

January 9, 2022

## JOB'S LAMENT

Job 3

*(2 of 7 in a series through Job)*

Years ago I went to a pastor's conference on biblical counseling. David Powlison was the main speaker, and he shared so much wisdom during that weekend. He's with the Lord now, and though I've only read a few of his books, I feel confident that anything you read by him would be good. But actually what stuck in my mind after that conference wasn't anything I heard from him—which is disappointing because, as I mentioned, I came away with a feeling that he was so wise. But the moment from that conference I specifically remember to this day was an answer given during a Q & A that took place with all the speakers during that weekend. One of them was asked from someone in the audience if he'd ever battled depression. And though I'm sure I'm not remembering his answer verbatim, I'm pretty sure I can get close. He said something like, "I'm not sure I've ever battled depression. Depression is like mercury on a table. It's hard to get your fingers around it. But, I have been so filled with sorrow that I've sat on the riverbank, staring out at the river, and couldn't remember the names of my children."

I can honestly say I didn't see that answer coming. Couldn't remember the names of his children?! I have to admit that I've never been there. But it's a reminder—whether you would say you've battled depression or not—of just how sorrowful we can feel, isn't it? And that shouldn't be surprising to us. Jesus himself, in the garden, noted that he was sorrowful to the point of death, which I've always taken to mean that the depth of sorrow he felt was so great that he thought it was going to kill him. And it may be that many of you today very much feel like you can relate to that. You know what that conference speaker and Jesus in the garden were talking about. And if so, what do you do? What do you do *as a Christian*? I mean, you may have wondered if it's even appropriate to feel that level of sadness as a follower of Christ. And if so, let's thank God together that we have Job 3, which is a chapter which focuses solely on Job lamenting in deep sorrow and despair after having lost so much, which we saw in chapters 1-2.

As chapter 2 ended, you'll remember that Job had three friends arrive to come and comfort him, but when they saw him they were so shocked—being unable even to recognize him—that they just sat down on the ground to mourn with him without speaking a word to him for seven days. Well, chapter 3 begins with someone breaking the silence, but it's not any of Job's friends. It's Job himself. And Job's words are a bit surprising. He doesn't outline for his friends what had happened to him in detail (which we might have anticipated) or to confess sin (which they might have anticipated). It was to ask God to curse the day that he was born, as he poured out his sorrow and pain in a poem of lament. That's what Job 3 is.

It's tough to read. It's painful. It's hard to expose yourself to the depth of pain Job expresses here, but if we'll do it, I think there are some lessons we can learn from it. I want to note some of them this morning. The first is that feelings of great sorrow and deep despair can have a place in the believer's life.

## Feelings of great sorrow and deep despair can have a place in the believer's life

It's hard to get a grasp of the sorrow and despair that Job feels in this moment. As he begins to lament, he not only curses the day he was born but even the day he was conceived. He says in verses 3-7, "Let the day 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."

Job looks at the day he was conceived or the day he was born, and he wants it removed—as if it never existed. His language sounds like the reverse of creation. If you'll remember in the beginning of Genesis the Lord called for light to shine out of darkness as he created the world. Now Job wants darkness to overcome the light and the creation of that day—indeed the creation of Job himself—to be reversed.

I've read that some pagans in this time period had stories or told tales of magicians trying to summon a sea monster who could leap out of the sea, swallow the sun, and destroy creation.<sup>1</sup> Well, in verse 8 Job seems to be crying out for these magicians to succeed, as he writes, "Let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan." He mourns that creation continued to the point of his birth and continues now.

But even then, he wishes that if he had to have been born, then at least he could have died at birth. He writes, "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?" (v. 11). Or again, he writes in verse 16, "Or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never seen the light?" As he sees it, if that had happened, he would not have had to experience the sorrow and pain that these recent days have brought into his life. He writes, "For then I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept; then I would have been at rest" (v. 13). He pictures death as a place where the wicked cease doing wrong and the weary get to rest. Everything about it seems better than the days he's lived.

He wonders why the Lord permits him to keep living in such misery. He asks, "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?" (vv. 20-22). He feels like God has imprisoned him in suffering and simply won't let him escape, writing, "Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?" (v. 23). You may remember this is the language Satan used earlier, telling the Lord that he put a hedge around Job to keep anything but blessing out of his life (1:10). Now Job sees God

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Ortlund, *Piercing Leviathan: God's Defeat of Evil in the Book of Job*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 22.

putting a hedge around him as well, but he means it as a prison of suffering from which the Lord is giving him no escape.

Finally, Job tells us that sighing and groaning come from him, being poured out like water. What he dreads in every moment is his reality. There is no ease. He feels no rest. He can't be quiet. He's overcome in sorrow and pain. That's what we see in Job 3. As I mentioned, it's painful. And you can imagine the discomfort Job's friends must have felt, hearing him speak of his pain and longing for death in such ways.

But the first and most obvious lesson to see in this chapter is that feelings of great sorrow and deep despair can have a place in the believer's life. We certainly see they have a place in Job's life, who is a righteous man. Now, by that I do not mean that every feeling we have in our sorrow is without sin. Clearly we can have unrighteous feelings, such as sadness we might feel when good happens to another whom we envy. That's a sadness that stems from our sinful hearts. Nor am I saying that everything we think or say or do that stems from our sorrow and despair is righteous, for we can obviously sin in our sorrow. But I am saying that the mere presence of sorrow and despair isn't sin. It clearly can have a place in the life of a believer. It obviously was present in Job's life here, and we see many psalms—such as the psalm with which we opened the service (Psalm 13)—where the psalmist expresses similar feelings.

So if you have felt such sorrow and despair—or if you're feeling it now—I want to first tell you that it's okay. I don't want to add guilt on top of your sorrow. It's okay. Sorrow and despair most certainly can have a place in the experience of a believer living in faithful obedience before God. Again, it's hard to imagine that anyone could go through Job's experience and not feel sorrow and despair. But now, let's try to answer the question, "What do I do when I feel such sorrow and despair?" And the answer is also found here in Job 3: when in sorrow and despair, we take our lament to the Lord.

### **When in sorrow and despair, we take our lament to the Lord**

One thing that we already saw in chapters 1-2 and that will become ever-increasingly clear in the rest of the book is that Job recognizes God as the one who is in control. If Job is afflicted, God must be the one to allow it, even as he granted permission to Satan to attack Job (within limits). Consequently, Job's lament is a lament before and to God. Whenever in Scripture one asks that something be cursed—as Job does, cursing the day he was born (v. 1)—it is understood that God is the object of that request because God alone has power over such things. Moreover, as Job seeks for the day of his birth to be wiped from record, he explicitly asks God not to seek the creation of that day, for he recognizes that God alone is the one who made that day come about (v. 4). Then, as he proclaims his sufferings, he sees it as an act where "God has hedged [him] in" (v. 23). In Job's worldview—which is the biblical worldview—God alone is the rightful object of this lament for God alone is sovereign over all the things that Job has gone through, and God alone has the power to do what Job requests. It doesn't mean that Job doesn't understand secondary agents—like Satan, the Chaldeans, or the Sabeans—but he knows that God is the one

who is ultimately in control. Therefore, we can see that this entire poem of lament is Job laying bear his thoughts, sorrows, hopes, and lament before the Lord.

Now, someone might wonder if it's okay for us to lament like this before God, and I think not only is it acceptable, but it's appropriate. The reason is because we're acknowledging in our lament that God is in control, that he is the only one who can do anything about our situation, and that he cares for us. In short, when we direct our lament to God, we're acknowledging that he is God.<sup>2</sup> We're declaring that we don't think this world lies ultimately in the hands of the enemy or to the winds of chance. We know that God alone is the creator and ruler, and so when we lament it is appropriate to lament to God.

Also, when we think about it, there really is no fitting alternative. We could run and hide from God, but that is not only sin but it removes us from our Father who loves us. We could sit silent before him, but he already knows our thoughts, fears, and hurts. And so the only appropriate thing is to share them with him. Cry out to him in our pain, our disappointment, our despair, and our lament. Cast your cares on him, knowing that he cares for you. We might say that this is the application of what we see in Job 1-2. That is, if God is in control (which we saw in Job 1-2) and we feel sorrow and despair, then we lament to the one in control, sharing our hurt, pain, and tears with him. And yet I want to note some things to keep in mind as we lament. One is that as we lament we need to keep in mind that we can't see the full picture.

### **As we lament, keep in mind that we can't see the full picture**

For Christmas one of my sons got a 1,000 piece puzzle. I love puzzles. Oftentimes, if the kids get one and invite me to help them put it together, we find ourselves going through the same routine every time. They get tired and want to take a break, I stay at the table and keep working at it, and eventually Lili tells me to back away from the table and leave some for the kids to do. She doesn't want them to wake up only to find out that I've put together the puzzle without them. And so with this latest puzzle, I've dived right in. And I realized something the other night when three of us were working on it together. We were constantly asking one another the same question, namely, "Can you pass me the box that the puzzle came in?" The reason, of course, is because the box has a picture of the whole puzzle, and it can be nearly impossible to know what to do with the pieces lying on the table in front of you unless you can get a look at the full picture. And since there was one picture of the puzzle and three of us, we were passing that thing around every few seconds.

Well, this is important to remember as we lament—we don't have the full picture.<sup>3</sup> We're looking at the pieces we've been dealt—our suffering, pain, and loss—but we don't see all that God is doing or how the things in our lives fit within his purposes and plans for us. And so just as

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony T. Selvaggio, *Considering Job: Reconciling Sovereignty & Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 59.

<sup>3</sup> "We must never forget the limitations of human knowledge and understanding." Selvaggio, 64.

Paul told the Thessalonians that we do “not grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13), so we can say that we must not lament as those who have no hope. We know better. We don’t see how it’s all working, but we know our all-wise, all-good God is in control and working all for our good. And this brings us to a fourth lesson: as we lament, remember what we know of God from his Word.

### **As we lament, remember what we know of God from his Word**

Now, I add “from his Word” because we don’t have the full picture, our emotions aren’t always reliable guides, and so we do not always see clearly. Again, we see this in Job’s lament. Job’s lament shows that he feels like God is against him. The picture Job has in his mind is that of God torturing him without relief. The image that comes to my own mind is that of a cat when he’s found a mouse. Now, I doubt this bothers us too much because, well, who likes mice? But it’s a torturous scene if you’ve ever witnessed it. At first the cat will catch the squealing mouse and toss him up in the air a few times so that the mouse finally is beaten up enough not to try to escape. Then, the cat sits there, right by the mouse, seemingly ignoring the mouse completely. And this goes on in this standstill until the mouse decides to move. Then, as soon as the mouse moves even a bit, the cat smacks him with his paw. And on and on it goes. The abuse is continual, but the cat won’t do enough just to kill the mouse. It seems that he thinks the second he goes too far and kills the mouse, he’s lost his toy.

That’s how Job seems to perceive God, as he speaks of God hedging him in. It’s as if God has afflicted him in the harshest way imaginable. Job has lost all his possessions, all of his children, and his health as well. And now Job is left to suffer just up to the point of dying, without actually dying. As Job notes, he longs for death, but it does not come (v. 21). It’s like that picture of a cat with a mouse where God is the cat and Job is the mouse. God has encompassed him—hedged him in with a world of suffering—and he won’t give him the relief of just killing him. That’s how Job perceives God as he laments here.

And yet this isn’t an image of God we gather from our Bibles. As I mentioned last week, we know what Job doesn’t know. We know that God is like a proud Father to Job. God has bragged about Job’s righteousness to the devil himself, even noting that there is none like him on the face of the earth. Job is treasured and prized in God’s sight. He’s the one God has chosen to illustrate to Satan what human obedience and worship looks like. And so let’s remember what we thought through last week. We don’t know all that is in the purposes and plans of God with regard to our own life. We do not have the perspective in our suffering to say that we understand exactly why God is allowing the suffering we’re experiencing. But we do know so much about who our God is and who he is toward us.

Therefore, in our lament, don’t let how you feel dictate what you perceive to be true about God. We can lament, telling him that we feel like he’s hedging us in. We can ask him why it feels like he’s abandoned us. But then we need to remember what we know from his Word—that he’s the God who gives good gifts, the one who doesn’t give his child a stone when we ask for bread. We need to remember that he’s the God who tells us that he will never leave us nor forsake us.

We need to remember that he's the one who loves us and gave himself for us, who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood. Remembering who God is in the midst of our lament helps us not to adopt a perverted view of God shaped more by our pain than by the Bible. It allows us to hold to a right view of the one whose presence, comfort, and love we desperately need. And one final observation: as we lament, we need to remember our certain hope.

### **As we lament, remember our certain hope**

As Job shares his lament, you can feel the hopelessness in his words. As I've noted, his mentioning of being hedged in is a way of communicating there is no escape. But we live in a time where we can see more clearly. We know that God sent his Son to live, die, and be raised for us. We know that one day he's returning and that those of us who know him will be given glorified bodies that will never feel pain or know decay and death, and we will be with him forever. We know that for eternity there'll never again be reason for lament. There'll be no reason for sorrow, sadness, and despair. We know, according to Romans 8:18, that eternity will be so glorious that the sufferings of this age aren't worth comparing to that glory to come. And we know that if you tried to make the comparison, the eternal weight of glory that will be ours makes the sufferings of this age appear as mere light, momentary affliction (2 Cor. 4:17). And so we must always keep in mind our certain hope.

But our certain hope is not that things in this age will turn around. That chronic pain might not go away. The disease might not be eradicated from your body. The waves of sorrow that seem to come out of nowhere and rush over you again and again may well recur your entire life. But the resurrection is coming. It's certain. And if we walk in faith till that day, I assure you, you'll agree with Paul that the suffering of this age isn't worth comparing to that glory. You'll never feel an ounce of regret in pressing on in obedience to Christ and persevering love for your Lord on that day.

And so what do we do when we feel overwhelmed by sorrow in the midst of our suffering in this life? We realize this is part of the Christian's experience. We cry out in lament to the Lord—running toward him rather than away from him. We remind ourselves in our lament that we don't have the full picture, remembering what we know to be true of God from his word, with our hope fully fixed on the resurrection as our certain hope. And we come to the table, week by week, remembering and giving thanks that our end times verdict has already been given to us—justified!—through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Amen.