

JOB'S CURSE & LAMENT

Job 3

By Leo Douma
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I think as Christians we recognise that for some one to commit suicide is a terrible thing, not only for the family left behind, but also in the sin against God. If we accept the sovereignty of God we realize our life is not our own. It is a gift from God and it his right, and his only, to give or take it. However, if we are sensitive to another's suffering, we will realize there are times when their suffering is so bad, when the pain is so excruciating, when the depression is so deep, that death seems like wonderful release from all that, and peace is finally found. This is what we see here with Job in chapter 3. This will come as a surprise. In chapters 1 & 2 we have seen how Job lost all his possessions, all his children and his health, all because Satan challenged God that Job would curse him if God didn't look after Job so much and give him all he had. Satan's cynicism implied Job only loved God for what he could get, not God himself. But despite all his loss, Job remained faithful to God, a wonderful example. Even when his wife, in her pain, suggested Job curse God and die, he refused, saying "*Shall we accept good from God and not bad?*" In the last part of chapter 2 we left Job sitting on the ash heap, terribly ill, with his three friends sitting with him to console him. They sat there with him, in complete silence for seven days. Now in chapter 3 we see that Job breaks the silence. And what he says stuns us. The man who always trusted God, never said a thing wrong, took whatever God gave or withdrew as God's right, now, as we read in verse 1, "After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth." And does he let fly.

In this chapter we see that Job does four things: he curses his birth (3-10), longs for death & peace (11-19), he deplores life (20-23) and ends what he says with a moan (24-26). Put simply his suffering is so bad that he wants out, he wants to die so his suffering will finish. He is at the point where he reckons it would have been even better if he had never even existed. Why have life if this is how it feels. That's why we see that Job curses the day of

his birth in verses 3-10. *“May the day of my birth perish and the night it was said ‘A boy is born!’ That day- may it turn to darkness, may God above not care about it; may no light shine upon it. May darkness and deep shadow claim it once more; may blackness overwhelm its light...”* Job’s thinking, as it was in those ancient times, was that if the day of his day of birth could be removed from existence then everything that came with that day, including him, would be gone, no longer existing. The belief was that each day was a new creation from God, just as God created the first days of creation. God created the day from the darkness, the formless and dark chaos we see in Genesis 1:1. If that darkness could overwhelm that day and take it back, then Job would be satisfied. Job says in verse 6 *“That day- may thick darkness seize it; may it not be included among the days of the year.”* Job’s language is similar to that of God’s in Genesis 1. There God said *“Let there be light, ...a new day”*. But Job wants to reverse it. Let there be darkness. Job even calls upon the powers of the wizards to remove the day as verse 8 says: *“May those who curse days, curse that day, those who are ready to rouse Leviathan.”* Leviathan was seen as the huge sea monster. Job is very serious in his curse. Curse the day of my birth- let it never exist so I don’t exist, so I would never have to suffer as I do now! We will be shocked to hear Job speak this way. But note, though he pushes the envelope, he doesn’t curse God or himself. Job doesn’t lash out at God. But he does express his deep pain, his anguish, as this curse bursts from his mouth. Perhaps we are shocked at the emotion. Aren’t good Christians supposed to bear their grief in quiet calm and trust in God? But who says being stoic, stiff upper lip, is biblical? Listen to the psalmists as they cry out in lament or Jeremiah the prophet as he lashes out in his anguish, or listen to the roar of Jesus as he cried out from the depths of hell. God’s testing of Job is not to see if he can sit unmoved like a piece of wood. Job is not stone. He is a real human being with real emotions. Job is a man bereaved, humiliated, in pain. His skin is festering and his nerves are on fire. Of course he is deeply distressed and very emotional. It is better to be honest in prayer with God and to grapple with him, then to bury the emotion and slowly see the life of faith die out. Job’s greatest struggle is

not the loss of all his possessions or his children, nor that his wife suggested he curse God. His greatest struggle is with God, with God who seems to be absent, who seems to show a whole different side, a dark side, one who has withdrawn and left him. Job's struggle is the battle between the God he knows in his faith and what he now experiences in how God has treated him. His faith says God is the sovereign and good God who cares for his people. That is how he knows God. But his experience is saying some thing different. Where is God now, this almighty caring God? It seems he is gone, absent, the hidden God, the God who has withdrawn. And it is this that creates Job's deepest anguish. He wants never to have existed if God is absent. As we said, Job is not the only one who has reacted like this in his anguish. Jesus, when on the cross suffering the depths of hell, had cried out, had roared from the pit of hell "*My God, why have you forsaken me?*" Why God are you absent in my deepest suffering?

In verse 11-19 we see that Job's curse stops and he turns to lament. Four times he cries out "*Why? Why...why...why...?*" Now the anger is drained, the curse has stopped. Now he cries, and complains, he longs for death, for peace. In the theology of this old book in the Old Testament, death was seen as a place called Sheol. Sheol did not have the sense of judgment, of people going to heaven or hell. In salvation history theology developed as more was revealed especially with the coming of Jesus. Death was seen the great leveler, the finish of suffering, the place of rest. Job speaks of the wicked ceasing from their trouble making, the captives enjoying ease, the slaves freed from abuse, the small and great are all there. Job wails and cries: Why didn't I die when I was born? Note verses 11-13 "*Why did I not perish at birth, and dies as I came from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed? For now I would be lying down in peace, I would be asleep and at rest with the kings and counsellors of the earth...*" Job is not suicidal. In his faith he recognizes the sovereignty of God. It is he who gives life and determines the time for it to be taken. But Job cries out to God: Where are you? Why didn't you take me back then?

Why not, if this is what life is about; if this is what I have to suffer? Please take me and let me rest. Put an end to it and let me have peace.

So far we see that Job has found life intolerable and wishes he had never existed (3-10), and he has lamented life and shown his longing for death. Now in verses 20-23 Job strikes deeper into the problem by asking why any of this should happen at all. Why have life at all, if those who have it don't want it?(20) *"Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure, who are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the grave?"* Here Job is getting close to the edge, close to the danger area where his faith in God's goodness is being pushed to its limits. If he were to go further he would deny that God is good. But he doesn't cross the line, he doesn't abandon his faith. Yet, at this point he cannot see the point, he can't understand why there should be life given by God if those who live that life just want to die. In a sense he says: I still believe you are good, God, but my problem is, my experience is that there's no point to the life given. Job in verse 23 applies his general complaint to his own situation. *"Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?"* The Hebrew word "way...his way is hidden" is 'derek' and it refers to his destiny. Job means his big struggle is that his life has no purpose; there is no sense to it, no meaning. Job is so miserable because his way is hidden, his future has no sense. In fact he feels trapped. As he says: "...God has hedged" me in. What can he do? God is sovereign. Job is in completely in God's hands. His life is miserable because God has taken away all he had. He can't die because that is in God's hand. It seems to Job that God has locked him into his misery and thrown away the key. Job is trapped.

And so he says all that is left for me is to sigh and groan; sighing and groaning are my food and drink. Verse 24 *"For sighing comes to me instead of food, my groans pour out like water."* Actually the NIV translation here is a bit soft. The word for sighing can mean "shrieking" and the groaning he

speaks of is like the deep roar of the lion. This is life for him; this is what he feeds himself on- the shriek of pain, the deep groan, the roar of anguish. Yes, what he had *feared had happened* he says in verse 25. Job had not been a complacent man. He feared God and served him faithfully. Remember how he had made a sacrifice after each time his children got together- just in case they thought ill of God in their hearts. Yet, still terrible things had happened. The thing he feared the most was to lose favour with God. But still it had happened and he has no idea why. The chapter ends with four sharp cries: *“I have no peace, no quietness, I have no rest, but only turmoil.”* He can’t settle mentally or physically or spiritually.

How do we respond to Job in this chapter? How would you minister to such a person in that position? One writer has said that there are those who believe not in God Himself, as he is, but believe in their beliefs about him. Eg some might like to believe that God is like a kindly grandfather, always being nice to us, that nothing bad could ever happen. But great suffering puts an end to belief in that belief. So far Job is still holding on to his belief in God- but only just. The heart of Job’s struggle is in the fact that he knows and loves God and trusts Him, but his life experience seems to be very different to what he knows about God. That is the essence of Job’s suffering. What he does know about God’s goodness and what he does not know about the mystery of God’s purposes are here in unbearable tension. His recent experiences make it impossible for him to see in what sense God has his well being in mind. Job is still in touch with God, but it is not the God he thought he knew. The God he is now experiencing seems more like an enemy than a friend, more like darkness than light. God is now the hidden God. Says one commentator: he does not doubt for a moment that he has to do with God. But it almost drives him mad that he encounters him in a form in which he is absolutely alien. Or as C. S Lewis put it when he was losing his wife to cancer, he wrote in his book *“Not that I am...in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not “So*

there's no God after all", but "So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer."

If ever we have felt that God has withdrawn from us, that God is not the God we thought he was, then Job lets us know we are not alone. This good man felt it so long ago. Another man did too; Jesus the son of God. He was totally abandoned when he was in his deepest suffering, the very depths of hell. Jesus also complained bitterly towards God as he roared out the words "My God why have you forsaken me?" Being on this side of the cross we know why God left Jesus to suffer- to pay for our sin, to bring about the awesome way of grace, to bring hope and joy to even those who suffer terribly. It may not be too clear why we go through our times of suffering. We may have a string of 'why' questions like Job. But we can trust, from the Bible teaches that God is working for the good of those who love him; and for the awesome glory of his name. It may well be that our darkest hour becomes the time our light shines the brightest for God.

But what do we say about Job's outburst and all his questions of why? Did he sin in that? He came close to going over the mark. But he was within the bounds of God's grace. His friends will accuse him of terrible sin in the coming chapters. But Job always protests his innocence. If he did cross the line in this chapter, then his protests would have been a mockery. Nowhere does God take him to task for what he said. So there is grace here. God in his grace allows us to ask our questions, to struggle and grapple with him. God is not a tyrant who beats us into unquestioning submission. He is well aware that at times what we suffer is beyond our understanding and bearing. He is big enough to handle our complaints and understands the desperate desire for release from pain. Like a mother who understands her boy's anger at her discipline and waits till he settles down to cuddle him again, so God is understanding and patient with us. The issue is whether we hang on to God, as Jesus did in hell. Our experience may cause us to wonder about God's goodness, about what God is really like as Lewis said. But faith says: No despite suffering I know God is good and I will keep the

faith and hang on. Actually it is God who hangs on to us. Take heart any time you suffer. Job knew the struggle. So did Jesus; and he walks with you all the way.