

(( ( PREACHING *the* WORD )) )

# JOB

*The* WISDOM  
*of the* CROSS



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R. Kent Hughes

*Series Editor*

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**David J. Jackman**, Former President, Proclamation Trust, London, England

*Job*

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# 1

## Welcome to a Well-Run World

JOB 1:1–5



IN WHAT SORT OF A WORLD would you like to live? In any society some people come out on top, and others are nearer the bottom; some are great men and women, and others are not. When we give this some thought, we probably say that we would like to live in a society where the great persons are also good persons. In England we have an idiom; when we want to describe a gathering of important people we say, “the great and the good were there,” leaving the connection between greatness and goodness unstated and open.

Much misery is caused when evil people govern and rule. And much joy results when good persons become great and govern with justice and righteousness. That is the sort of world we want, or at least the sort of world we ought to want.

That is the world with which the book of Job begins.

There Was a Man . . .

The story begins with the words, “There was a man . . .” (or, in the Hebrew word order, “A man there was . . .,” v. 1). This is the story of a human being.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy not to concentrate when someone is introduced to us. I find that when others kindly tell me their name and something about themselves, all too often what they have said has gone in one ear and out the other. But in the book of Job we need to pay careful attention to the introductions, and supremely to the first one.

This is the first of the three prose introductions that structure the book of Job (see “Structure of the Book of Job” earlier). Although other people

are introduced later, the human focus of the book is on the one man Job. It is Job who is introduced first. The scenes that follow focus on what happens to Job. The long speech cycles with his friends are all addressed to Job or spoken by Job. Elihu addresses much of his four speeches to Job. Even the Lord addresses his speeches to Job, and Job replies. It really is “the book of Job.” Job is, as it were, either on the stage or the subject of discussion at every point in the book. So we need to pay careful attention to how Job is introduced to us.

The writer tells us five things about Job.

### *His Place*

First, he lived “in the land of Uz” (v. 1). We do not know exactly where Uz was. Probably it was in the land of Edom, just to the east of the promised land. Lamentations 4:21 says, “Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell in the land of Uz.”<sup>2</sup> But “[t]he importance of the name Uz lies not in where such a place is, but in where it is not”; namely, it is not in Israel.<sup>3</sup>

We do not know whether or not Job was a Hebrew (the term *Jew* was not used until much later in Old Testament history). But we do know that he lived outside the promised land, and his story does not tie in to any known events in Israel’s history. The story does not begin “in the xth year of so-and-so king of Israel or Judah” or at any identifiable time in Israel’s history. In fact, as we shall see in verse 5, Job seems to be a kind of patriarch who offers sacrifices on behalf of his family in a way that would have been strictly forbidden after the institution of the priesthood. He seems to have been a contemporary (speaking very loosely) of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. He lived independent of the giving of the promises to Abraham, before the captivity in and exodus from Egypt, before the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, before the conquest of the promised land, and outside that land. All this makes his story all the more wonderful. Here was a man who knew almost nothing of God, and yet, as we shall see, he knew God and trusted and worshipped him as God.

### *His Name*

“. . . whose name was Job” (v. 1).

Although various theories have been propounded about the possible meaning of Job’s name, there is no convincing evidence that the name had any particular significance.<sup>4</sup> Most likely he is called Job because Job was his name! We are not given his genealogy. His family connections are not significant. He is just a man called Job.



*His Godliness*

“. . . and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (v. 1). After the more or less incidental historical facts of his place and his name, the first really significant thing the writer tells us is about Job’s character. This is of lasting importance, and we need to burn this into our consciousness as we read the book.

We are told four things about Job: his integrity, his treatment of others, his religion, and his morality. These four things tell us, not what Job was from time to time or occasionally, but his “constant nature.”<sup>5</sup>

First, he was “blameless.” This is a better translation than “perfect” (e.g., KJV, RSV). It does not mean “sinless,” for Job himself admits “the iniquities of my youth” (13:26) and “my sin” (14:16). Fundamentally the word “blameless” speaks of genuineness and authenticity. In Joshua 24:14 Joshua exhorts the people of Israel to serve God “in *sincerity*” (the same Hebrew word)—that is to say, genuinely, not just pretending to serve him while their hearts were somewhere else. In Judges 9:16 Jotham challenges the people of Shechem, “Now therefore, if you acted in good faith and *integrity* [same word] when you made Abimelech king . . .” By which he means, “if you meant what you said and were not trying to deceive or double-cross anyone . . .” God said to Abraham, “Walk before me, and be blameless” (Genesis 17:1). And Psalm 119:1 proclaims a blessing on those “whose way is blameless.”

The same idea is conveyed by the old expression used by some of the rabbis: “his ‘within’ was like his ‘without.’”<sup>6</sup> Or as we might put it, “what you see is what you get.” When you see Job at work, when you hear his words, when you watch his deeds, you see an accurate reflection of what is actually going on in his heart. The word means “personal integrity, not sinless perfection.”<sup>7</sup> It is the opposite of hypocrisy, pretending to be one thing on the outside but being something else on the inside. Centuries later Timothy had to deal in Ephesus with the very opposite, men who had “the appearance of godliness, but [denied] its power” (2 Timothy 3:5). Job had the appearance of godliness because there was real godliness in his heart.

This character trait of blamelessness or integrity is pivotal in the book of Job. In 8:20 Bildad will say, “God will not reject a *blameless* man,” and in 9:20–22 Job will repeatedly claim that he is “blameless.” He does the same in 12:4.<sup>8</sup> As the drama develops, we shall be sorely tempted to think that Job is hiding something, that he is not as squeaky clean as he appears, that he is not blameless. We need to remember that he *is* blameless. The writer has headlined this wonderful characteristic of him.

Second, “that man was . . . upright” (v. 1). This shifts the focus slightly from Job’s own integrity to the way he treats other people. In his human relationships Job is “upright,” straightforward, a man you can do business with because he will not double-cross you, a man who deals straight. We shall see this upright behavior beautifully described in 31:13–23.

Third, his character was marked by integrity and his relationships by right dealing, and his religion was shaped by a humble piety. “That man was . . . one who feared God” (v. 1). We do not know how much he knew about the God he feared. But he had a reverence, a piety, a bowing down before the God who made the world, so that he honored God as God and gave thanks to him (cf. Romans 1:21).

Later in Israel’s history the fear of the Lord was “that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law.”<sup>9</sup> For Job, not knowing that law in its fullness, the fear of God consisted of a devout, pious reverence for God and a desire to please him in all he knew of him. Job was, in the very best sense of the word, a genuinely religious man.

As the book develops we shall see that Job believed that God was both sovereign and just, that he had the power to make sure the world ran the way he chose to make it run, and that the way he would choose to make it run would be fair and marked by justice. At least that is what Job thought to begin with. The second of these convictions (God’s justice) is about to be sorely tested.

Finally, Job’s religion issues in godly morality. “. . . and that man was . . . one who . . . turned away from evil” (v. 1). As he walked life’s path, he resolutely stayed on the straight and upright path and turned away from the crooked byways of sin. To turn away from sin is to repent. Job’s character was marked by daily repentance, a habitual turning away from evil in his thoughts, words, and deeds.

Job is thus presented to us, not as a perfect man—only one perfect man has ever walked this earth—but as a genuine believer. In Ezekiel, Job is bracketed with Noah and Daniel as a man of conspicuous righteousness. God says, “Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in [a land], they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness” (Ezekiel 14:14; see also Ezekiel 14:20). What sort of righteousness did these men have? “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of *the righteousness that comes by faith*” (Hebrews 11:7). Noah was righteous by faith. So was Job. Indeed, no sinner has ever been righteous with God in any other way.

So Job is a real believer, genuine in his integrity, upright in his relationships, pious in his worship, and penitent in his behavior. His life was marked by what we would call repentance and faith, which are still the marks of the believer today, as they have always been.

So the next question is, what will happen to a man like this? The answer appears to be simple and wonderful: he will be a very very great man.

### *His Greatness*

“[And<sup>10</sup>] there were born to him seven sons and three daughters. He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east” (vv. 2, 3).

We begin with his family. “Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD,” and the man whose “quiver” is full of them is “blessed” (Psalm 127:3–5). Job’s quiver is certainly full—seven sons and three daughters. These are good numbers. Seven symbolizes completeness. Sons were special blessings in those pastoral cultures. When praising Ruth to the skies, the friends of her mother-in-law Naomi described her as being “more to you than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15). When Hannah celebrates the gospel reversals of God, she says, “The barren has borne seven” (1 Samuel 2:5). What more could a man want than seven sons! Well, I guess some daughters as well. And three is a good number. And seven plus three equals ten, which is also a good number. They are all good numbers and speak of an ideal family.<sup>11</sup>

Consider also his possessions. Job was a farmer. He was not strictly a nomad, for we see later that he was a local dignitary and was prominent in “the gate of the city” where local business was done (see Job 29:7). He seems to have grown crops as well as having herds and flocks.<sup>12</sup> He and his family lived in houses rather than tents (as we see, for example, in 1:18, 19, where the oldest brother’s house is destroyed).<sup>13</sup> Job had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels for desert transport, 500 yoke (i.e., pairs) of oxen for plowing the land, and 500 female donkeys, used to carry the produce of the fields and also for milk production and breeding. In addition, he had a large staff, huge numbers on his payroll. To identify with this, we may need to transpose this pastoral description of great wealth into our own contexts, whether urban or rural. It is a picture of great wealth and power. He is described as “the greatest of all the people of the east”(v. 3). “The people of the east” is an expression used of the Arameans (to whom Jacob fled in Genesis 29:1; cf. Genesis 25:20), of Israel’s eastern neighbors, as opposed to the Philistines in the west (Isaiah 11:14), or of those associated with the Midianites in the days of the Judges

(Judges 6:3). It is a general term referring to various peoples who lived east of the promised land. Among these peoples in his day Job was the greatest.

Job was, on a regional or local scale, what Adam was meant to be on a global scale—a great, rich, and powerful ruler. It is worth reflecting on this. This is, in a way, the prosperity gospel, and it seems to be what we ought to expect in a well-run world. Surely the world would be a better place if godly people got to the top and ungodly people were squashed down at the bottom, where they could do no harm. How terrible it is when ungodly people rise to the top. How miserable are so many countries because they are ruled by the wicked.

So Job's greatness is the natural and right consequence of his godliness. It is what we ought to expect. Or is it? There is just one more thing to note in Job's introduction.

### *His Anxiety*

His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, "It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually. (1:4, 5)

The expression "on his day" probably means an annual feast day for each son, perhaps his birthday (v. 4). This is not a picture of incessant partying, but of regular natural family get-togethers.<sup>14</sup> Their three sisters are presumably unmarried, for there is no mention of their husbands. So we are to think of Job as a man in the prime of life,<sup>15</sup> perhaps in contemporary terms a man in his early forties, with three unmarried daughters perhaps between eighteen and their early twenties. We do not know if the seven sons are married or not. Whatever the details, it is a picture of family harmony and innocent festivity.

And yet, for all the harmony and happiness on the surface, there is a deep anxiety and care in Job's heart. When each birthday party comes to an end,<sup>16</sup> Job summons all his children (or possibly just all his sons) for a religious ceremony of sacrifice. Each time Job "would rise early in the morning" (v. 5). This suggests an eagerness, a zeal, a sense of urgency. He is conscientious about this because he has a sensitive conscience. Before anything else intervenes to distract them, Job summons them for this ceremony. It is important. He impresses on his children the urgency of being present for this.

They gather, and Job the patriarch, the family head, offers a burnt offer-

ing for each of them. Later in the history of Israel a burnt offering would be the most expensive form of sacrifice, in which the whole sacrificial animal is consumed. It pictures the hot anger of God burning up the animal in the place of the worshipper, whose sins would have made them liable to be burned up in the presence of God. We can imagine Job doing this for them one at a time: “This one is for you,” and he lights the fire, and the animal is consumed. And the son or daughter watches the holocaust and thinks, “That is what would have happened to me if there had not been a sacrifice.” And then the next one: “This one is for you.” And so on until all the children were covered by sacrifice.

What was so serious that it necessitated such an expensive and urgent sacrifice? Why did Job insist on doing this party by party? Because he said to himself, “It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts” (v. 5). Although the children presumably showed outward piety (they did not curse God with their mouths; their parties were not wild drunken orgies or anything like that), Job is anxious lest in their hearts they did not honor God, lest deep inside lurked the godless wish that there were no God. Job has integrity (or blamelessness); he is not so sure about his children.

Job knows that what matters is not the appearance of godliness but a godly heart. He knows that to curse God in the heart, to wish God dead (as it were), is a terribly serious offense, an offense that carries the eternal death penalty if it is not atoned for. But Job believes in the atoning power of sacrifice, and so he offers burnt offerings. As Proverbs says, “In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge” (Proverbs 14:26). And the narrator concludes, “Thus Job did continually” (v. 5). Year after year the godly Job covers any secret sin in his children’s hearts with sacrifice.

## Conclusion

The story does not begin with this introduction. No event in the drama of Job has yet happened. Verses 1–3 are descriptions of Job and his character. And verses 4, 5 describe what Job habitually did. The whole introduction sets the scene before our story actually starts.

It sets a happy scene with one shadow. The happiness consists in a good man being a great man, a pious man being a prosperous man. It is a picture of the world being as the world ought to be, a world where the righteous lead. It is a world where the prosperity gospel seems to be true.

The shadow is the sad possibility that people might say that they are pious while in their hearts they are being impious, saying in their hearts that they wish God were dead. At this stage we cannot imagine why recipients of such

signal favor from God would ever want to curse God. Why would men and women blessed with such harmony and abundant prosperity do anything other than praise and love God from the bottom of their hearts? And yet the possibility is there. It exercises Job at every family gathering. There is something dark in human hearts, and Job knows it. Job knows that by nature we do not honor God as God or give thanks to him (cf. Romans 1:21). Only sacrifice can cover such sin in the heart.

## 2

# The Testing of Your Faith

JOB 1:6—2:10



THE GLORY OF GOD is more important than your or my comfort. That is a statement with which all Christians will readily agree in theory. A Puritan prayer begins:

Lord of all being,  
There is one thing that deserves my greatest care,  
that calls forth my ardent desires,  
That is, that I may answer the great end for which I am made—  
to glorify thee who hast given me being. . . .<sup>1</sup>

That is a fine and noble prayer. But it has awesome consequences from which we naturally shy away. Of course, we say, there can be nothing more important than the glory of God. What Christian could possibly disagree with that expression of correct piety? And yet before long we find ourselves recoiling from the implications of this statement.

The introduction of the book of Job in 1:1–5 portrays a world with which Disney would by and large be happy. It is a world in which the right people come out on top. We are ready, as it were, to go home happy, knowing it is all working out as it should. But then the action begins, with four alternating scenes in Heaven and on earth. The story is told sparingly and brilliantly, as a cartoonist might, as a few well-chosen lines on the page conjure up whole worlds of drama. In this drama we shall see that it is necessary for it publicly to be seen that there is in God's world a great man who is great because he is good, and yet who will continue to be a good man when he ceases to be a great man. Ultimately, in the greatest fulfillment of Job's story, we will need to see

a man who does not count equality with God (greatness) as something to be grasped but makes himself nothing for the glory of God (Philippians 2:6–11).

### Scene 1: Heaven (Job 1:6–12)

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and the Satan<sup>2</sup> also came among them. The LORD said to the Satan, “From where have you come?” The Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” And the LORD said to the Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” Then the Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” And the LORD said to the Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So the Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (Job 1:6–12)

After the timeless introduction, which describes who Job was and what he habitually did, we read, “there was a day” (v. 6). And what a day! On this particular day something happened in Heaven that would change Job’s life forever.

The day began in what seems to have been a routine way: “the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD” (v. 6). The expression “the sons of God” speaks here of beings whose existence is derivative from God (hence “sons”) but whose rank is superhuman.<sup>3</sup> The expression literally translated “sons of God” by the *ESV* is often translated “angels” (e.g., *NIV*). We meet them again in Psalm 29 (“Ascribe to the LORD, O sons of God,” Psalm 29:1, *ESV* footnote) and in Genesis 6:2.<sup>4</sup> They form a “divine council” or heavenly cabinet, and we see reference to this in Psalms 82 and 89.

God has taken his place in the divine council;  
 in the midst of the gods he holds judgment. . . .  
 I said, “You are gods,  
 sons of the Most High, all of you.” (Psalm 82:1, 6)

For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?  
 Who among the sons of God (*ESV footnote*) is like the LORD . . .  
 a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones,  
 and awesome above all who are around him? (Psalm 89:6, 7)

As members of God’s heavenly cabinet, they come “to present themselves” before him (v. 6). The expression “to present oneself” or “to stand



before” means something like “to attend a meeting to which one is summoned” or “to come before a superior ready to do his will.”<sup>5</sup> It is the expression used of the wise man in Proverbs: “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men” (Proverbs 22:29). That is to say, he will be a senior civil servant or a government minister rather than just a local council employee. The same expression is used with apocalyptic imagery in Zechariah when the four chariots go out to all the world “after presenting themselves before the Lord of all the earth” (Zechariah 6:5). First they present themselves for duty, and then they go out to do what they have been told to do.

This “day” that turns out to be so devastating for Job begins with a normal heavenly cabinet meeting. God summons his ministers rather as an American President might call his senior staff to an early-morning meeting in the Oval Office before sending them out for action.

Only one member of the heavenly cabinet is mentioned individually: “. . . and the Satan also came among them” (v. 6). The expression “the Satan” suggests that here “Satan” is a title, which tells us something about his role. The word “Satan” means something like “adversary, opponent, enemy.” The noun is used to mean an adversary in other contexts as well. When the Lord stops Balaam in his tracks, he does so “as his adversary [satan]” (Numbers 22:22). When the Philistine commanders tell the Philistine king Achish they don’t want David fighting with them against Israel, they say, “He shall not go down with us to battle, lest in the battle he become an adversary [satan] to us” (1 Samuel 29:4). Here in Job 1, it is not yet clear whose adversary the Satan is. It will soon become apparent that he is Job’s adversary.<sup>6</sup>

We are not told explicitly whether or not the Satan is present as a member of the heavenly council or whether he is in some way a gatecrasher. It is sometimes assumed that because the Satan is evil he cannot be a member of the council and must have barged in uninvited. So the Lord’s question, “From where have you come?” (v. 7) is read in a hostile voice (“What do you think *you* are doing here?”). But this is unlikely. The word “among” (v. 6) probably suggests that he is a member of the group.<sup>7</sup> There need be no hostility or implied rebuke in the question, “From where have you come?” Probably it represents something like a President asking a Cabinet secretary for his report: “Secretary of War, it is time for your report. Tell us where you have been and what you have seen.”

In 1 Kings 22 the prophet Micaiah vividly describes the same heavenly council: “I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him.” Then as Micaiah describes the conversation in the

council, “a lying spirit” speaks up and is sent out by the Lord to do his will (1 Kings 22:19–22). So there is apparently no inconsistency in “a lying spirit” being present in God’s council. In the same way, it will become clear that the Satan is present at the council because he belongs there. His presence (and indeed that of other lying spirits and evil spirits) has been described as being analogous to the expression in British governance, “Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition.”<sup>8</sup> They oppose the government, but they do so in ultimate and unquestioned subservience to the Crown. Their opposition is a necessary and good part of British governance. They in themselves are devoted to trying to bring the government down; and yet in spite of themselves their opposition serves a purpose in making the government better than it would be in the absence of opposition (as tyrannies attest). In the same way the Satan will oppose Job and yet will do so in a way that strangely and paradoxically will eventually be seen to serve the purposes of the Lord. As Luther put it, the Satan is “God’s Satan.”

### *How the World Is Governed*

This description of the Lord and “the sons of God” gives us an important insight into the way the world is governed. Presumably this language of God sitting surrounded by a heavenly council is anthropomorphic language. God does not literally sit at the head of a council any more than he literally has hands or feet. This kind of language is used of God because we can understand it, to accommodate to our limitations. But what does it mean?

Broadly speaking there are three models for understanding the spiritual government of the world.

The first is polytheism or animism, in which the universe is governed (if that is not too strong a word) by a multiplicity of gods, goddesses, and spirits, none of whom is perfect and some of which are exceedingly evil. There is no absolutely supreme god or goddess, although some are generally more powerful than others. The end result is a universe filled with anxiety, in which we may never know in advance which spiritual power will come out on top in a particular situation, in which different deities have to be appeased and kept friendly, much as a citizen in a corrupt society may offer bribes to different officials, hoping he or she gets the bribes right in their amounts and their recipients. This is the world of animism and of Hinduism. In a strange way, it is also the world of Buddhism, where the “gods and goddesses” are within ourselves. Each person is his or her own god or goddess. Who knows who will win?

At its simplest this view becomes a dualism in which the world is gov-

erned by the outcome of an ongoing contest between God and the devil, who are thought of as pretty much equal and opposite powers battling it out for supremacy, like the Empire and the Federation in *Star Wars*. The devil is perceived as having an autonomy and agency independent of God. Some Christians are practical dualists in this way.

The second is a kind of absolute monism, in which the world is governed absolutely and simply by one God. What this God says goes, end of story. Above the visible and material universe there is one, and only one, supernatural power, the absolute power of the Creator of Heaven and earth. This model underlies the classic objection to the goodness of God: “If God is God He is not good. If God is good He is not God.”<sup>9</sup>

As I understand it, this is the model of Islam, and many Christians think it is the Biblical model. It is not.

Christian people can veer toward either of these, a dualism or a monism. Neither does justice to the Bible’s picture, which is more nuanced and complex. The Bible portrays for us a world that lies under the absolute supremacy and sovereignty of the Creator, who has no rivals, who is unique, such that there is no god like him. And yet he does not govern the world as the sole supernatural power. He governs the world by the means of and through the agency of a multiplicity of supernatural powers, *some of whom are evil*. That is to say, “the sons of God” represent powers that are greater than human powers and yet are less than God’s power. They include among their number the Satan and his lying and evil spirits.

Above the visible and measurable material world of human senses lies a world in which is the one Jesus calls “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31) and whom Paul will later call “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). “The air” here speaks of a region higher than earth (hence supernatural) but lower than the dwelling-place of God himself (Heaven). Our battle does not just take place at the human level (“against flesh and blood”) but “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

This model is not dualist; the sovereignty of God is not compromised one iota in this model. But the nature of the government of the world is significantly different than in the monist model. We need to take account of these supernatural agencies, “the sons of God” in the language of Job and other Old Testament passages. And we need to grasp that the evil agencies, the devil and all his angels, while being supernatural and superhuman, are sub-divine. Satan is, to again quote Luther’s famous phrase, “God’s Satan.”

Some will object that since God cannot look at or have fellowship with evil (Habakkuk 1:13), he cannot allow the Satan to be in his presence. But this is to confuse fellowship with government. God can have no fellowship with evil, because he is pure light, and “in him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5, 6). But he can use evil in his government of the world, and he does. His having business dealings, so to speak, with the Satan in the government of the world is not the same as suggesting that the Satan enjoys God’s presence in the sense of his blessing.

### *The Conversation in Heaven*

The writer of the book of Job is a prophet. How else could he know what happened in the heavenly council? As Eliphaz taunts Job later, “Have you listened in the council of God?” (15:8). Of course he hasn’t. But the writer has. And as he listens, this is what he hears.

To the introductory question, the Satan replies, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it” (v. 7). This may be evasive, like the teenager who, asked by Mom or Dad what he’s been doing all day, grunts, “Oh, just stuff” (subtext: “it’s none of your business”). And yet the expression “going to and fro” suggests going about with a specific purpose.<sup>10</sup> What that purpose is will become apparent. The Satan has a job to do, and he has been doing it, even if he is reluctant to divulge his findings.

His task becomes clear with the Lord’s next question: “Have you considered [literally, “Have you set your heart upon”] my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” (v. 8). This implies that the Satan’s job, as God’s submissive opposition, is to search men and women to see if there is anyone who is genuinely godly and pious. God claims that there is one and echoes point for point the storyteller’s description of Job in the very first verse of the book. We might paraphrase it like this: “I wonder if, in your travels looking for genuine piety, you have noticed my servant Job.” The expression “my servant” conveys Job’s honor and dignity; he is God’s covenant partner. It is a title used forty times of Moses, as a general title for the prophets (e.g., 1 Kings 14:18), and of the patriarchs (e.g., Genesis 24:14; 26:24; Psalm 105:6; Exodus 32:13). Job is loyal to the Lord, and the Lord will be loyal to him: “He is a real believer, with integrity and consistency. It is impossible to find in the whole world such a conspicuously pious and consistent believer.”

These fateful words, singling out Job as conspicuously genuine and godly, are to prove devastating in their consequences for Job. The book of Job is not about suffering in general, and certainly not about the sufferings com-

mon to men and women the world over. Rather it is about how God treats his friends.<sup>11</sup> Commenting on the words “he whom you love is ill” (John 11:3), John Chrysostom wrote, “Many men, when they see any of those who are pleasing to God suffering anything terrible . . . are offended, not knowing that to those especially dear to God it belongeth to endure these things.”<sup>12</sup> In the same way God singles out his friend Job for the Satan’s detailed attention. He asks the Satan if he has noticed Job’s astonishing and preeminent godliness.

The Satan has. After all, it is his job to notice people like that. But—and this also is a part of his God-given role in the government of the world—the Satan puts a different interpretation on Job’s piety. “Does Job fear God for no reason?” he asks (v. 9); or it may be, “Has Job *feared* God for no reason?” implying that Job was fearing God the last time he saw him.<sup>13</sup> He admits that Job looks like one who fears God; he must admit this. But why does Job fear God? Is it because God is God, because God is worthy of his worship and loving obedience? Or is there another reason? “Does God’s finest servant, his boasted showpiece, serve him for conscience or convenience?”<sup>14</sup> The Satan suggests that it is merely convenience: “Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side?” (v. 10). Outside Job’s human skin there is an outer skin, a protective hedge put there by God, so that not only his body but his family and his possessions are kept safe. “You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land” (v. 10). Here is a protective hedge that expands as Job’s possessions expand. It is not a hedge that constrains him, but simply one that protects him and all that is his.

The Satan insinuates that Job’s prosperity is the only cause of his piety. “Sure, he is pious,” the Satan says in essence. “I cannot deny that. I see him in church every Sunday and at the church prayer meeting and active in the service of God. His piety is incontrovertible. But why is he pious?” Answer: Job has discovered the prosperity gospel, and it works. He has discovered that if he honors God, God will make him richer and richer. He and his wife will have great sex. His wife will have children. His children will be healthy and successful. And his bank balance will grow and grow. They will enjoy fabulous holidays and a lifestyle to make a pagan billionaire envious. Who wouldn’t be pious, if that’s what you get out of it? That is his motive. That is why he is pious. He is pious not because he actually loves God, honors God, or believes God is worthy of his worship; he is pious because piety results in prosperity, and for no other reason. That’s the Satan’s argument.

So the Satan continues, “But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face” (v. 11). The “hand” of God is the

Bible's way of speaking of God in action. When God stretches out his hand, he acts in human history. To "touch" here means more or less to "smite"<sup>15</sup> or "hit aggressively." "Do that," says the Satan with impudence using the imperative command to God ("stretch out"), and "I'll be damned if he doesn't curse you to your face."<sup>16</sup>

The Satan's logic is impeccable. How can we tell whether Job is pious because he believes God is worthy of his loving worship or whether he is pious because he believes his piety will result in blessing? Does his genuine piety lead to prosperity, or does his prosperity lead to his superficial piety? We must find out, says the Satan. The honor of God depends upon it. And the only way to find out is to take away Job's prosperity. Only when that outer skin or protective hedge is breached and the hand of God breaks in to take away what Job has will we and can we know whether or not his piety is genuine. "If we take those things away and he still fears you and turns from evil, then," implies the Satan, "I will admit that there is a man on earth who worships you because you are worthy of worship. But he won't. You watch and see. He will curse you to your face, directly, impudently. Just try it and we'll see."

Now although the Satan's motives are 100 percent aggressive and malicious, his argument is correct. There is no other way publicly to establish the nature of Job's piety. David Clines has pointed out perceptively that the converse would also be true. If a poor man were pious, it might even be necessary to enrich him to be absolutely sure that his piety were not the result of his poverty.<sup>17</sup>

The Satan is not bullying God, nor is he offering him a casual wager, as though Job's sufferings were just to see who wins a bet in Heaven. No, the Satan, for all his malice, is doing something necessary to the glory of God. In some deep way it is necessary for it to be publicly seen by the whole universe that God is worthy of the worship of a man and that God's worth is in no way dependent on God's gifts.

Exactly the same logic is present when Peter writes to Christians enduring trials and sufferings. Even though in the present "you have been grieved by various trials" there is a reason. And here is the reason: ". . . so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6, 7). When Jesus returns, the fact that a Christian has gone on trusting and believing even though all the blessings have been removed and he has suffered severe trials will prove to the universe that another human being considers God to be worthy of worship simply because he is God. God will be praised, his glory adored, and his

honor seen by the universe because Christian men and women have gone on worshipping him when all the blessings have been taken away.

The glory of God is more important than your or my or Job's comfort. In some deep way the sufferings of Job are necessary to redound to the glory of God. Paradoxically the Satan, for all his evil motivation, has a necessary ministry in God's government of the world for his glory. If the Satan did not issue this challenge, it would be necessary for God to delegate this terrible task to another supernatural creature. Satan has a ministry; it is the ministry of opposition, the ministry of insisting that the genuineness of the believer be tested and proved genuine. It is a hostile and malicious ministry, but a necessary ministry for the glory of God.

So God gives his terrible instruction and permission: "And the LORD said to the Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand'" (v. 12). This instruction does not betray callousness in God, nor cold-bloodedness. We cannot say that God's insistence that Job's person not be harmed is a sign of God's love, for what then of the next heavenly scene, when that protection is withdrawn? Something deeper is going on here. Nor can we say, as David Clines perversely suggests, that God gives this permission because God himself does not know whether Job's faith is genuine.<sup>18</sup>

We must not draw too clear a line between instruction and permission. We do not like the idea of God instructing the Satan to attack Job, but that is what he does. In all this the Bible insists on the sovereignty of God. It has been fashionable since the late twentieth century to get around the problem of evil by suggesting that God is doing his best and we cannot blame him if he does not manage to arrange everything the way he wants. In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner "solves" the problem of suffering in this way. Others suggest that God is like a chess grandmaster taking on a roomful of amateur chess players; usually he wins the game against all comers, but once in a while an amateur wins. In the same way God wins most of the "games" but not all. The Bible allows no such idea. God is sovereign. "He [the Satan] cannot touch a hair upon the back of a single camel that belongs to Job, until he has Divine permission."<sup>19</sup> The Satan does what he is told, no more and no less.<sup>20</sup>

What is at stake here is the glory of God. Ultimately the well-being of the universe depends upon the glory of God. A universe in which God is not glorified will be a universe at odds with itself, a self-contradictory universe. Ultimately—and it is ultimately rather than immediately—the well-being of



Job depends upon the glory of God. And the sufferings of Job are necessary for the final blessing of Job.

It is not self-centered of God to desire his own glory. For us it is an inappropriate megalomania; for God, it is to desire the most deeply right thing in the world. We may perhaps use a trivial illustration to cast light on this. If I suggest that I ought to be given a Nobel Prize for Chemistry, I am suggesting something deeply inappropriate, for my knowledge of chemistry is very poor. If this prize were to be awarded to me, there would be something deeply awry with the Nobel Prize committee. But if a brilliant chemist who has done seminal work suggests he ought to be given the prize, this is quite different. Indeed, if he is *not* given the prize there is something wrong! In a faintly similar way, the universe has gone terribly awry when God is not given ultimate glory.

And so at the end of this scene “the Satan went out from the presence of the LORD” to do his terrible but strangely necessary work (v. 12).

### Scene 2: Earth (Job 1:13–22)

Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, and there came a messenger to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, “The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, “The Chaldeans formed three groups and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you.” While he was yet speaking, there came another and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother’s house, and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead, and I alone have escaped to tell you.”

Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, “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.”

In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong. (Job 1:13–22)

Scene 2 is terrifying. We move now from Heaven to earth and from that first “day” (v. 6) to another “day”(v. 13). Like 9/11, this day begins normally enough. It seems to be the oldest brother’s party, another in the lovely annual round of family festivities. Job is in his own home, perhaps quietly rejoicing in the harmonious family God has given him, when a messenger knocks on



the door and insists on being heard. Job turns from whatever he is doing and listens quietly as this ashen-faced messenger, ragged and distraught, tells his story. He has run in from the farm. “The oxen were plowing” (v. 14), so it was a normal farming day in early winter, preparing the fields after harvest to sow the seed for the next harvest. Beside them “the donkeys [were] feeding” after the hard work of carrying the harvest into the barns. It was just a normal day in the autumn when, quite suddenly, “the Sabeans”—roving peoples from either southwestern or northern Arabia<sup>21</sup>—“fell upon them and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword” (v. 15). It was an unexpected, violent, sudden, and terrifyingly destructive terrorist attack, as terrible in its violence and bloodshed as a car bomb or a suicide bomber today. The protective “hedge” (v. 10) has been breached. Every victim of a house burglary knows the feeling of being violated at this invasion of what they thought was their safe space. It is like this with Job. The world he thought was safe has been turned into a killing field. All Job’s oxen and donkeys were stolen and all the associated farm workers were killed in one terrible attack. And—to add to the completeness of the terror, each returning servant said, “I alone have escaped to tell you” (v. 15; cf. vv. 16, 17, 19).

It is a devastating message. But before Job has time even to begin to take this in, while the first messenger is still speaking, another traumatized messenger appears in the doorway and interrupts: “The fire of God” (v. 16)—a conventional way of speaking of lightning<sup>22</sup>—“fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them.” Not only the oxen and donkeys, but now the sheep too, with all the shepherds, were killed—not this time by terrorism but by a terrible act of God (as the insurance companies call it), a freak storm. The shock is not unlike the trauma experienced by victims of an earthquake or tsunami. And it comes on top of the trauma experienced by victims of terrorism. And again, to press home the completeness of the devastation, Job hears those awful words, “I alone have escaped to tell you” (v. 16).

But the trauma is not over. While this messenger is still telling his shocking story, a third messenger appears. “The Chaldeans”—nomads from southern Mesopotamia—“formed three groups”—a deliberate premeditated strategy of criminal aggression—“and made a raid on the camels and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword” (v. 17). First the oxen and donkeys with their workers are killed, then the sheep with their shepherds, and now the camels are stolen and their keepers killed. And again, as Job listens in shocked silence, come the words, “I alone have escaped to tell you” (v. 17).

Job has been bankrupted. The greatest man of the region has been emptied

of all his wealth in a day—from riches to rags. But poor Job doesn't even have time to think about what he will say to the creditors who are even now making their way to his door, for there is worse to come. As we listen to the story, we cannot avoid wondering why we were told at the start that all the children were together in the oldest brother's house. The tension has been rising. While the third messenger is still blurting out his story of disaster, a fourth and final messenger runs in with a tearstained face: "Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house"—*yes, I know that*, we can imagine Job thinking, *get on with the news*—"and behold, a great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house"—four corners to stress the completeness of the ensuing disaster—"and it fell upon the young people,"<sup>23</sup> and before Job has time to ask if there were casualties, before he even has time to hope, "and they are dead." All the remaining servants, all the children are dead, "and I alone have escaped to tell you" (vv. 18, 19).

An alternation of two human terrorist attacks and two "natural" disasters have deprived Job of everything. If we dwell for a few moments on this scene, it is hard not to weep with Job. Throughout the rest of this long book we must never forget the trauma of this scene. We are used in our cultures to post-traumatic stress disorders and to the training of trauma counselors to assist in times of natural disaster, terrorism, and war. But rarely if ever in human history can there have been a succession of such extreme disasters as this. Bankrupt and bereft, Job is basically left alone. His protective hedge has been broken, his outer skin so to speak violated, and all he had has been taken away.

The four messengers (who perhaps remind us of the four horsemen of the apocalypse in Revelation) fade away, and Job is on the stage alone. The greatest man of the region has now no possessions and no family (except his wife, who will make a brief and unhappy appearance soon). How will he respond? How he responds will reveal the true state of his heart—or so we have been led to believe by the Satan. Does Job serve God for what God gives him, or does Job serve God because God is worthy of his worship?

Job has been sitting to receive his terrible visitors. Now at last he can begin to respond. He "arose" (v. 20); perhaps he began to rise as each of the messengers neared the end of their tale, only to be nailed back to his seat by the onset of the next report of disaster. But now at last he can begin to respond and to grieve. He rises; he tears his robe, the outer mantle worn by people of distinction, perhaps symbolizing the pain that is tearing at his heart.<sup>24</sup> He shaves his head, another conventional symbol of mourning, perhaps indicating identification with the dead. And then he falls on the ground, not (yet)

crushed by sadness, but in worship of the God he knows and loves. Quietly, with dignity and restraint, Job worships.

And then he speaks:

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. (v. 21)<sup>25</sup>

The preacher says something very similar in Ecclesiastes:

As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. (Ecclesiastes 5:15)

Job knows that eventually he will die and take nothing away. It is almost as if he has died today. He understands that all his possessions and all his children were gifts from the Lord. By the nature of the Godness of God he gives, and it is therefore entirely his prerogative to take away as he sees fit, as and when he chooses. This is part of God being God.

So Job blesses the name of the Lord. He expresses the wish that all who hear his story will bless God for it. The Satan said Job would curse God to his face. On the contrary, his response to terrible loss is wonderfully blessing the God who has given and has now seen fit to take away. In the moment of his loss his first thought is of the God who had first given.

The story seems to conclude, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (v. 22). What this man says about God is the key issue at stake. He has been anxious lest his children may have cursed God in their hearts. The Satan has predicted that Job will curse God to his face. Instead he responds with blessing. It is a wonderful conclusion to a terrible story.

But it is not the conclusion. This is the next shock. We need to learn to be shocked and shocked and shocked again by this story and never to let familiarity dull the sharpness of the pain.

### Scene 3: Heaven (Job 2:1–7a)

Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and the Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. And the LORD said to the Satan, "From where have you come?" The Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the LORD said to the Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against

him to destroy him without reason.” Then the Satan answered the LORD and said, “Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” And the LORD said to the Satan, “Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life.”

So the Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. . . . (Job 2:1–7a)

Suddenly we are taken back into Heaven to witness another “day,” another heavenly cabinet meeting. Job did not witness the first one, and he does not witness this one. But we, the readers, are allowed to be flies on the wall.

We have no indication of what time elapses between the disasters of scene two and the heavenly scene three, but this new scene begins almost word for word the same as the last scene in Heaven. This time we are explicitly told that the Satan “came among them to present himself before the LORD” (v. 1). If we were in any doubt that the Satan is a minister or servant of the Lord, this lays that doubt to rest. Like all the other powers and principalities that share in the agency of governing the world, the Satan is subservient to the Sovereign God. He comes “to present himself” and specifically to report back on “progress” since the last meeting, when he was sent to deprive Job of all his possessions and children. It is a macabre task that the Satan has carried out.

The report begins with the same formulas as in the previous meeting—the same question, “From where have you come?” and the same evasive answer, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it,” (v. 2).

Then the Lord asks the same question as before but with something extra added: “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” (v. 3). If we were in any doubt about Job’s character, surely this must lay it to rest. Three times now he has been called blameless, upright, God-fearing, and penitent, once by the narrator and twice by God himself. Also twice God has called him “my servant.”

But now the Lord goes on, “He still holds fast his integrity”—his inside is the same as his outside—“although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason” (v. 3). We learn two more things here. First, that Job has maintained his integrity as a genuine and consistent believer. This is exactly what we thought from the conclusion of the last scene.

But, second, we learn the Satan’s actual motive. The Satan sets up the test with a logic that has its foundation in the glory of God. But what he actually wants is not to see Job tested but to see Job destroyed. He wants God to destroy him, to swallow him alive, to kill him. There is no justification for this

(it is “without reason” [v. 3]), but this is what the Satan wants. Job’s sufferings are undeserved. And yet the Satan is frustrated by the instructions he has been given—to take away what Job has but not to touch his person.

So the Satan presses the matter further. “Skin for skin!” he says, using an idiom the meaning of which is not absolutely clear.<sup>26</sup> “All that a man has he will give for his life” (v. 4). Which is to say, you can breach the protective hedge, the outer skin, around a man’s possessions and family, and you will hurt him; but there is an inner skin that protects the man himself, his body and soul. Until that skin is breached, a man will not really be tested to see if his piety is genuine. “But stretch out your hand and touch”—again to “touch” means to “strike”—“his bone and his flesh [the inside and outside of his own person], and he will curse you to your face” (v. 5).

The point here seems to be that there is a distinction between what a person *has* and what a person *is*. What a person is is closer to the person’s heart than what he has. I am attached to what I have, whether it be impersonal possessions or personal relations (family); it hurts me to have those taken away. But it does not ultimately hurt me as deeply as when my inner skin is penetrated and the attack reaches to who I am, to my own body and soul. This is what the Satan demands.

Shockingly (and it is truly shocking) the Lord agrees. Having rebuked the Satan for inciting him against Job without valid reason, the Lord says to the Satan, “Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life” (v. 6). But the Satan is frustrated in his desire to see Job swallowed up and utterly destroyed—he is not allowed to kill him.

Nevertheless, we must think hard about this second permission or instruction. Had we been writing the story, we would have had the Lord say to the Satan, “Enough is enough. The man has suffered more than any human being in one day. He has been taken from riches to bankruptcy, from greatness to destitution, from a happy family to utter bereavement. That is enough, surely, to establish that his piety is genuine. The man worships me because he knows I am worthy of worship. End of trial.” That is what we would have said.

That the Lord disagrees with us must teach us something very deep. The glory of God really is more important than your or my comfort. When all that Job has is taken from him, we may get an approximate or provisional demonstration that God is worthy of worship. But an approximate or provisional demonstration is not sufficient for the ultimate glory of God. In the end it is necessary and right that this man should suffer personal and intimate attack upon himself, so that we see absolutely and without doubt that God is worthy

of worship. It is necessary for this man to demonstrate a full and deep obedience to the glory of God.

So for a second time “the Satan went out from the presence of the LORD” (v. 7). Thus the third scene comes to an end.

#### Scene 4: Earth (Job 2:7b–10)

. . . and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes.

Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.” But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips. (vv. 7b–10)

The transition from scene 1 to scene 2 was, if we may say so, leisurely. There was a day for the heavenly scene, and then, at some unspecified date later, there was another day when the disasters happened on earth. Similarly there is no indication of how long elapsed between scene 2 and scene 3. The transition between scene 3 and scene 4 is immediate. One scene fades into the next, as in many cinematography sequences. There is no “there was a day” formula this time (1:13). The moment “the Satan went out from the presence of the LORD” he “struck Job with loathsome sores” (v. 7). It was an immediate disaster. The pace has quickened.

The scene is intensified in another way. In the first four disasters the agents were either human (the Sabeans and the Chaldeans) or impersonal (lightning and hurricane). Here the Satan is the immediate agent of Job’s sufferings: “the Satan . . . struck Job” (v. 7). We are not told what medical causes are intermediate between the Satan and the suffering. Satan struck Job’s person, not just his family or his possessions, afflicting his skin with “loathsome sores” (v. 7). And he did it “from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (v. 7). It was a total and intimate affliction with no reprieve. All of Job’s person is invaded; the last vestige of protective hedge has been destroyed.

So he sits “in the ashes” (v. 8) on the council incinerator and rubbish dump, where the rubbish is continually burned in a heap outside the city gate, the place that Jesus was later to use as the best human image to represent Hell (Gehenna, the valley of the sons of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem). Job “took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself” (v. 8). Everything about Job is broken now. And he is all alone.

So this really is the test. Now we shall see for a certainty whether he

serves God only for what God gives him. Now God has taken it all away. God could not take any more away from Job without killing him, and then we would never know the result of the trial. So Job must live.

And yet there is one more trial. Job's wife makes her only appearance in the drama. We must resist the temptation to romanticize Job and his wife. All we know of her is that at this moment of lonely suffering she pleads with him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity?"—as God says he does before this last trial (2:3)—"Curse God and die" (v. 9). She knows, as Job knows, that to curse God ultimately brings a human being under sentence of death. This is why Job had offered all those burnt offerings to protect his children from this fate. This is what Job has refused to do after the first trials, blessing God wonderfully in 1:21.

But, not for the last time in human history, a wife has seen her husband suffering so terribly that she has wished him the peace of death. We are not invited to make any moral judgment about Job's wife. But whatever her motive, she is the mouthpiece of a terrible temptation, what Augustine calls "the devil's assistant" and Calvin "Satan's tool,"<sup>27</sup> asking Job to do what the Satan wants him to do. Job hears the pleading of his nearest and dearest to abandon his proud principles about God and just give in, let rip against God, and bring upon himself the inevitable judgment of death.

Job's reply is a model of faith under trial. "But he said to her, 'You speak as one of the foolish women would speak'" (v. 10). In kindness he does not actually call her a foolish woman. But he says that what she has suggested is not worthy of her. Hers is the suggestion that you would expect from a fool. She has spoken under stress, as if she were foolish.

Far from cursing God, Job says, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" (v. 10). Job speaks not self-centeredly of himself alone but of them both ("Shall *we* . . . ?") Again, as after the first trials, Job's heart is full of God the Creator who is the author of all good gifts. All the good he has received, he received from God. Can he not trust this same God to give him evil (i.e., harmful) things and to believe that he knows best? The sense of "receive" is to accept, humbly bowing beneath God's loving providence.

Now comes the conclusion: "In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (v. 10). This does not suggest that Job did sin in his heart;<sup>28</sup> sin with the lips is what the Satan had predicted, and sin with the lips is what Job has not done. We have here a simple affirmation that Job has passed the test. The question is settled, the trial concluded. Job's piety results from Job's heart conviction that God is the author of everything, the Creator who is worthy of all his worship in the bad times as well as the good.

In one sense the trial is settled. But as the book continues, Heaven is silent from now until the Lord speaks from chapter 38 onward.<sup>29</sup> Only in chapter 42 will we know for sure that Job is vindicated. In the meantime the damaged and broken skin of Job speaks of a real believer in the process of a terrible and life-changing breakdown.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion: Does Satan Attack Christians Today?

The glory of God is more important than your or my comfort. It matters for the glory of God that there should be a man who worships God because he is worthy of worship, and for no other reason.

This is a good moment, before Job's comforters are introduced and we launch into the many chapters of poetry, to pause and orient ourselves in the book of Job. How are we as Christian people to read Job today?

The first thing to say is that Job is an extreme book. Job is extravagantly rich, wonderfully happy, and extremely great. He is not only one among many great men—he is the greatest of all the people of his region. And then his downfall is extreme. He does not go from moderate riches to a measure of poverty; he goes from extravagant riches to absolute destitution. He does not do so gradually; he does so in a day. He does not experience the loss of one child or even two. He loses all ten children, and he does so in a day.

This poses a problem for us as we read the book. However deep our suffering, it is unlikely that our experience can ever do more than very approximately mirror Job's. We have neither been so great as Job, nor so fallen, neither so happy, nor so lonely, neither so rich, nor so poor, neither so pious, nor so cursed. All of which points to a fulfillment greater and deeper than your life or mine. Job in his extremity is actually but a shadow of a reality more extreme still, of a man who was not just blameless but sinless, who was not just the greatest man in a region, but the greatest human being in history, greater even than merely human, who emptied himself of all his glory, became incarnate, and went all the way down to a degrading, naked, shameful death on the cross, whose journey took him from eternal fellowship with the Father to utter aloneness on the cross. The story of Job is a shadow of the greater story of Jesus Christ.

And yet we cannot stop there. For the story of Job is, in a measure, your story and mine as Christian believers, as men and women in Christ. Before the cross Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you ["you" here is plural, referring to all the apostolic band], that he might sift you like wheat." Just as the Satan demanded to have Job to sift and test him, to see if he was—as it were—wheat or chaff, so he demanded to



sift the apostolic band. And just as God the Father sent Satan off to do that to Job, so he does with the apostles. Jesus does not go on to say, “But my Father has forbidden Satan from doing this.” Rather, he says, “But I have prayed for you [“you” here is singular, Simon Peter specifically] that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31, 32). Clearly Satan’s demand is to be granted; the apostles are to be sifted by Satan, to see if their faith is genuine. And their faith will prove genuine, not least because God the Son prays to God the Father for Peter, and then Peter becomes the instrument to strengthen the faith of the others.

Later in his life, as we have seen, Peter writes to Christian believers under trial to explain that their trials are necessary “so that the tested genuineness” of their faith “may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6, 7). An enemy, “your adversary the devil,” “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour,” and he can be resisted only by faith (“Resist him, firm in your *faith*”) (1 Peter 5:8, 9). Paul exhorts Christian people to put on “the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11). So we are naive and mistaken if we suppose that Satan no longer wants to attack believers or that God the Father has changed his mind about giving Satan permission to launch such attacks. We have a dangerous enemy who continues to attack us, as he attacked Job and as he even assaulted the Lord Jesus Christ himself. The book of Job is a scary book, not like a horror movie (where we can enjoy the scariness, knowing that it is not about to strike us), but because of the real understanding that this terrible story may in some way become our story too. Our horror in reading the story of Job is more than an empathetic horror; it is a personal horror.

But there is one difference. We live after the cross of Christ and therefore after the fulfillment of the story of Job. In the cross of Christ, God has “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them” in Jesus and his cross (Colossians 2:15). Through his death Jesus will “destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who though fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:14, 15). “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). The cross changes things.

We learn what the cross changes from a vivid apocalyptic passage in Revelation 12.

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and

there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” (Revelation 12:7–12)

As a result of the victory of the cross, the Satan is no longer present in the council of God, as he was in Job 1, 2, to accuse believers before the Father. He has been thrown down to earth. He no longer has access to the throne room of Heaven. What does this mean, since he is still dangerous, ranges the earth and sea with great anger, and indeed can only be conquered by those who “loved not their lives even unto death” (v. 11)? The key truth is that he who was “the accuser of our brothers” is no longer able to accuse Christian believers before God (v. 10). He accuses us, and we need to learn what to do with his accusation. But when he accuses us, God is not listening. The devil no longer has that access. The issue of our justification has been decisively settled at the cross. This is the gospel truth of the cross: there is no longer any condemnation (Romans 8:1), and our consciences have been cleansed by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 9:14).

So as we read the story of Job we think first and primarily of the greater story of Jesus, who walked the way of Job for us, who plumbed the depths of Job’s suffering for us, and who was vindicated for us. Satan is still able to attack us, and he spends what short life is left to him angrily doing that, like a hungry lion on the prowl. We must be realistic about this. Still we have to endure (“Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints,” Revelation 13:10). But if we are in Christ, the Satan is no longer able to accuse us before God. He no longer has that access.

# 3

## The Loneliness of Job

JOB 2:11–13



### Alone on the Rubbish Heap

Job is terribly, frighteningly alone. He sits on the rubbish heap. His wife has come and gone after a disagreement. His only companion, if we can call it such, is a broken shard of pottery with which he scratches himself (2:8). At this stage we can only guess what thoughts filled his mind. Did he think back to days of purpose, when he got out of bed with drive and desire, to work energetically, to manage his farm, and to govern his household? Did he remember the accolades given him for his justice, his care for his employees, and his business success?

Were there memories of his sons and daughters in their childhood? Near where I live in central London there used to be a bronze statue of a local man sitting on a bench overlooking the River Thames. A few meters in front of him is a bronze figure of a little girl, his daughter who had died in childhood. As he sits, in his old age, his imagination plays tricks with him, and it is as if he sees his little daughter alive and playing there. That pair of statues always moves me to tears. Did Job's imagination play those kinds of tricks with him? We cannot know.

### A Visit of Friends

But what happens next presses home to us Job's loneliness as never before. This is surprising because it seems to start so well. "Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil [harm] that had come upon him, they came. . . ." (v. 11). So Job has friends. The word "friend" in the Old Testament, and especially in the Wisdom literature, is stronger than our debased use, in which we may have many so-called "friends" (especially on social networking sites).

“A man of many companions [what we might call Facebook friends] may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). A friend is bound to you with bonds of steadfast love (the strong Hebrew word is *chesed*, which means pledged, unbreakable, covenant love and loyalty).

Many years later “Hushai the Archite, David’s *friend*” pretends to have gone over from David’s side to support and counsel his rebel son Absalom. Although Absalom is pleased to have Hushai’s counsel, he is surprised and chides Hushai: “Is this your loyalty [*chesed*, steadfast loyalty] to your *friend*? Why did you not go with your *friend*?” (2 Samuel 16:16, 17). Indeed as Job himself says, “He who withholds kindness [*chesed*, steadfast covenant loyalty] from a *friend* forsakes the fear of the Almighty” (6:14).

It is therefore deeply encouraging to know that Job has three friends, men who are bound to him with ties of steadfast love and loyalty. Surely they will be able to help. It begins well. “Now when Job’s three friends heard . . . they came. . . . They made an appointment together to come ” (v. 11). It must have taken weeks, if not months, for the news of Job’s afflictions to reach them, for them to communicate with one another, to rendezvous, and then to travel to visit Job.<sup>1</sup> And all this time Job is alone on the rubbish heap with his shard of pottery for company. Job himself later refers to “months of emptiness” (7:3), and the lament of chapter 30 indicates a long suffering.

### *Sympathy and Comfort*

But at last they come. They come “together” rather than separately, perhaps because they sense that the task of comforting Job will be more than any individual can bear.<sup>2</sup> They come “to show him sympathy”—that is, to enter into and share in his grief<sup>3</sup>—“and comfort him”—that is, to find a way to ease his pain (v. 11).

We must not read back into their coming the later disappointment and anger that their words bring. So far as we can tell, these are “three good men and true.”<sup>4</sup> They were bound to Job as Jonathan was to David. They were not fair-weather friends, Facebook friends who were glad to be able to “name-drop” Job’s acquaintance when he was rich and famous or to take vacations in his luxurious holiday villas. They were loyal friends who took the considerable trouble to travel and come to sympathize and comfort him when he was bankrupt and bereft. “Theirs was a noble, gentle spirit. They were sincere.”<sup>5</sup>

It is worth pausing to ask how “comfort” works. The Hebrew word is *nacham*. It is not the same as empathy. Empathy may be inarticulate, because it focuses on entering into the feelings and experience of the sufferer as best

we can. But comfort must be articulate and active. Empathy may be silent, but comfort must include speech. To comfort involves speaking to the mind and heart of the sufferer in such a way as to change his or her mind and heart. Comfort is an action, sometimes called “speaking to the heart,” that hopes and intends to bring about a change in how the sufferer thinks and feels about his or her suffering. When Joseph “comforted” his brothers, he did so in such a way as to reduce their fearfulness (Genesis 50:21); his words lowered the level of their fear. The Levite in Judges 19 spoke “kindly to” (“spoke to the heart of”) his wife with a view to changing her mind and bringing her back home (Judges 19:3). Boaz cheers Ruth up when he comforts her with his words (Ruth 2:13). Joab tells David that unless he will “speak kindly to” (“speak to the heart of”) his army by speaking words to them, they will abandon him (2 Samuel 19:7). His comfort will change their minds. King Hezekiah “spoke encouragingly to” (“spoke to the heart of”) his army to make them strong and courageous (2 Chronicles 32:6, 7). Both the verb *nacham* and the expression “speak to the heart” refer to speaking words that bring comfort and change someone’s mind or feelings. This is what we expect Job’s friends to do.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Wisdom of the World*

And so “they came each from his own place,” and we might wonder what resources of comfort were available in the places from which they came (v. 11). We are told their names and places—“Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite.” Eliphaz is from Teman, Bildad from Shuah, and Zophar from Naamah.

Naamah appears in Genesis 4 as the daughter of one of Lamech’s wives (Genesis 4:22), but this is a remote hint and tells us very little about Zophar. Shuah is one of Abraham’s sons by his wife Keturah, one of a group who (because they were not to inherit the promise through Isaac) were “sent . . . away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country” (Genesis 25:1–6).<sup>7</sup> This all fits with Job being “the greatest of all the people of the east” (1:3), somewhere to the east of the promised land.

The clearest clue is about Eliphaz. Teman was one of the most important towns of Edom (Jeremiah 49:20; Amos 1:12; Obadiah 9). Eliphaz himself bears an Edomite name. One of the sons of Esau is called Eliphaz (Genesis 36:4). He is even described as “the firstborn of Esau” (Genesis 36:15). Whether the Eliphaz of Job is the same Eliphaz or not, we cannot know. But he does seem to be an Edomite.

Edom was renowned for its wisdom. In Obadiah the Lord says he will “destroy the wise men out of Edom” (Obadiah 8). And in Jeremiah this wis-

dom is especially associated with Teman: “Concerning Edom. Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘Is wisdom no more in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom vanished?’” (Jeremiah 49:7). So it is no surprise that one of the friends who will, we hope, bring wise comfort to Job is an Edomite. It is a reasonable assumption that the other two also represent traditions of wise counsel. Certainly they think of themselves as such, as becomes evident when they begin to speak. We have here not just three kind and loyal friends but three wise friends who between them represent, as it were, the combined resources of the wisdom of the world. Can the world’s wisdom with the world’s kindness and loyalty help this lonely sufferer?

### *An Unbridgeable Gulf*

As they catch their first glimpse of their old friend they are appalled: “And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him” (v. 12). The smoking rubbish heap was often piled higher than the city itself,<sup>8</sup> so we may imagine them approaching the city and spying this lonely figure crouched on the landfill pile in the distance. They knew it was Job. Probably they had been told in advance that was where he was; we may suppose he was by now a well-known sight in the region. But they could hardly believe it was really him. “Is that Job?” we may imagine one saying to another, “so thin, so pale, so harrowed with pain and grief?” And as they approach him, they shrink back in horror.

Many have had this experience, of visiting a familiar friend or family member and of being shocked at the altered appearance. It is not just the physical features that have altered, but something deeper. It is as though the calamity or the suffering has claimed the other in an experience alien to us. The other is no longer fully or even primarily in our familiar world, but inhabits a realm whose terrain is strange and foreign to us. We sense a chasm across which we cannot or will not venture and from which we draw back in self-protective fear onto the safe ground of our familiar world. Or we attempt to cross the chasm somehow through sympathetic, perhaps symbolic, identification, hoping to draw the other back with us into the familiar world.<sup>9</sup>

Their not “recognizing” him was a painful thing for them, but no doubt it was also a painful thing for him.<sup>10</sup> No longer could there be the old natural friendly embrace, the hug or handshake, the smiles of friendship rekindled, the delighted warmth of welcome into his home. Instead they did not “recognize” him. They found themselves behaving toward him as to a stranger. There was something painfully strange about his appearance, the emptiness

in his eyes, the lines in his face, the brokenness of his demeanor. This is a sad assembly, very different from the happy family gatherings that punctuated the ordered life of the introduction (1:4). This one is marked by alienation rather than fellowship, and loneliness rather than joy.<sup>11</sup>

“And they raised their voices and wept” (v. 12). Weeping here (*bakah*) is not the shedding of silent tears. It is “the *sound* of . . . weeping” (Psalm 6:8), something done with the mouth as well as the eyes.<sup>12</sup> But they weep at him and not with him. This cannot be the “weep[ing] with those who weep” of Romans 12:15. They cannot sit “with” him in any meaningful sense. He is unrecognizable. He has been taken away into a different realm, a realm of suffering so deep they cannot reach him.

### *Silent with a Corpse*

Job has torn his robe in mourning (1:20), and they too tear theirs. And they “sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven” (v. 12).<sup>13</sup> Dust speaks of mortality and death. God says to cursed Adam, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). Joshua and the elders of Israel tear their clothes, fall to the ground, and put dust on their heads after the disaster at Ai (Joshua 7:6). The Israelite who reports the capture of the ark by the Philistines comes to Shiloh with his clothes torn and with dirt on his head (1 Samuel 4:12). After Tamar has been raped by her half-brother Amnon, she tears her clothes and puts ashes on her head, mourning for her lost future (2 Samuel 13:19).

To throw dust in the air (toward Heaven) so that it falls on their heads is vividly to identify themselves in their grief with Job’s dead children and probably also with Job himself, who has been grasped by death and is already being dragged down into the realm of the dead. Job is to them like a friend being sucked down by quicksand in the desert; they long to draw him up, but he is beyond their reach. He is as good as dead.

“And they sat with him on the ground” (v. 13). They do not sit on a carpet or on cushions but directly on the ground. The ground is the place of the dust of death; it is the closest men on earth can get to Sheol. After the sack of Jerusalem, “The elders of the daughter of Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth” (Lamentations 2:10).

Then comes silence, seven days and seven nights of silence! “They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.” Job’s suffering was, as we shall see, deeper than merely physical. It was made sharper by mental

and spiritual grief. It was an anguish and an agony.<sup>14</sup> This man who had been a very great man (1:3) now suffers a very great suffering.

What are we to make of this silence? It is at best ambiguous. Preachers often say that this long silence was the best thing that they did. And certainly, as we shall see in chapter 4, when they begin to speak they do no good at all. So one writer concludes, "If for the most part Job's friends got things wrong . . . here, at the beginning, they do it right." "Here is genuine friendship. Here is deep ministry." He calls this "the compassion of a silent presence."<sup>15</sup> Another says, "Their silence is a further expression of their genuine empathy."<sup>16</sup> Others say, "They do honour by profound silence to his vast grief," for "when grief is so crushing, what form but silence can sympathy take?" "They were true friends, bringing to Job's lonely ash-heap the compassion of a silent presence."<sup>17</sup>

But while their silence may initially have been appropriate, it seems unlikely that it continued so. To sit quietly with a sufferer, to hold his or her hand, to listen patiently as he or she pours out his or her grief is one thing. But this silence is "hugely extended."<sup>18</sup> To refuse to speak a word to a sufferer for seven days and seven nights is eerie and not comforting. It is interesting that we are told they did not speak a word "to him" (v. 13). For all we know, they may have spoken with one another. So it may not have been silence after all, but just a refusal to speak to Job, which is quite another thing.

Even if it was total silence (which seems more likely), a seven-day silence symbolized mourning for the dead. It is what Joseph did for his father Jacob. It is what the loyal city of Ramoth-Gilead did for King Saul (1 Samuel 31:13).<sup>19</sup> "Job's friends mourn for him as one already dead."<sup>20</sup>

It is as if they call for the hearse and sit by Job with the coffin open and ready for him. There is no point talking to a corpse; one just weeps by it. To them Job is no longer a living person. Their silence may be not so much a silence of sympathy (although it may have begun as such) but a silence of bankruptcy. They say nothing because they have nothing to say that will bring him comfort. It seems to them too late for that.

### The Loneliness of Suffering

Whatever the meaning of their silence, the book of Job brings home to us the loneliness of suffering. The friends came with kind intentions. They came together. They brought with them the wisdom of the world, all the resources available within the world to comfort their suffering friend. But they were bankrupt, able to sympathize up to a point but utterly unable to comfort. Before they came, Job was all alone on the rubbish heap. After they came, he



was yet more deeply alone as he sat alongside them but was utterly ignored by them with not a word addressed to him as a person. Before, there was no one physically or emotionally close to him; now he has proximity (they sit by him) but is still without intimacy.

Sometimes in Scripture there are corporate laments. Psalm 137 is one such. But this is so personal, and Job is so alone. Suffering does that. Even a non-serious illness cuts us off from others; we have to miss out on a family outing, a party, or a gathering. There is (in the title of an old play) “Laughter in the Room Next Door.” And if even a trivial suffering begins to isolate the sufferer, heavy suffering isolates acutely. Even a shared loss is experienced uniquely by each bereft person. When a child dies, the father alone knows what it is to be the father of this dead child; only the mother enters the unique depths of loss as the mother of this son or daughter. However much they share, at the deepest level they suffer alone. In his book *The Anatomy of Loneliness* Thomas Wolfe writes, “The most tragic, sublime and beautiful expression of loneliness which I have ever read is the Book of Job.”<sup>21</sup> We need to recognize that those who suffer, suffer alone. And Job is terribly alone.

### The Loneliness Job Foreshadows

Job in his awesome aloneness foreshadows another believer, an even greater man who endures an even deeper suffering. This believer too was with his dearest friends, in a garden outside Jerusalem. He told them to sit and wait while he prayed. He took with him his three closest friends “and began to be greatly distressed and troubled.” He said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” He went on a little farther, fell on the ground, and prayed “with loud cries and tears.” But when he came back he found them sleeping. “Could you not watch one hour?” he asked sadly (Mark 14:32–42; Hebrews 5:7). He prayed and wept alone. And the next day he suffered alone, stripped of his clothes, robbed of his friends, with even his mother having to keep her distance from the cross. He had said to his friends that although they would leave him alone, he was not alone, “for the Father is with me” (John 16:32). But in the deepest intensity of his suffering he cried out in anguish, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). As the old hymn puts it, “He bore the burden to Calvary, and suffered and died alone.”<sup>22</sup>

There is a deep sense in which the lonely sufferings of Jesus Christ mean that no believer today is called to enter Job’s loneliness in its full depth. As someone has put it:

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Suffering encloses a man in solitude. . . . Between Job and his friends an abyss was cleft. They regarded him with astonishment as a strange being. . . . But they could no longer get to him. Only Jesus could cross this abyss, descend into the abyss of misery, plunge into the deepest hell.<sup>23</sup>

However alone the believer in Christ may feel today, the reality is that he or she is not ultimately alone as Job was.

# 4

## Weep with Those Who Weep

JOB 3



WE COME NOW TO “a poem of immense power and poignancy.”<sup>1</sup>

“In the end it was Job who broke the silence” (v. 1 JB). This is like David in Psalm 39, struggling with the presence of the wicked:

I was mute and silent;  
I held my peace to no avail,  
and my distress grew worse.  
My heart became hot within me.  
As I mused, the fire burned;  
then I spoke with my tongue. . . . (Psalm 39:2, 3)

In a similar way Job’s inner anguish has been boiling up within him, and in the end he cannot hold it in. And out it pours in the darkest chapter of the book. And yet this outpouring of grief is not yet the beginning of a conversation.

We have watched the loneliness of Job. Now we listen to his loneliness. Chapter 3 is a soliloquy. Job is not speaking here to anybody. He is not speaking to his friends; the cycles of speeches begin with Eliphaz in chapter 4. He is not speaking to God. He is just speaking with himself. And although no doubt the friends are within earshot, and surely God is listening, this soliloquy deepens the solitariness of Job. Although his friends hear his words, it will become apparent that they have not really heard his heart. And although God has undoubtedly listened with a Father’s heart of love, Job has absolutely no awareness of that patient listening ear at this stage of the tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

A true Christian believer may be taken by God through times of deep and dark despair. This may happen to a man or woman who is affirmed by God as a believer before the darkness, who remains a believer in the darkness, and who will finally be vindicated by God as a believer after the darkness. He or she may be taken through this darkness even though he or she has not fallen into sin or backslidden from faith in Jesus Christ. This is a very important truth.

In Job 3 we must “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). When I first preached this chapter at the church where I was pastor, we did not sing at all in the service. Not a hymn, not a song. Although some of us had come to the service feeling quite cheerful, our own circumstances full of hope, we needed to weep with one who wept.

So we read together Psalm 137, where the people of God are asked to sing one of the songs of Zion but cannot sing, so deep is their distress. That is a terribly painful psalm, with its desperate cry for justice wrung from broken hearts: “We have seen our young children murdered, we have heard their screams—well, just maybe someone will do that to your children, you torturers, and when they do, good for them!” Those are strong words, but that is how they felt. “We cannot sing. And if you force us to be happy, it will add torment to our misery.” “Cheer up! Pull yourselves together!” said their tormentors. But they could not.

In that church service we listened to the puzzling story of William Cowper, the great Christian poet and hymn-writer—how his life was blighted first by the death of his mother when he was six, how fifty-three years later when someone sent him a portrait of her, he wrote a moving poem that makes it clear his grief was ever fresh. That poem included the lines:

I heard the bell tolled on thy burial day,  
I saw the hearse that bore thee slow away,  
And turning from my nursery window, drew  
A long, long sigh, and wept a last adieu!

We heard how Cowper's father sent him away to a boarding school where he was cruelly bullied, and he probably never recovered in his mind. And how after a two-year engagement his fiancée's father forbade the marriage. How before his conversion he suffered repeated episodes of deep depressive illness. “I was struck,” he wrote, “with such a dejection of spirits, as none but they who have felt the same, can have the least conception of. Day and night I was upon the rack, lying down in horror, and rising up in despair.”

We listened to how, aged thirty-one, Cowper suffered a catastrophic psy-

chotic breakdown, tried three times to take his own life, and was committed to an asylum (today it would be called a psychiatric hospital). This asylum was run by an evangelical Christian, and it was there, six months later, that Cowper met the Lord Jesus Christ and became his disciple. Describing his conversion he wrote, “Unless the Almighty arm had been under me, I think I should have died with gratitude and joy. My eyes filled with tears, and my voice choked with transport; I could only look up to heaven in silent fear, overwhelmed with wonder and love.”

It was a wonderful change and a real conversion. And yet on four more occasions in his life he suffered deep depressive illness. And shortly before he died of dropsy in 1800 one of the last things he said was, “I feel unutterable despair.”<sup>3</sup>

Now this was a Christian, a real Christian who bequeathed to the church some of its deepest and greatest hymns. In that service we looked together at his great hymn “O for a Closer Walk with God,” in which he laments the loss of the blessedness he had first known when he met the Lord Jesus and how his diagnosis for his despair is that there must be an idol in his life. If only he can be helped to tear that idol from God's throne in his life, then again his walk will be close with God, and calmness and serenity will return.

Where is the blessedness I knew,  
When first I saw the Lord?  
Where is the soul refreshing view  
Of Jesus and His word?

The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate'er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,  
And worship only Thee.

So shall my walk be close with God,  
Calm and serene my frame;  
So purer light shall mark the road  
That leads me to the Lamb.

And we considered the possibility that—great though that hymn is, and as much as it applies to many believers—it may have been written out of a false diagnosis of Cowper's own condition. His despair might not have had anything to do with backsliding or turning away from the worship of the true God. As we shall see in this study, Job's despair was not the result of backsliding or unforgiven sin.

In that service we also listened to the unrelieved laments of Psalm 88 and Jeremiah 20:14–18, where we read:

Cursed be the day  
 on which I was born!  
 The day when my mother bore me,  
 let it not be blessed!  
 Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father,  
 “A son is born to you,”  
 making him very glad.  
 Let that man be like the cities  
 that the LORD overthrew without pity;  
 let him hear a cry in the morning  
 and an alarm at noon,  
 because he did not kill me in the womb;  
 so my mother would have been my grave,  
 and her womb forever great.  
 Why did I come out from the womb  
 to see toil and sorrow,  
 and spend my days in shame?<sup>4</sup>

We listened to the lament of Job 3. And then, after the sermon, we went home. It was a sobering evening with one aim—that we might grasp that a real believer may go through blank despair and utter desperation. That a blameless believer, who has not fallen into sin, may go through utter dereliction, and yet at the end be seen to be a real believer. That we might grasp that we ourselves, if we walk closely with Christ, may go through very deep darkness, deeper even perhaps than if we had not walked faithfully in his footsteps. And that as we grasp this sobering truth we may learn to weep with those who weep.

Job 3 is a very important chapter for contemporary Christianity. There is a version of Christianity around that is shallow, trite, superficial, “happy clappy” (as some put it). It is a kind of Christianity that, as has been said, “would have had Jesus singing a chorus at the grave of Lazarus.”<sup>5</sup> We have all met it—easy triumphalism. We sing of God in one song that “in his presence our problems disappear,”<sup>6</sup> in another that “my love just keeps on growing.”<sup>7</sup> Neither was true for Job in chapter 3, and yet he was a real and blameless believer.

Someone has written a book about Christians who suffer depression and anxiety; it is called *I'm Not Supposed to Feel Like This*.<sup>8</sup> That is a provocative title. The authors state, “It is bad enough that I feel low or anxious. But on top of that I feel guilty: for I ought not to feel low, as a Christian. I feel that I

ought to be able to cast my cares upon him, for he cares for me (1 Peter 5:7). And yet somehow I can't."

In Job 1:1—2:10 we watched this blameless believer suffer heartrending loss—his possessions ruined, his children killed, his health destroyed. And we listened—as Job could not listen—to the conversations in Heaven that lay behind his loss—between God and the Satan, the enemy, and how the Lord gives his terrible permissions to the Satan to torture Job. Job is not being punished for his sin. Exactly the reverse: Job suffers precisely because he is conspicuously godly. And he suffers deep deprivation—physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual loss.

And yet still he shows faith. After the first two trials we hear two very remarkable and often celebrated responses.

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)

Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil? (2:10)

Both Jewish and Christian piety have wanted to major on Job's faith. This is not surprising, for Job's faith here is very wonderful. But the danger with our focusing on 1:21 and 2:10 is that we make Job's faith two-dimensional. "He suffered; he trusted," we say, "and so should we. End of story."

But it is far from the end of the story, for in 3:1 he curses the day of his birth. And we are brought up short, for Job then goes on lamenting and protesting chapter after chapter. We must not soften this. We must remember that at the end of the book God affirms that Job has spoken rightly of him (42:7), that Job is God's servant, that Job is a righteous man (who can therefore pray and expect his prayers to be heard). The despair of Job 3 is the authentic experience of a man affirmed by God at the start (1:8; 2:3) and affirmed again by God at the end (42:7). We need to remember that. It is very surprising, for Job 3 is a dark chapter.

The Satan has first attacked the outer skin of Job's possessions, wealth, and household. Then he has gone in closer, to ravage the skin so to speak of his family, killing his ten children. And then he has gone deeper still, to strike the literal skin of Job's body. But the Satan's attack has penetrated deeper still, for he has struck at Job's heart. And now for the first (but not the last) time in the book we hear the cry of Job's heart and soul. So far in the story we have mostly been looking *at* Job, listening to the heavenly conversations, looking from above at the earthly disasters, and hearing from Job only the brief

affirmations of pious trust (in 1:21; 2:10). We have watched his loneliness as his comforters sit with him in a terrible seven-day and seven-night silence. Chapter 2 ends with the words, “his suffering was very great.” We are about to learn just how great as we listen to his inner experience.<sup>9</sup>

So let us go with Job into his dark lament. As we sing with Job verse by dark verse, I want us to notice three features of his lament. The first is that in his darkness Job can only look back. His mind is full of regrets and is empty of hope for the future. The second is that he cannot rest but is unbearably troubled. In each of these themes we will find a paradoxical glimmer of light. It is not easy to find the gospel in Job 3, but—as in all of Scripture—it is there. It will not do to immerse ourselves in the darkness and then say in a shallow and banal way, “Ah, well, it was pretty bad. But thank God Jesus has come, and now it’s all OK.” It is not OK, and it is dishonest to pretend that it is. Instead we must see how glimmers of the gospel may be seen in the ashes of Job’s rubbish heap. The third feature is that Job’s lament extends beyond his individual experience to the common experience of undeserved sufferings by the godly throughout the world. In this too there is gospel.

Job’s words fall naturally into three parts: a curse (vv. 3–10), a lament (vv. 11–19), and an agonized question (vv. 20–26).

### A Curse (3:3–10)

Job’s outburst begins with a carefully crafted curse. Job “cursed the day of his birth” (v. 1). He does not curse God, as the Satan has said he would (1:11; 2:5) and as his wife exhorts him to do (2:9). But he comes right to the brink of doing this.<sup>10</sup> He curses (literally) “his day” (the *ESV* is probably right to translate this as “the day of his birth”).<sup>11</sup>

In verses 3–10 he expands on this to give a comprehensive curse on his very existence.

Let the day perish on which I was born,  
and the night that said,  
“A man is conceived.” (v. 3)

The day on which Job was born and the night nine months earlier in which he had been conceived together supply the two foundations of his existence as a human being, indeed as “a man.” The word usually indicates a grown male in his strength and dignity, as opposed to a child. This lament is not at the troubles that have come upon some insignificant creature, a weakling or a nobody; these disasters have come upon a man of distinction,



greatness, and dignity.<sup>12</sup> This is a comprehensive wish not only that he had not been born but that he had not even begun to exist as a fetus.

Verses 4, 5 expand on the day of his birth and then verses 6–10 on the night of his conception.

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. (vv. 4, 5)

Every moviemaker knows that darkness is associated with sadness, danger, and gloom. Often the sad parts of a movie are set on rainy days or with a blue filter to indicate nighttime! Now we must take that idea and press it far beyond the worst horror film, right to the gates of Hell.

When time began, darkness was everywhere, and “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day . . .” (Genesis 1:2–5). Light is about God, goodness, creation, order, and life. For a day to become night is for a part of creation to be undone.

Job piles up words for darkness and pours them onto the day of his birth. “Let that day be darkness!” he says. Let it never have come into existence as a day. “May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it” (v. 4). For God to “seek” or pay attention to something is for it to be a place or time where God is present in his life-giving power. The New Jerusalem will be “called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken” (Isaiah 62:12). To be “sought” by God is the opposite of being God-forsaken. Here at the root of Job’s existence is to be a God-forsaken “day” that is no day at all, a day that is night, a day with “Darkness at Noon.”<sup>13</sup>

“Let gloom and deep darkness claim it” (v. 5). This is not the darkness of a naturally cloudy day, but the “deep darkness” that is the shadow of death itself. This word means a thick, deep darkness, like that found in a mineshaft (28:3) or in the regions of the dead (10:21: “before I go . . . to the land of darkness and deep shadow”); it is the place of the gates of death (cf. 38:17 where “the gates of death” stand parallel to “the gates of deep darkness”). When God brings salvation, he “turns deep darkness into the morning” (Amos 5:8).<sup>14</sup> Job’s desire is that these death-powers of gloom and deep darkness would lay “claim” to Job’s birth day, that they would win back their demonic rights over this created day (Job 3:5). The word “claim” (*ga’al*) is also used, positively,

of the redemption accomplished by the kinsman-redeemer; here, in an ironic reversal, Job wishes that the powers of darkness would “redeem” his day from light into endless darkness.

“Let clouds”—that is, supernatural clouds that blot out every trace of light—“dwell upon it; let the blackness of the day terrify it” (v. 5). The “blackness of the day” means an eclipse, a source of supernatural dread and terror to ancient peoples. The word “terrify” speaks of “an uncanny feeling that causes every fiber of one’s being to shudder, leaving one powerless.”<sup>15</sup>

Life is so painful that Job wishes the roots of his existence had been recaptured by death and darkness, that he had never existed in the presence of God. He wishes God would rewind the tape of creation and undo the part that led to his existence.

And then, to press this wish home to its most radical conclusion, he does the same for the night of his conception in verses 6–10:

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. (vv. 6–8)

The night of Job’s conception had not been “night” in any spiritual sense. It had been a time of life and joy, a time of sexual joy for his parents, a time when a new human life sprang into being, a time in which that wonderful and astonishing moment had happened when two DNAs fused and a new human being was procreated. It had been a time that imaged the creative power of God triumphing over darkness and evil. But Job cannot rejoice in this. He wishes that night had been truly night in the darkest and deepest sense imaginable. He wishes it would be like the plague of darkness over Egypt at the time of the exodus or the night when Judas went out to betray Jesus (John comments, “And it was night,” John 13:30). He wishes it had been that kind of God-forsaken night.

He wishes that “thick darkness,” darker than any natural darkness, which is often illuminated by moonlight, starlight, or even candles, would “seize” that day, abduct it, take it out of the calendar. He wants it removed from the days and months of the year, so that every calendar from then on will have that night missing (v. 6).

Far from being an empty time, that night had been fruitful. But Job

wishes it had been “barren,” like rocky soil yielding no crops, like a barren woman giving no children. There had been in it a “joyful cry,” perhaps the literal joyful sound of his parents’ lovemaking,<sup>16</sup> but certainly the poetic joyful cry of the night itself personified, giving a shout of joy that a child was conceived. How many childless couples long for the night when that joyful sound will be heard! But Job wishes it had never been (v. 7).

He wishes that someone somewhere had the power and authority to “curse the day”; he wishes for someone to “rouse up Leviathan” (v. 8). Leviathan, whom we shall meet again in Job 41, was the storybook sea monster of chaos, the great enemy of the Creator whose mission it was to undo the order and beauty God had made. Job pictures Leviathan as having keepers, professional curse-bringers, who can whistle for Leviathan and call him to come and destroy part of the created order. He wants them to stir up from the depths<sup>17</sup> this chaotic, evil, supernatural sea monster whose design is always to bring disorder in place of order, death in place of life, darkness swallowing life. It is rather like in *The Lord of the Rings*, when those making up the Fellowship of the Ring are passing through the mines of Moria, and one of the hobbits accidentally stirs up the monstrous Balrog, with terrible consequences. But Job wants this to be done deliberately. He wishes for a supernatural demonic intervention to have prevented his conception and birth. He summons the most powerful sorcerers in the universe to do this for him. “I wish they would call him to curse the night of my conception, so that I might never have been born,” he says in essence.

Of course it is all fanciful. He cannot effectively curse the past. The past is past, and he cannot change it. “The language is fierce, but the curse has no teeth and the wish is hopeless. Its power is wholly literary, its extravagance the violence of Job’s feeling.”<sup>18</sup>

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. (vv. 9, 10)

Job wishes this night, as well as being supernaturally dark, would have been a night that never ended in day, a night that never saw the morning “stars” (traditionally Venus and Mercury) assuring another victory of light over darkness (v. 9). Here is a night in which watchmen can watch and wait for the morning (as in Psalm 130:5, 6), but they will watch and wait in vain, for morning will never come. They will never see “the eyelids of the morn-

ing,” the first light in the eastern sky that announces sunrise is at hand, the dawn personified as a beautiful woman whose eyelids are suggestive of the full splendor to be revealed when dawn comes (Job 3:9). But for Job there is no beauty of dawn, no hope, no confident waiting for a light at the end of his dark tunnel.

Why does Job make these terrible wishes? Because that night “did not shut the doors of my mother’s womb” to prevent new life from entering at the time of conception, to keep the sperm from fusing with the ovum, to prevent his first beginning to exist (v. 10).<sup>19</sup> This is a retrospective contraceptive wish applied to his own existence.

This is terrible. In normal life almost nothing can rival conception and birth as signs of hope. A wife tells us she is expecting a baby, and we rejoice. Or we ought to. Her position is quite literally pregnant with hope (even if sometimes mixed with feelings of inconvenience, alarm, or anxiety). Fundamentally there is excitement, and there are eager preparations. And when we hear of a safe birth this is even more so. The whole affair is full of looking forward. We ask expectant parents, “Is there anything you are looking forward to?” and they look at us as if we are mad. “What a silly question! Of course we’re looking forward. Our lives, and the mother’s body, are literally filled with hope and expectation.”

But for Job it has all gone into the negative. All he sees is a *No Entry* sign to the future. “If only I had never been.” “What are you looking forward to, Job?” “Nothing.” If he tries to look forward, all he can see is a blank wall of hopelessness as his affections and longings are turned back upon themselves in despair. “There is no future for me; would that there had been no past.” Here is bitter memory unsweetened by hope.

In St. Nicholas’ church in the village of Moreton in Dorset, England, there is a beautiful window engraved by Laurence Whistler. It is a memorial to a local fighter pilot shot down and killed in the Battle of Britain. It shows the broken propeller of his plane, and on it are two pairs of initials, his and his young wife’s, with the years of their marriage—1939–1940. What did that premature death do to that young widow? What happened in her mind to all the potential and hope with which their marriage began—the children they might have had, their future together? There is no comment in the window, but in those initials and those dates is such a compression of grief.

The last line of verse 10 is the climax of this section: “. . . nor hide trouble from my eyes.” Job’s conception and then Job’s birth have opened the way for Job’s troubles, for had those doors been closed, “trouble” would have been hidden from Job’s eyes. The word “trouble” (*amal*) speaks often in the book

of Job of Job's plight. Eliphaz says accusingly that those who "sow trouble" will reap the same, as Job evidently has (4:8). He says that "man is born to trouble" (5:7). Job himself speaks of "nights of *misery*" ('*amal*, 7:3). Zophar promises that if Job repents, "you will forget your *misery*" ('*amal*, 11:16). Eliphaz says the godless "conceive trouble" (15:35). And Job accuses his friends of being "*miserable* [troublesome] comforters" (16:2).

Job would never have known the unrest, the distress, that he now endures. He would never have known the pain of bankruptcy, the grief of bereavement, the misery of sickness, the evils that seem to him so dark that they render life meaningless and worthless. This theme of trouble and unrest dominates the remainder of the chapter. In 3:13 he longs to lie down and be quiet, to sleep, to be at rest. In verse 17 he yearns for a life unsullied by "troubling," a life of rest. And in verse 26, at the very end, he laments that he has no ease, no quiet, no rest, but only trouble. It is not simple pain that hurts Job; it is trouble and unrest.<sup>20</sup> Job is restless, but he is not resigned to his fate. He knows there is something terribly wrong. We will see that this unrest is itself a paradoxical sign of hope. Job has not given up; he will not give up. He is on a journey, we might almost say, through crucifixion to resurrection. But before the resurrection there must be this terrible loneliness as he is increasingly isolated not only from other human beings but from his own past and future.<sup>21</sup> He hangs suspended between past and future, utterly alone and utterly without the experience of hope in his heart. And yet he will not give up.

### A Lament (vv. 11–19)

And so Job's pointless, ineffective curse merges into a desperate lament. This lament is carefully structured in two parts. Each part begins with the question "Why?" and ends with a description of the place of the dead (v. 11). Each of these parts helps us to understand the other.

Part I is found in verses 11–15.

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.

Part II is seen in verses 16–19.

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.

Part I begins with the question, if I had to be conceived and born, why did I have to be born and stay alive? Why could I not have been just another statistic of perinatal mortality, dying at or immediately after birth? There is a movement in verses 11, 12 from womb to knees to breasts. This is a movement toward sustainable life on earth.

The knees may be the knees of Job's father or of his mother. For a father to take a baby on his knees seems to have indicated acceptance of paternity and responsibility for the child's support and future. In a variation of this custom, the children of Joseph's grandson Machir are described as being, literally, "born on Joseph's knees" (Genesis 50:23; the *ESV* renders this as "counted as Joseph's own"). More naturally here, however, it would seem to refer to a mother taking a baby on her knees prior to putting the baby to her breast. In Isaiah 66:12 those who love Jerusalem are described as being lovingly "bounced upon her knees" in the context of being nursed and fed. This would seem to be the picture here. Job had traveled from his mother's womb to being dandled fondly on his mother's knees and then lovingly put to his mother's breast. It is a beautiful picture of a young life loved and nurtured. But for Job it was a disaster. All it did was to launch him into a life that would end with unbearable misery.

Job longs for the place of the dead. Verse 13 piles up four consecutive images of rest. First, "I would have lain down." That is, "I am tired; I want to lie down." Then he would have "been quiet," away from the noise and tumult. Third, he would have enjoyed the peace of sleep. Lastly, he "would have been at rest." This is normal human experience at night: we lie down, we are quiet, we sleep, we find rest. It is rest for which Job most deeply longs.

But who would have been his resting companions? Here we come up against a surprise. In verses 14, 15 Job speaks of a familiar threesome of powerful men—"kings . . . counselors . . . princes." The word "counselors" means senior ministers of state, such as Hushai and Ahithophel under King David (2 Samuel 15–17). The word "princes" simply means powerful people. This

threesome appears in Ezra 7:28 (“ . . . the king and his counselors, and . . . all the king’s mighty officers”) and Ezra 8:25 (“ . . . the king and his counselors and his lords”). These three are a comprehensive way of saying “powerful and influential people in the world.” In our terms, they include presidents, prime ministers, senators, media barons, CEOs, billionaires, and anyone else who exercises power.

Job describes these men as having “rebuilt ruins for themselves” and having had “gold” and having “filled their houses with silver” (vv. 14, 15). The word “ruins” may refer to ruined cities that these powerful people sought to rebuild as a mark of their greatness.<sup>22</sup> God himself speaks of his intention to rebuild the ruins of Jerusalem (Isaiah 44:26; 58:12).<sup>23</sup> This is possible. In the twentieth century we saw Saddam Hussein proclaiming his greatness by his plans to rebuild ancient Babylon.

Alternatively, the text may mean not that they *rebuilt* ruins but that the buildings they built in their lifetime are now fallen into ruin. The NIV reads, “who built for themselves places now lying in ruins” (v. 15). This accords better with Job’s argument here. The reference to wealth and filling their houses with silver in verse 15 would seem to be parallel to the description of the ruins in verse 14, and this may help us understand the imagery. One persuasive suggestion is that the “houses” of verse 15 are the burial places they built for themselves, which they filled with wealth to take with them to the afterlife.<sup>24</sup> The now ruined state of these monuments and mausoleums shows that in fact these powerful men are in the place of the dead; they are now on the same level as everybody else. They take with them neither their wealth nor their power.

However we understand the detail of verses 14, 15, the main picture is clear: the place of the dead is where powerful people end up, no matter how rich and strong they were in this life. But why does Job specifically speak of his longing to be with *these* people? He is surely not expecting a privileged status in Sheol!<sup>25</sup> The key would seem to be found in the second part of the lament, in verses 17–19.<sup>26</sup>

Verse 16 echoes verses 11, 12, with essentially the same question: “Why, if I had to be born, could I not have been stillborn and never see the light of life? I wish I had gone straight from the womb to Sheol.”<sup>27</sup>

But in verses 17–19 we see a different portrait of his prospective Sheol companions. Instead of just kings, counselors, and princes, we now have two groups—on the one hand “the wicked” who cause turmoil and trouble, “the taskmaster,” “the great,” the “master” and on the other hand “the weary,” “the prisoners,” “the small,” and “the slave.” The kings, counselors, and princes are now seen as the oppressors. Here humanity is viewed through the lens of

power and divided into the powerful and the powerless. Job clearly identifies himself with the latter group. The former are wicked and cause trouble for the latter. The former run slave labor camps. The former exploit the weak and use their power for their own advantage. The former are the slave owners and slave drivers. Surely these are the same as the kings, counselors, and princes. They may have been rich and powerful, but they are wicked. And it is their selfish wickedness that causes so much of the suffering on earth. Job's distress here broadens beyond his own awful suffering. He knows that he is not the only human being on earth to experience unfair misery.

In Isaiah 14 the King of Babylon comes to Sheol, and when he arrives they say, "Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms . . . ?" (Isaiah 14:16). When alive, he had made people tremble and shake; he had caused trouble and turmoil. He causes it no more.

The image of "the voice of the taskmaster" is a haunting one (v. 18). It contains echoes of the Pharaoh's cruel taskmasters before the exodus (Exodus 3:7), of "the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor" in Isaiah 9:4, and of the oppressor who marches roughshod over people in Zechariah 9:8. It is a penetrating image, heavy with the long shadow of human cruelty over the lives of sufferers. At the very end of his classic and deeply moving two-volume account of Auschwitz and his return home, the Italian Jew Primo Levi recounts "a dream full of horror [which] has not ceased to visit me." "It is a dream within a dream" in which he begins in peace, perhaps sitting at a table with his family or friends or in the green countryside. And yet he feels

a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat." And then "everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the centre of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I *know* what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager [concentration camp] once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues . . . a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, "*Wstawàch*."<sup>28</sup>

The voice of the slave driver cast a long shadow. The nightmare shadow of that voice never left him. Perhaps it echoed in his mind at the time of his death in the 1960s, very possibly by suicide.



Job can find no rest on earth because he is now identified with the small, the weak, the downtrodden. He experiences with them the turmoil and restless misery of being oppressed by forces stronger than himself. It is probably not fanciful to extend this from the oppression of the Sabaeans and Chaldeans, who caused him such trouble in chapters 1, 2 to the evil oppression of his spiritual enemy, the Satan.

So in verses 14, 15 it is not that Job particularly wants to be with the kings, counselors, and princes. After all, among them will no doubt be the Sabeian and Chaldean chieftains who ravaged his property. Rather he believes that in Sheol at last they will no longer be able to cause him trouble.

“If I had been stillborn,” says Job in effect, “I would have been in Sheol, the place of the dead. And that would be peace.” In his clearer moments Job knows that is not true, that Sheol is a terrible place. In 17:14 he knows it is where decay and the worm are our father and mother. But in his desperation he thinks it’s the place of rest.

The deep reason for Job’s unrest is that he cannot understand his sufferings. He cannot understand why a believer, a man of godliness and piety, suffers with such mind-numbing intensity. This inexplicable trouble shakes the foundations of his moral and ordered universe. It is for this reason he cannot and will not rest until he has found some resolution to this cosmic question.<sup>29</sup>

At heart human rest is rooted in the rest of God when he looks on a completed and good creation (Genesis 2:1–3). Rest is predicated on cosmic order, a creation in which there are proper boundaries, in which virtue is rewarded and vice punished, in which there is justice and in which goodness triumphs. Job longs to share that rest with God. At the moment his experience is the polar opposite. So he ends his speech with a desperate question.

#### An Agonized Question (3:20–26)

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<sup>30</sup> to a man whose way is hidden,  
 whom God has hedged in?

In verse 20 “him who is in misery” is singular; we think of Job. But “the bitter in soul” is plural. Job’s question does not relate to Job alone. Although God is not mentioned by name, the verb “given” implies that God has given

it, as in 1:21 (“The LORD gave . . .”); it is from the Lord that we “receive” good things and bad things (2:10). The expression “bitter in soul” speaks of a deep distress. The childless and desperate Hannah experiences this deep distress (1 Samuel 1:10). It is the bitter misery of the defeated and crushed. Hushai says to Absalom that David and his men are “enraged” (literally, “bitter of soul,” *ESV* footnote) after their expulsion from Jerusalem (2 Samuel 17:8). In Ezekiel’s lament for the trading city of Tyre, he speaks of the mariners weeping over her “in bitterness of soul” (Ezekiel 27:31). The expression is used of parents who have lost a child in 1 Samuel 30:6 and of the sick and despairing King Hezekiah in Isaiah 38:15. These are men and women who have lost all hope and who cannot see the point of continuing to live. Why does God give them life in the first place? asks Job.

Verses 21, 22 speak with biting irony. These miserable people, of whom Job is one, long for death with the passionate desire of the treasure hunter, rushing out to the wild west in the gold rush, dreaming of death as the gold-hunter dreams of the yellow stuff. And when they die, their exuberance can only be understood when you think of the treasure hunter striking a rich vein of gold. The Roman writer Ovid speaks of a terrible curse so that someone has a reason for dying but not the means.<sup>31</sup> Job feels like a man on a life-support machine who longs for it to be switched off.

Job is obsessed with death as the only way out of trouble because life is so futile. Wilfred Owen gets this so poignantly in his poem “Futility.”<sup>32</sup>

Move him into the sun—  
Gently its touch awoke him once,  
At home, whispering of fields unsown.  
Always it woke him, even in France,  
Until this morning and this snow.  
If anything might rouse him now  
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds,—  
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.  
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,  
Full-nerved—still warm—too hard to stir?  
Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
To break earth’s sleep at all?

Owen writes of the untimely death of a young British farmer on the fields of the Western Front in World War I. In this poignant poem Owen moves from

one particular futile tragedy to a world that seems to have no point. The sun used to wake this young man; it won't wake him now. That same sun gave life to the cold earth (at creation); why? And in his anger he shouts, "O what made fatuous sunbeams toil to break earth's sleep at all?" Why did God bother to make the world at all? This is what Job feels.

In verse 23 he describes himself and others like him as walking on a way or path that is "hidden" from God's blessing and grace, a God-forsaken walk, and a path that is "hedged in" by God. To be "hidden" suggests it has no purpose or meaning. To be "hedged in" is an ironic twist to what the Satan had said. In 1:10 the Satan said that Job's happy prosperous life was hedged in by God's gracious protection.<sup>33</sup> Now he experiences a different kind of hedge, a hedge of razor wire, not to keep the marauder out, but to keep Job imprisoned in a miserable life he longs to leave but cannot, a life that is locked in to trouble, with the key thrown away. He speaks of it again in a later chapter: "[God] has walled up my way, so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths" (19:8).<sup>34</sup>

It is a life of cramped narrowness, just as the world of an elderly person today gradually contracts from the world to the nation (no longer going abroad), from the nation to the neighborhood, from the neighborhood to the occasional walk in the garden, from the garden to being housebound, from the house to the bedroom, and from the bedroom to the coffin or casket. Job feels this is happening to him. He is hedged in, trapped, and he cannot escape. And he wonders why God is doing it. What is the point? Is there a point?

In verses 24–26 there is a great emphasis on what "comes" upon Job. His sighing "comes" to him (v. 24a); his groanings "are poured out" over him like water (v. 24b); what he fears "comes" upon him, and what he dreads "befalls" him (v. 25). He has no rest, but trouble "comes" (v. 26). He is the target. Things happen to him. What is "given" by God "comes" to Job. These things are the reality of his experience. But he does not, and cannot, know why. This is the source of his deep unease. He knows that God is the author, and he knows that these things have come to him. But why?

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. (vv. 24–26)

The word "sighing" or groaning is a strong word (v. 24). It means something like "my shrieks,"<sup>35</sup> the loud moans and wails that come from people

devastated by tragedy. It is the kind of thing we see after an earthquake or terrorist bombing, when the injured and bereaved cry out aloud in their misery. Under the Pharaoh, the Hebrew slaves “groaned” (the same word) because of their slavery (Exodus 2:23). At the exile Jerusalem’s people wail aloud (Lamentations 1:4, 8). It is an exhausting grief. Jeremiah’s companion Baruch says, “I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest” (Jeremiah 45:3). This is Job’s daily diet. It comes to him in place of bread; he can only feed on his own misery. This is the lament of David in Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?” This grief is fulfilled many years later when a man cries out from a cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Verse 25 speaks of the things Job had most dreaded, which are now coming upon him. Right at the start, in 1:4, 5, we see Job anxious about possible troubles. But whatever troubles he may have dreaded in his worst nightmares are now fulfilled.

Verse 26 is the climax of the speech, with its four images of rest/unrest. Job is “not at ease,” he has no “quiet,” he has “no rest,” but instead just “trouble.” Three negatives (no “ease,” no “quiet,” “no rest”) and one terrible positive (“trouble”). This is torment not just of body, terrible though that is, but of the soul. The word “trouble” is the keynote and the closing word of the speech. What a contrast to the idyllic picture of 1:1–3, a portrayal of a restful prosperity untroubled by pain, a reassuring regularity unbroken by disorder.

The question “Why?” will echo throughout the book (v. 20). We are drawn by the tragedy of Job into bigger and more alarming questions than the individual tragedy of Job himself. Job wants not only to undo his own life but to question the creation of the world. Genesis 1 moves from darkness to light, from night to day, from inanimacy to life. Job wants to put it all into reverse.

### Where Is the Gospel in Job 3?

We know if we are Christians that for every believer the best is yet to be. Always there are better things ahead; always there is hope, because the future is God’s future, and our destiny is glory. But we need to recognize that there may be times in the life of a believer when that future appears utterly blank and all we can do is look back with regret, consumed with “if only.” That is where Job is in Job 3. It is a bleak time.

So where is the gospel in Job 3? It is not very obvious, but it is there in three ways.

*Even in the Darkness Job Cannot Avoid God*

It seems unlikely that Job is conscious of the presence of God. Perhaps he would have echoed the words of C. S. Lewis in his moving personal reflection after the death of his wife (*A Grief Observed*). Lewis asks the question, in bereavement, “Where is God?” and he answers:

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.<sup>36</sup>

And yet Job knows that he cannot turn away from that door. Right here in the depth of his misery he knows he has to deal with God. We shall see as the book unfolds that this is a great theme in his journey. Even in God’s felt absence he is somehow there. We see this in the word “given” in verse 20. Light and life have been given, given by God, and therefore it is with God we must deal. Even in his absence God is present as the focus of Job’s loss.

There is a glimmer of hope here. But it will take some time for that glimmer to become a ray.

*Job’s Restlessness Is a Paradoxical Sign of Hope*

We have seen that the dominant tone of chapter 3 is restlessness. Job cannot rest with things as they are. And therefore he will not rest. In his weakness, misery, and distress there is yet an energy within Job that surges and drives him to discover the God who has treated him like this. Although he says he has no hope, his restlessness betrays him. A restless man is not a defeated man; a troubled man is not a hopeless man resigned to his fate. If there really is no hope, there is no point asking “Why?” (v. 20). And yet Job does ask “Why?” and he asks it repeatedly and energetically. He says he wants to die, but his restless words betray him, for they point inexorably to life and resurrection.

*Job’s Darkness Anticipates a Deeper Darkness*

At the end of Job 3 we leave Job terribly alone, sitting with friends who want to comfort him but have nothing to say. We leave him able only to look back

with bitter regrets that he ever lived, mired in deep darkness. Is there anything that can be said to him?

I believe there is; even at this stage there is something to be said, beyond the silence of bankruptcy, beyond even the silence of sympathy. We saw when considering 2:11–13 that Job’s loneliness foreshadowed a greater loneliness. His darkness likewise anticipates a deeper darkness. Two thousand years ago another blameless believer was in deep darkness, hanging on a cross at midday. Deeper than the darkness of night. Deeper even than Job’s darkness. And from his lips came the cry of dereliction, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:33, 34). In some strange way, because Job’s darkness of soul foreshadows the darkness of the cross there is within it hope of rescue.



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