

“Why?”

Texts: Job 2:11-3:26; Matthew 27:45-50

Job is a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil. The Lord himself says of Job, “*there is no one else like him.*” When this poor man loses everything, nevertheless, he praises God. His herds have been plundered or destroyed. His servants have all been captured or killed. His seven sons and three daughters—the delight of his life—have been tragically killed by a windstorm. Job’s body is now covered with open sores. The greatest man of the east is now a pitiful wretch, banished to the town dunghill. Still Job refuses to curse God or blame him for what has happened. Now completely bewildered and utterly heartbroken, Job begins to wrestle with that haunting question which we all ask at one time or another, “Why?”

We now move from the prologue (chapters 1 and 2), into the heart of the book, a series of speeches which run from chapters three through thirty-one. In a rapid-fire dialogue which almost takes the form of a debate, we hear first from Job (chapter 3) and then from his three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar), along with responses to each of these friend’s speeches from Job himself. In chapters 32-37, we will hear the speech from Elihu (who is someone who witnesses the dialogue between Job and his friends) and who must contribute his two cents to the debate. But all of these speeches come to an end when God answers Job’s question “why?” speaking to Job from the midst of a whirlwind as recounted in chapters 38-41. As we work our way through these speeches, you may recognize in the speeches from Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, bad counsel given you in times of past trial from your own well-intended friends and family. But before we turn to the three cycles of speeches from Job’s three friends, we begin with Job’s lament in Job 3.

In our previous two sermons on Job, we have met the man and learned of his great piety. We have witnessed the heavenly court in session when the veil which separates the seen from the unseen was lifted. We know the critical fact which Job does not—the Devil has taken up God’s challenge to consider his righteous servant Job. By taking up God’s challenge to consider Job, Satan is not only attacking the man who is the apple of God’s eye, but Satan is also attacking the foundation of the gospel. According to Satan, Job serves God out of pure self-interest. According to God, Job is blameless and upright only because God bribes him with wealth and the pleasures of family. Take all these things away—Satan reasons—and Job will curse God to his face. Not only that, but God’s plan to redeem sinners will be exposed as nothing but bribery. With the challenge issued by God and accepted by Satan, Job must undergo a trial by ordeal so as to vindicate God’s altogether righteous, but albeit, mysterious ways in dealing with his creatures.

When a series of terrible disasters befall Job, leaving him with nothing, instead of cursing God as Satan had predicted, Job praises God. We read in Job 1:20-22 that upon learning of the disaster which has befallen him, [Job] *fell to the ground in worship and said: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.’ In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.*” Overwhelmed by his great personal loss and heartbreak, Job’s faith is now sorely tested. Had Job been an atheist, there would be a sense of loss and heartache. But as a believer, it is much different. The God who created all things and

who promised to redeem Job, and who had blessed him with so much, has now, without apparent reason, taken everything away. Had Job not believed in God, this calamity would have only affirmed the atheist's premise that the world can be a very cruel place. But Job knew the living God. He trusted in God's promise to save him from his sins. He made weekly burnt offerings on behalf of himself and his family. Job knows that he has done nothing wrong to provoke God to anger. He knows that God will not punish him unjustly! And yet, Job has lost everything. The apparent contradiction is inescapable.

This is why the loss of his wealth and family thrusts Job into an intense internal conflict reflected in a series of speeches which makes up the bulk of this book. As the debate unfolds we are forced to tackle the question, "why do the righteous suffer?" We read of Job's pain and anxiety as it spills out from his heart, revealing to us the depths of his pain and suffering. Why did the God whom Job loves so much bring this to pass? Why did this happen? Why does God not vindicate Job's good name? Why?

But if Job thought his ordeal would end with the loss of his wealth and children, he is sadly mistaken. In Job 2:1-6, we read of yet another appearance of Satan before the heavenly court. Notice that Satan does not even mention that the first trial of Job has not turned out the way the Accuser expected. Job did not curse God as Satan had predicted. No, Job praised God despite the loss of everything he owned and the death of his seven sons and three daughters.

Summoned a second time to come before the heavenly court, Satan tries another line of attack. Take away Job's health—Satan tells the Lord—and then Job will curse God to his face. But as we read in Job 2:10, Job did not curse God when he was suddenly afflicted with a satanic illness which affected his skin, nor did Job accuse God of wrong doing. Instead, Job rebuked his wife when she told him to give up his integrity—in doing so, implying that Job has some secret sin which led to the calamity—and that Job curse God and die. Talk about adding insult to injury! What is worse, Job's wife is speaking forth the Devil's desire that Job would curse God to his face.

Here sits the greatest man of the east, a solitary outcast, alone on the town dunghill, in great agony, trying to relieve his suffering by using broken pieces of pottery to scratch his inflamed skin. Job is a pitiful sight and his suffering now extends to every area of his existence. Job has lost everything. Job is sick and suffering horrible pain. He is an outcast. Given sinful human nature, Job knows what everyone who sees him is thinking. What did Job do to deserve the fate which has befallen him? What horrible sin has Job committed? What has Job done to provoke God's anger? The stares from the self-righteous no doubt hurt every bit as much as did the sores on his skin.

With the reason why God has allowed Satan to subject Job to such an ordeal revealed to us in the prologue, the story of Job now moves to a rapid-fire dialogue where the intense and personal nature of Job's inward struggle moves to the fore. In Job 3, we see that this blameless and upright man is not a man of stone or clay. Job's pain is real. His lament breaks our hearts. In this chapter Job comes as close as he ever will to cursing God. But he never does, as Satan predicted that Job would. Job's heart breaks. He cries out in pain. He curses the day of his birth. But he refuses to curse God.

Before we take up Job's complaint in Job 3, we are introduced to Job's three friends in verses 11-13 of Job 2.

As we saw last time, there was a reason why Satan did not kill Job's wife, when he took the lives of Job's seven sons and three daughters. This is because Satan used Mrs. Job in the same way in which he had used Eve in Eden—to vocalize the very thing Satan had hoped to bring to pass, that Job would curse God

to his face. The same thing holds true of Job's three friends, who respond to their friend's predicament with every intention of comforting Job in his suffering, but who, whether they know it or not, are actually doing the devil's bidding. It is their very presence in the city of Uz, which plunges Job into greater depths of despair than we have previously witnessed. With the arrival of these three "wise men," Job descends from a state of physical torment into a state of spiritual torment and lament, as we see in Job 3.

According to Job 2:11, "*When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him.*" The fact that Job's three friends had to travel from their homes clearly indicates that several months had transpired (cf. Job 7:3) between the time of Job's loss of everything and the speeches which begin in Job 3. Some months earlier, when Job's wife told him to admit that he had sinned and then to curse God and die, Job's response was resolute. "*Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?*"

But the greatest enemy of the sufferer is the passage of time. As the hours turn into days, and days into months, the pain, the loss of sleep, the loss of emotional well-being, slowly but surely chip away at both Job's physical endurance and spiritual resolve. And so Job's three friends find him in a far different emotional state than he had been in just months earlier. In the midst of his tears, Job praised God. Now, after some months have transpired, Job has fallen into the depths of despair. So much so that he is to the point where he is now cursing the day of his birth.

The extent to which Job's physical and emotional state has worsened becomes clear in verse 12. "*When they saw [Job] from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.*" The greatest man of the east is now a pitiful wretch almost beyond recognition. Job's three friends are totally unprepared for the sight that greeted them. The weeping and throwing of dust in the air are not only gestures of grief on behalf of their friend, but also indicates the shocking nature of Job's appearance.¹ That Job was as good as dead (presumed to die) is clear from what is described in verse 13. "*Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights.*" The customary period of mourning is seven days. During this whole time, "*no one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.*" Joining Job on the dunghill and mourning with him is a sign of the strength of the friendship between the four men. From this act of support, we must take what follows in the three cycles of speeches—despite the tactlessness of their comments—to mean that the sincerity of these men and their love for Job cannot be questioned. They mean well. But they simply do not understand and the more they talk, the more they make things worse.

In the meantime, what has happened to Job's great faith? The man who refused to blame God and renounce his integrity is now a shell of his former self. Surely the pain and misery of his affliction, the realization of the greatness of his loss, the lack of proper food and rest, the shame of being banished from town, as well as the awareness the townspeople surely think he has brought this on himself through some secret sin, are all clearly in view. But the trigger for the lament which follows appears to be the arrival of Job's three friends. The very presence of these three men starts an internal dialogue which Job did not face before. While Job does not know of the satanically-orchestrated trial by ordeal, he does know that he has done nothing wrong. And we can reasonably assume that Job knew that his friends must be thinking similar things to what his wife had been thinking—there was some secret sin which Job had committed which God was now punishing. Since Job has committed no such secret sin, there is only one

¹ Andersen, *Job*, p. 95.

explanation as to why these horrible things have come to pass. Either God has abandoned Job,² or else God has permitted these things to pass.³ And this raises the series of questions that pour forth from Job's heart throughout this entire chapter. "Why?"

What follows in chapter three raises the difficult question about whether or not Job sins by engaging in the lament which follows and the cursing of his own birth. The one thing we can say for sure is that the more intensely Job seeks an answer to his question, the more and more he realizes that there is a wall between man's understanding and God's decree which no amount of human wisdom or curiosity can penetrate. By focusing so intently upon the "why?" Job begins to lose the proper perspective he had earlier. While Job never curses God—and in no sense whatsoever fulfills Satan's expectation that Job will do so—cursing the day of his own birth does bring into question the righteousness of God's decree which included Job's birth. This explains why the story of Job ends with the account of Job's repentance (42:6) and after Job does so, God renews and re-establishes his relationship with Job, so that things are even better than they had been before (42:12 ff).⁴

We also need to keep in mind that at the end of these series of speeches, God commends Job for speaking correctly about him, while at the same time rebuking Job's friends for misrepresenting the ways of the Lord. As one writer reminds us, Job's friends are talking about God and at times Job addresses their theologically-flawed comments. But at many points in what follows, Job does not even respond to the comments of his friends, choosing instead to describe his own struggles by pouring out his heart before God. Job is not seeking to win an argument. Being right doesn't really matter to him. More importantly, Job seeks to restore his friendship with God. This is why Job's heartfelt but audacious comments shock his friends. They don't want to hear such honest if shocking words from Job, since they are primarily concerned only with the logic of it all. But Job not only responds to his friends, he tries to debate with God and force an answer to his question. Job is not always right, but he is painfully honest.⁵ Job puts into words those things that every sufferer thinks and feels, but may be afraid to say out loud. This is why the honest and intense drama of all of this grabs us so tightly.

Despite the depths of his pain and the passion which flows from his heart, Job never laments the loss of his wealth or his health. Job does not whine about all the things he had before and has now lost. Instead, as a blameless and upright man, Job demands an answer from God. He repeatedly asks "why?" Since Job knows nothing of the reason behind his trial by ordeal, he is deeply troubled about the fact that God has brought all this to pass. Job has no clue yet that his obedience and refusal to curse God points us ahead to the perfect righteousness of Christ. Job is afraid that God has abandoned him, especially when he has done nothing wrong. Job struggles to figure out why this has happened. Anyone who has ever suffered can certainly put themselves in Job's place. We all ask "why?" Asking "why?" is not necessarily a sin. At least it is not a sin to ask "why?" if we are prepared to accept the answer God gives.

Does Job sin in all of this? Yes, because everything not done from faith is sin. But Job is already

² Kline, "Job," p. 464.

³ Andersen, *Job*, p. 99.

⁴ Kline, "Job," p. 465

⁵ Cf. the helpful discussion of this in; Andersen, *Job*, pp. 96-99.

justified through the merits of the coming redeemer in whom he has placed his trust. Therefore, whatever sin Job commits must be seen in the context of the sins of a justified sinner. Job's repentance at the end of the story is clearly evidence that this is the case. Even though Job cries out in bewilderment, he never does curse God and fulfill Satan's prophecy. In this sense, Job passes the trial by ordeal with flying colors. His unwillingness to blame God means he understands the nature of God's promise—that God will redeem Job from his sin. Job also demands that God keep his promise to vindicate the innocent. Since all covenants involve two parties—and God has sworn on his oath that he will bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him—Job has every right to ask (even demand) that God vindicate him from the accusations that some secret sin lies at the root of Job's travail.

Yes, Job knows and accepts the fact that God has the right to do what he wants with his creatures. Yet Job also knows that God will not punish the innocent. Since he is blameless and upright, Job has the right to raise the "why?" question about his own predicament. The answer Job gets in the end can only satisfy those who are willing to understand God's mysterious ways through the eyes of faith. God's answer to Job as to why all this happened will never satisfy those driven by impatient and sinful human curiosity to ask "why?" But for those who see the trials of life in the light of the sufferings of Jesus Christ, there is indeed an answer to the very difficult questions that Job raises throughout his lament.

In the first ten verses of Job 3, we learn that Satan's challenge fails. Job does not curse God—instead he curses the day of his birth.

Job's doxology now gives way to lament. The memory of wealth and joy have now faded, stolen by Job's current misery. The presence of his friends mourning his wretched condition brings forth a torrent of heartfelt but provocative words. Thus we read in verse 1, "*After this,*" [the arrival of his friends and the week of mourning] "*Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said: 'May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, 'A boy is born!''*" What Job is requesting is that the Lord remove that day from history when he was conceived. Job cries out in verses 4-7, "*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 a cloud settle over it; may blackness overwhelm its light. That night-may thick darkness seize it; may it not be included among the days of the year nor be entered in any of the months. May that night be barren; may no shout of joy be heard in it.*" All of this can be paraphrased by saying, "it would have been better if I had never been born."

The saddest part of Job's ordeal is that his present pain has totally obscured the memories of all the joys he had known before. When life is viewed through the lens of pain and loss, it is easy to reason, "better to have never existed at all than to endure my present sufferings." Some of us have been there. Some of us are there now.

A number of commentators take what follows in verse 8 to be indicative of the depths of Job's despair. Job invokes magicians to blot out the day of his birth even as they seek to control the monsters of the deep.⁶ "*May those who curse days curse that day, those who are ready to rouse Leviathan.*" But this does not fit with Job's fear of the living God, and there is every possibility (as the NIV text note indicates) that this is really the word *ym* or "sea." The idea is that the powers which hold destructive forces in check (preventing the chaos signified by Leviathan), now be used to blot out the day of Job's

⁶ John E. Hartley, The Book of Job, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), p. 94.

birth.⁷ Job's wish is that the night on which he was conceived be blotted out of the historical record, as we read in verses 9-10. *"May its morning stars become dark; may it wait for daylight in vain and not see the first rays of dawn, for it did not shut the doors of the womb on me to hide trouble from my eyes."* Job does not seek to take his life. Suicide is not an option. But given his current state, Job wishes that he had never been born. Cursed be the day of his birth! Job's patience has become despondency.

At this point in his lament, Job's cursing the day of his birth gives way to a series of rhetorical questions. "Why?"

Since God had not blotted out the day of his birth, why then was Job even born? Job's despair begins to become apparent beginning in verse 11. *"Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed?"* But Job was born. Thus, he reasons, "would it not be better to just die and get it over with?" As he states in verses 13-16, *"For now I would be lying down in peace; I would be asleep and at rest with kings and counselors of the earth, who built for themselves places now lying in ruins, with rulers who had gold, who filled their houses with silver. Or why was I not hidden in the ground like a stillborn child, like an infant who never saw the light of day?"* As Meredith Kline puts it, "even confinement in the dark grave—not yet illumined by the resurrection glory of Christ—seemed a far better state of existence. There Job, outcast and a byword of base men and fools would share a common lot with kings and princes."⁸

In the grave there are no stares from the self-righteous. There are no haunting thoughts, no wretched existence. No pain and itching from sores. As Job puts it in verse 17, *"There [in sheol] the wicked cease from turmoil, and there the weary are at rest. Captives also enjoy their ease; they no longer hear the slave driver's shout. The small and the great are there, and the slave is freed from his master."* Better to be dead, Job reasons, than continue on with such suffering and shame. Job does not speak of an afterlife as a place of reward or of curse, although he certainly does believe in a bodily resurrection at the end of the age (cf. Job 19:25). Keep in mind that at this point in redemptive history, not much about the resurrection or the afterlife has been revealed. The point being made here is that for Job, death will bring an end to his sufferings. Job will not take his own life. He hopes that God will take it for him and bring an end to his travail. We could even paraphrase Job to be saying, "just kill me and get it over with!" But this is not God's purpose for Job.

As Job's lament continues, and it is clear that he cannot either undo the fact of his birth, nor bring his own life to an end, Job now arrives at the fundamental question in verses 20-23.

Job cries out, *"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? Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?"* In other words, why does God give such good things like life to those who now wish to die. And why does God not give death to those who want it? If God gives good gifts and death would end Job's suffering, why does he not give Job the gift of death so that his suffering might come to an end?

It is important to notice the word play in the text. Satan saw the hedge or the limits placed around Job as

⁷ Andersen, *Job*, p. 104.

⁸ Kline, "Job," p. 465.

a sign of God's favor. Without awareness of Satan's appearance before the heavenly court, Job now uses the same word to describe how he feels trapped—hemmed in by God's goodness in light of his own suffering.⁹ God's prior blessing has become a matter of curse.

While the final three verses of the Hebrew text of Job 3 are difficult to translate, what is clearly revealed here are the depths of Job's anguish. Beginning in verse 24, Job cries out, "*For sighing comes to me instead of food; my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.*" The words translated in the NIV as sighing and groaning are far too weak. The former word describes the roaring of lions, while the latter can be used in reference to the crash of ocean waves.¹⁰ This is much more than a mere sigh of resignation or a soft groan. This is a violent and defiant act, something like "bellowing."

We also learn that Job did not take his great wealth for granted. He regularly made burnt offerings to the Lord not only to give thanks for all that God gave him, but also to consecrate all of his possessions to the Lord who gave them. The very thing Job dreads most has come to pass. The loss of his wealth means the loss of God's favor. Thus Job is terrified by the thought that God no longer favors to him and Job has no idea why.¹¹ He has done nothing wrong. He is blameless, upright, fears God and shuns evil. Why has his life come to this? "*I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil.*" The greatest man of the east is completely undone. And our hearts break for him.

What should we say in response to such suffering?

First, Job is correct not to curse God or blame God for what has happened to him. By resisting the temptation to do so, Job passes the trial by ordeal and frustrates the purposes of Satan. Second, as a prophet, Job's own obedience points us ahead to the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ, which is the ground of Job's own justified status before God. Third, in all of this, Job is an example to us in our own suffering. It is perfectly OK to pour out our hearts before God, as though we could hide what we are thinking from God anyway. But what Job does that we cannot do is curse the day of our birth. God has ordained the number of our days as well as whether or not we will suffer. If we accept good things from his hand, should we not, like Job, be willing to accept suffering and loss when God brings these things to pass? After all, God has ordained whatsoever comes to pass—good and evil.

The thing to keep in mind here is that we know what Job does not. We know how the story will end. We know that God is going to restore Job's family and fortune and vindicate Job's good name after he passes through the ordeal. Even though Job does not know nor understand the true nature of his trial, we do. Therefore, we have a perspective on Job's ordeal that he does not have. Like Job we know that God not only promises to turn evil and suffering into good, but he has the power to do the very thing he has promised to do. Unlike Job, we have seen that the promised redeemer whom Job anticipates, has indeed come and fulfilled all righteousness. Given our better redemptive-historical perspective on things, we know that Jesus Christ suffered and died for our sins upon the cross. And like the poor sufferer Job, Jesus, too, was innocent. Like Job, Jesus, too, cried out in anguish and asked that haunting question,

⁹ Cf. Kline, "Job," p. 465; and Andersen, *Job*, p. 109.

¹⁰ Andersen, *Job*, p. 109.

¹¹ Andersen, *Job*, p. 110.

“why?” Thus words of Matthew 27:45-46 echo the words of Job, “*From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani?’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’*”

This means that Jesus sanctifies the question “why?” Since Jesus asked “why?” so may we. What is more, the one who hears and answers our prayers is a fellow sufferer, who was tempted and tested in all ways as we have been and yet was without sin. But we must also understand that Jesus accepted God’s answer to his question. Jesus must suffer and die so that we might be saved from our sins. The suffering and agony of the cross must come before the empty tomb. This is the pattern we find throughout redemptive-history. So while we may ask “why?” we must be willing to accept the answer. Suffering comes before glory.

That being said, we must also never forget that the victory of the resurrection did come as Christ’s death became a glorious victory over the curse and the devil. When we look at the big picture, not only do we see that God restores Job’s health, wealth and family, but he restores his relationship with Job. The same holds true for the greater Job, Jesus Christ. Even as Jesus suffered and cried out “why?” so, too, God raised him from the dead and gave him the name above every other name. As God has done for his beloved son, so too, God will turn our suffering to good. Our suffering will come to a glorious end and our suffering is never in vain. It has an ultimate purpose, even if that purpose is known only to God.

Therefore, in the midst of trial, loss and sickness, it is perfectly OK to open our hearts and cry out in anguish as did Job. But you must know before you ask “why?” that you may not get your answer until you cross over into glory. Suffering, loss and death most often precede the ultimate and final answer. But since all of God’s promises are “yes” and “amen” in Christ, even as we ask “why?” we can be sure that not only does our own suffering have a purpose, but that somehow, and in some way, God will turn it all into good.

How do we know this? We know this from the story of Job. But more importantly, we know this from Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. Suffering comes before glory. But glory will come, just as it did for Job and for our blessed Lord Jesus. And it will come for all of you who even now have been called to suffer. Amen!