

Job longing for death and Eliphaz's chastening of him

'Is it not better to die than live?'

Job 3:1-26 and Jeremiah 20:14-18 are two rivals for a possible award for being the most depressing chapters in the whole Bible. Therefore, few sermons select either of these chapters as the basis for an exposition in Church on the Lord's day; instead, they are viewed as chapters that depict the lowest point in the emotional experiences and lives of both Job and the prophet Jeremiah. As such, then, they attract very little attention from the pulpit. But for those who find themselves in the midst of suffering, they give voice to many a hurting heart!

The first two words in Job 3:1, 'After this,' are no doubt a reference to the series of losses and tragedies that Job has just experienced in the previous two chapters. But then we are told that Job 'opened his mouth and cursed his day' (3:1, my literal translation for 'the day [of his birth]'). We should not suppose that by 'his day' Job was referring to his destiny or his future; instead, he clearly refers to the 'day ... [on] which [he] was born' (3), thus the paraphrase in most of our English Bibles is correct. But it is also clear

that with an outburst of anguish, Job regrets that he had ever been born (3:1-10), for he wishes that he indeed had been born dead (3:11-19); or if not, he now states how he longs to die (3:20-26). It would appear that those seven days of silence from his three 'friends' had sharpened his sense of loss and caused him to reflect on the unfairness and complete injustice of what had happened to him as if it became clear to him all of a sudden. How was he to account for such a batch of trouble? If God is good all the time, and all the time God is good, then, what on earth had gone wrong?

1. JOB WISHES HE HAD NOT BEEN BORN (3:1-10)

Job begins to vent his anguish by wishing he had never been born and that even that day might have been wiped clean off the calendar. In fact, he even wished that the night he had been conceived would have been erased as well, even prior to the event of his birth some nine months later (3:3b). It is worthwhile noting that Job and the Scriptures here point to the fact that the beginning of one's existence, i.e. the beginning of life, commences with conception rather than as some modern theories place it, at the time when a mother first feels movement in her womb in the fifth month, or even later according to some, at the time of birth. Even the 'night' in which he was conceived, is personified as if the night itself knew and announced that a male child had been conceived on that very night! Thus, the night Job was 'conceived' was regarded as the time when he first began to exist, or live, contrary to modern so-called scientific-claims. So disheartened was Job that

he charged that 'night' with an injustice in letting him be born. Poor Job – he was at one of his lowest points of despondency.

Job goes on to give more details on the day of his birth (4-5) and to enlarge on what he thinks about the night of his conception (6-9). Verse 4 has two 'Let not's: 'let not God (Hebrew, *Eloah*) above care for it,' and '[Let not] light shine on it [that night!]' Verse 10 concludes this poetic unit by supplying us with the reason why Job longed for the removal of his birthday from the calendar.

In a dramatic reversal of God introducing 'light' in Genesis 1:3, Job despondently prays, 'May that day [of my birth] be darkness' (3:4). I suppose he wanted it to be dark so he could slip by being born without any notice by anyone or by God. Job refers to 'darkness,' five times, and here he uses four different Hebrew words for 'darkness.' For example, in 3:5, he asks for 'darkness' and 'black gloom' (3:5). The Hebrew word for 'darkness,' this time in 3:5c, is used only in this verse in Job, but it does not appear in the rest of the Old Testament. It refers to the 'blackness' of an eclipse, a tornado, or an intense storm. Job even hopes that God would wipe the night of his conception off the calendar so it would not be counted in the actual number of days and nights (3:6b-c).

Job goes on to pray that the night of his conception (3:7) might 'be barren,' in which he uses the word that literally means 'stony' – i.e. apparently, that either his mother or his father might be as unproductive as 'stony' ground! And whereas people in the Near East shouted for joy when a baby was born, Job says in 3:7, 'Let no joyful shout enter (Hebrew literally, 'pierce') it [the night].'

Job even raises the specter of ‘rousing Leviathan’ (3:8b) to curse the day of his birth. The ‘Leviathan’ appears in Canaanite literature of Ugarit and Phoenicia as a sea monster, who on the occasion of an eclipse is said to swallow up the sun or the moon. This does not mean that Job believed in the mythology of Canaan; instead, it may merely have meant that he was appropriating the images that were known in his day and age for his own poetic literary purposes. Accordingly, if one of the luminaries in the heavens suddenly disappeared, then there might also be hope, as Job saw it, in his mixed up mental state of despondency, i.e., that his birthday might also be missing in a manner similar to disappearing luminaries in the heavens. Thus, he wished the ‘morning stars’ (usually said to be the planets of Venus and Mercury) would be darkened so that they too would give no light on the night he was conceived. The opening of the ‘doors of the womb’ that bore Job is another way to depict his conception, not his birth. If his mother’s womb did not open, then Job would not have been conceived (3:10) and ‘trouble’ would have been hidden from his eyes (3:10b). Job needs comfort and help, for he is grief-stricken to the nth-degree.

2. JOB WISHES HE HAD DIED AT BIRTH (3:11-19)

Since Job’s wish that the night of his conception and the day of his birth would have been blotted off the calendar has not been granted, he proceeds to wish that he had at least been stillborn (3:11). Cursing the night of his conception and his birthday were not enough for the release of pain and suffering he had faced. Why, then, was he not at least

born dead? A miscarriage, or a stillbirth, would then have been his second choice rather than receiving life (3:11-12). To give prominence to his wishes, Job asks two questions: Why didn't I die at birth? And why didn't the knees that received me and the breasts that nursed me give out? The reference to knees that received him seems to refer to the custom of placing the newborn child on the father's knees (Gen. 48:12), a symbol the child was his own.

Job was in one sad state of mind, for he goes on in 3:13-15 to describe how much better it would have been had he died at birth, for then he would have known peace and rest from his upcoming troubles! And if death did not come at birth, then why did it not come when he was a child? Had he been given rest in death as a child, he could have rested with the notable kings, and the rich princes (3:14-15), who already were resting in their graves. Job depicts death as a 'restful' condition in the earth. He plaintively asks: Why was my fetus not hidden, or buried in the ground (3:16)? At least in that place in the grave he would 'cease from turmoil' and be 'at rest' (3:17). In that place Job would no longer suffer disease, or be a slave to the shout of the slave-driver (3:17-18). In death he would be with the small and the great (3:19). Job's pleas for a divine release from his suffering are put in one phrase after another as he reflects not only on his own suffering, but that of so many others who likewise face grief and pain in the extreme.

3. JOB AGAIN WISHES THAT HE WOULD DIE (3:20-26)

Now for the third time Job asks 'Why?' (3:20, 11, 12). Once more he returns to the subject of light and darkness

to depict life and death. His question in this section of verses 20-26 is best summarized in 3:21, Why is it that those who long for death, do not find it, even though they search and dig for it more than those who go digging for hidden treasure? When those who suffer finally 'find the grave,' they 'rejoice greatly' (3:22).

Then for the fourth time, Job once more uses the interrogative 'Why?' in chapter 3 (3:23) – 'Why am I Job so bewildered by God's work of hedging me in?' Such suffering deprived Job, he thought, of any hope in what was to come and restricted his movement from what he had known prior to this. Now for the first time, Job declares that it was God who had brought his sufferings and afflictions on him. Why, even Job's food made him groan at the very sight of it, meaning I guess that he had lost all his appetite, and his food did not please him, but repulsed him (3:24).

What Job had feared might happen to him had now taken place (3:25), for when he heard of one loss, he feared another loss would follow. Job summarizes his condition in 3:26. He could find no quietness, no rest, but only turmoil (3:26). Job was not finished with his questions by a long shot, for he posed at least ten questions throughout his long discourse with his three 'comforters' (3:11, 12, 20, 23; 7:20, 21; 9:29; 13:24; 21:4; 24:1). Each will be seen in our journey through the book of Job!

But on top of all of this, Job is next to be assailed by three men who claim to be his friends, but who turn out to be an even more bitter pill to swallow.