him on the ash-heap, that they lose all words. They simply sit with him. The language describing their actions suggests that they're treating this as if it were a funeral ritual. Job might as well be dead.

And Job might wish he were dead, but he's not ready to give up. His lament is in three parts and he begins by cursing the day he was born. Look at Job 3:1-10.

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.'

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!

Let it not rejoice among the days of the year;

let it not come into the number of the months.

Behold, let that night be barren;

let no joyful cry enter it.

Let those curse it who curse the day,

who are ready to rouse up

Leviathan.

Let the stars of its dawn be dark;

let it hope for light, but have none,

nor see the eyelids of the morning,

because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,

nor hide trouble from my eyes.

Job doesn't curse God, but he does curse the day on which he was born and he spares no words to do so. We get a sense of his overwhelming despair. No doubt the day he was born was a happy one for his parents. It *had been* a happy one for Job, until all this happened. Now he looks back on the joy with which his parents spoke of his birthday and he says, "Curse the day!" Curse the day that saw me born and curse the night when my parents conceived me.

Next he heaps up words for darkness.

"Let that day be darkness...nor light shine upon it. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it...clouds dwell upon it; let the blackness of day terrify it." This is the language of "de-creation".

Creation began in the darkness and chaos, and God began his creative work of bringing order and purpose to that chaos by calling for light. Light symbolises the creative and sustaining hands of God. Light symbolises his goodness and his care. Light symbolises the order that God brought out of the chaos of the pre-created cosmos. And so Job calls down darkness on the day he was born. "May God not seek it out." May the day of my birth pass by God unnoticed, unordered, unsustainable, for then I might not have been born. Job laments his very creation. If only God had been sleeping, not paying attention, or otherwise busy on that day, it might have passed by, Job would never have been born, and he never would have known all this sorrow.

While his parents knew joy the night he was conceived, Job calls out to the keepers of Leviathan, the great chaos beast of the sea. You see, for the Jews—as for many ancient Near Eastern peoples—the sea was a remnant of that pre-creation chaos, a bit of the chaos still untamed. (This, by the way, is probably why St. John's vision of the new creation has no sea, not because the sea will literally be gone, but because

it's a symbol of the Lord finishing what he began and leaving nothing to wreak havoc again as the serpent had.) Leviathan personified the chaos of the sea. It was a beast of *uncreation* and Job calls on its keepers to set the great monster loose to curse the day of his birth, wishing that day had never been.

Job has lost hope. Even in the darkest of days, the birth of a child brings hope. New life coming into the world. There's excitement and anticipation. If you were to ask an expectant mother if she's looking forward to anything she might think you were crazy. Of course she's looking forward to something! Isn't it obvious? Job's mother and father felt that way once, but Job's discouragement is so deep that he wishes that day had never happened. Again, he's lost all hope. And so, knowing that he can't actually curse the day of his birth, he moves from pronouncing a curse to wailing a formal lament for the day. Look at verses 11-19:

**“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?
For then I would have lain down and
been quiet;
I would have slept; then I would
have been at rest,
with kings and counselors of the earth
who rebuilt ruins for themselves,
or with princes who had gold,
who filled their houses with silver.
Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn
child,
as infants who never see the light?
There the wicked cease from
troubling,
and there the weary are at rest.
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.**

If he had to be born, why couldn't he have been stillborn? Again, we get sense of the depth of Job's grief and

despair. He'd rather be dead, in fact, he'd rather know nothing of life itself. Better the quiet and peace of the grave than the pain he's known. He could lie down with kings and counsellors and princes—with great men—and even though dead, they'd be better company than the life he knew.

In the grave, the wicked are no longer able to cause trouble. In the grave the weary finally find rest. In the grave, the prisoner finally finds release. In the grave, even the slave finally knows what is to be free. Had he died at birth, Job would know only the quiet of the grave and, he's sunk so low, what a blessing that would be!

I think that here, if we listen closely to Job, we get a sense of the difference between his perspective and our perspective and we get some insight into where he (and his friends) are coming from as they grapple with the question of justice. I think, too, that Job offers some push-back against the way that many of us think about this issue as Christians.

As Christians Job's attitude might seem foreign. Better dead than suffering? And especially in light of the fact that when Job talks about “dead”, he's talking about the grave. As Christians, we may experience evil and pain and suffering in our lives, but we know that no matter how bad it gets, we have a hope the other side of death. Life—real life, a life that the life we now know is only a shadow of—resurrection to life awaits those who are in Jesus by faith. Someday, when Jesus has put every enemy under his feet, he will finish the work of new creation that he has begun and the culmination of that will be the resurrection of the dead to life in the presence of God. We may not know justice this side of death, but we can live in hope knowing that all things will be made new someday and that everything that is wrong will be set to rights. But Job didn't know that hope and neither did the other Old Testament saints. Towards the end of the Old Testament period we see a belief in the coming of a future king and of the resurrection of the faithful dead *begin* to develop—in the

writings of prophets like Isaiah—but even then, it wasn't a well-defined idea. For the most part, in the Old Testament, there was only the grave. Their word for it was *sheol*. Job doesn't use *sheol* in his lament, but he does several times later in the book and that's what he's getting at here when he speaks of the grave. *Sheol* wasn't really good or bad. It just was. Sometimes it's used metaphorically to simply point to the grave. Other times it's a reference to the afterlife, the abode of those who have died. It's neither presented as a place of punishment or a place of reward. It just is. *Sheol* is the great equaliser, the destiny of everyone, rich or poor, good or bad. The connotation is usually that, at least compared to life, *sheol* isn't a pleasant place, but then that really underlines Job's despair. To have been still born, to have never known life, to know only this sort of limbo existence in *sheol*, would be better than his current state.

And that there was no punishment or reward to be found in *sheol* points to Job's need to wrestle with this question of the justice of God. For the Old Testament saints, justice was something to be expected in *this* life. We see this throughout the psalms, where the psalmists cry out—and expect!—to be delivered from their enemies. They trust that the Lord will destroy or punish their enemies while they go on to lead a long and happy life. This was Job's thinking and it explains his confusion and his frustration with God.

Again, I think this can give some needed balance to how we think as Christians. The Old Testament saints didn't follow the Lord for or didn't build their faith around a hope of eternal life with God. While *sheol* was not out of God's reach, it was a place apart from him. They expected to walk with the Lord and to receive his blessings in life. And, of course, this is where the Adversary's challenge came from. “Is Job only pursuing God for the good stuff he'll get in return?” Well, now we've seen that, no, Job is pursuing God for God's sake. Now, as Christians, Jesus has given us hope greater than anyone knew in the Old Testament. New Creation has

begun and we live in hopeful expectation that Jesus will finish that work and make us a part of it. But how often are we guilty of the same thing? We've often been guilty of structuring our evangelism around this very problem and when we do that, we lead people astray from the get-go. We persuade people to faith with the fear of hell and the reward of heaven, but if we leave it at that or if we stress that aspect of things too much, we may very well be making a whole lot of Christians who are serving God not for God's sake and not pursuing righteousness for righteousness sake, but doing it for the reward. There are therapeutic ramifications of the gospel, but if we present the gospel as primarily therapeutic, we end up making Christians who are in it for themselves. Don't misunderstand. We need to stand with St. Paul and declare that to live is Christ and to die is gain. We need to live in hope of life with God in the age to come and we need to declare that hope to the world. But I think the faith of the Old Testament saints, the faith of people like Job, pulls us back from the future and cautions us against escapist and gnostic fancies and down to earth, prompting us to seek righteousness and justice in life, not just as pie-in-the-sky when we die.

Now, in the final part of Job's lament comes the big question, the one he's been working towards: Why? Look at verses 20-26:

**“Why is light given to him who is in misery,
and life to the bitter in soul,
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?
Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
whom God has hedged in?
For my sighing comes instead of my bread,
and my groanings are poured out like water.
For the thing that I fear comes upon me,**

**and what I dread befalls me.
I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest, but trouble comes.”**

“Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?” asks Job. There's some irony here. Because we, the readers, have been let in on the scene in the Lord's council, we know that Job had been hedged in. Job now cries out that the Lord's hedge is an injustice. In reality, the Lord's hedge brought Job incredible blessing, but Job knew nothing of that. All he can see now, from his vantage point of suffering, is that the Lord has put a hedge between himself and Job. Job knew the Lord and his fellowship. He knew the Lord's blessing. And now it's as if the Lord has placed a wall between himself and Job. Job feels alone and he feels as though he's in the dark, and from the dark he's crying out, “Why?” And it feels like his cries to the Lord are simply bouncing off that wall. It's often when we need God the most that he seems the most distant and uncaring. After his wife died, C. S. Lewis wrote a little book titled *A Grief Observed*, sort of a journal of his journey through grief. He experienced this same phenomenon and I think he describes it very well:

“This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him...if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms.

But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once.”

I suspect we've all been there at some point. The door seems closed, but we know that God is there on the other side and we can't give up. Somehow we have to keep pushing the door, calling

over the wall. Hope—even if all we have left of our hope is a sliver—our hope demands we not give up our pursuit of God.

And we see this with Job. As he cries out he says he's lost all hope. He cries out for death. But, Brothers and Sisters, that he still cries out to God highlights that he really hasn't lost all hope. Maybe he thinks he has or maybe he's just angry and discouraged, but the hope is still there, otherwise he'd give up, turn away from the hedge, and curse the God behind it. But he doesn't. He doesn't understand how any of this can be. How can God bring such suffering on a righteous man? How can such a God be just? Job wrestles with these questions because he has known this God, because he has known this God and known him to be good, and so his questions become a lifeline—a way of holding fast to God even when his fingers feel like they're grasping at thin air, even when Job doesn't realise what he's doing.

We cry out to God from our grief and ask “Why?”, not because we question his goodness, but because we've just experienced something very bad and, yet, we *know* that God *is* good. We know it in our heads, in our hearts, in our guts. We know that God is good. The evidence of his goodness is there in Scripture on page after page after page. We *know* he's good. And so we cry out “Why?” We want to square the circle, to settle our question, to reconcile our present experience with our experience and what we know of God. From the darkness we cry.

And, once again, the gospel meets us in the darkness. If Job knew God's goodness well enough to cry out “Why?”, to seek to reconcile his circumstances with what he knew of God, how much better do we know the goodness of God this side of the cross? We know the goodness of God demonstrated in his humbling himself to be born a human being and to die on a cross for the sake of his enemies. Brothers and Sisters, the cross assures us of God's goodness no matter how dark our days, not matter how firmly shut the

door, no matter how high the wall. And it also points us in the right direction to find our answer. Job asked, “Why?” because he couldn’t reconcile his understanding of justice with what God had done. Why had God rewarded righteousness with suffering? Friends, the same thing happened to Jesus. He who knew no sin suffered. And yet there was a reason for it. He who knew no sin *became sin for us*. In Jesus we get a glimpse behind the scenes to see that God is bigger than the retribution principle, that God is not a divine vending machine dispensing blessings in return for service. In Jesus God shows us that his justice is deeper than we can ever fully grasp. In Jesus we have a glimpse of the perfect wisdom of God at work to bring goodness and blessing the likes of which the Old Testament saints never knew. They looked for blessings in this life and then expected nothing more than the grave. But Brothers and Sisters, because of Jesus we know a hope of the life of the age to come, a life in a world set right, a life in a world where we’ll never have to ask “Why?”.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, keep your Son and his Cross ever before our eyes and especially so as we struggle through difficult days. Keep Jesus and his Cross before us as we struggle to understand and when we ask “Why?”. Let the cross of Christ be a reminder to us that even when our vision is clouded, even when we’re stumbling in the dark and can’t see where we’re going, even when you seem distant, we can confidently hold onto the knowledge that you are good and that you are there and that you love us. Strengthen our faith as we walk through difficult days in the shadow of the cross, we ask, that we might hold ever tighter to Jesus. Amen.