

Thirteen

THE FAITH OF JOB—III

In the last section, we were looking at Job's faith as it related to life after death. We saw that Job was very conscious of death: there were times when he longed for it in his suffering, and prayed for it. He expected it to come very soon—he expected to die in his sufferings. So it is clear that his hope was not confined to this life. Where the comforters tried to tie everything up neatly this side of death, with a one-to-one correspondence in this life between virtue and reward, sin and punishment. Job had pointed out that it does not work that way. And even though he thinks he is going to die, he fully expects to be vindicated. We saw that must mean that Job's hope is not at all in himself, in his own merit or deserving. Death is the point at which we can do no more, if we ever could, for ourselves. Job's hope is entirely in God. If his hope is for vindication after death, then that has to be so. If we are going to be vindicated beyond that point at which we can do no more, then it must be, all along, something that God is going to do.

Let us remind ourselves of those great verses at the centre of chapter 14, from verse 13:

Oh that you would hide me in Sheol,
that you would conceal me until your wrath is past,
that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!

‘After I have gone to the place of the dead, remember me!’

If mortals die, will they live again?

That is a question that is not answered, but obviously he hopes, very surely, to be vindicated after death:

All the days of my service I would wait
until my release should come.

And here is the heart of it:

You would call, and I would answer you;
you would long for the work of your hands.

That even in death, God can call to the one He has loved, and the one He has loved can answer in response.

For then you would number my steps,
you would not keep watch over my sin;
my transgression would be sealed up in a bag,
and you would cover over my iniquity.

All that wrong would be dead and gone, and the person would be alive to God.

DOES JOB HAVE NEW TESTAMENT FAITH?

We must be careful not to say that what we read here of Job's hope and Job's faith is full-blown faith in the resurrection of the dead as it is presented in the New Testament. That can be a rather glib way of using the Scriptures: to say for instance that Job is saying here everything that Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 15 or 2 Corinthians 5 about the resurrection and the resurrection body. Yet what we have here is full blown faith in God, death notwithstanding. That fully comports with the revelation that was given to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5, based on our experience of the actual resurrection of Christ. When Job spoke, Christ had not been raised, and Job knew nothing of that, so we cannot expect him to have the same kind of belief in the resurrection of the dead as Paul did. Paul not only knew that Christ is risen, but in the things that had been shown him, perhaps when he was 'caught up to the third heaven' (2 Corinthians 12:2), he received a revelation of that life to come, the resurrection body—otherwise I don't think he would have been able to tell us some of the things he says about that.

We need to be aware that some people coming to the Old Testament—especially as we have these days professors or specialists in the Old Testament—sometimes want to cut off the Old Testament from the New Testament. That is their area of speciality, so they are inclined just to focus on that, and want to make it an entity in itself. The Christian church has never regarded the Old Testament as an entity in itself. At the time of the apostles, as Geoffrey Bingham has said many times, their job was to interpret the Old Testament in the light of the events of Christ, and the events of Christ in the light of the Old Testament. So the Old Testament, as we see it, is never complete in itself. Sometimes also some scholars see the Old Testament in a particular light. They say, 'People could not have believed in something like the resurrection of the dead early on in the Old Testament—that's something that came much later'. They may say, 'It came from the Persians at the time of the exile', or some such. We need to take that with a pinch of salt too, and realise that is not the only possible point of view, that belief in resurrection was something that came very late in the experience of Israel. A quote from Francis Anderson's commentary on Job (Tyndale Series, p. 169): 'Scholars influenced often by their *a priori* belief that the idea of resurrection arose quite late in Israel's thought . . . we believe that this opinion commonly held by Old Testament scholars is mistaken. On the contrary, belief in the continuation of personal human life with God after death was, we believe, part of Israel's distinctive faith from its beginnings. We cannot prove this here, but some idea of the new approach needed can be gained from Nicholas J. Trompe, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (1969).' So it is interesting that the earlier commonly-held view is now disputed. Jesus was quite clear that resurrection was there right from the beginning. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection of the dead, and this was the big argument that Paul had with them: he was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees accepted the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures and the references to resurrection that are there, but the Sadducees believed only in the first five books of the Old Testament, and they said they did not find resurrection there. Jesus, arguing with them, went right back to the book Genesis and showed them that when God said to Moses, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', who by that time were dead and gone, Jesus said that they are not dead to God, 'for to him all of them are alive' (Luke 20:37–38). So he says, 'Why do you say there is no resurrection of the dead?' As far as Jesus was concerned, the reality of the

resurrection was there from the beginning. It is good to see some scholars catching up with that these days!

HOW ARE WE TO READ THE BIBLE?

Just to say a little more about the way we approach Scripture: I have found it very helpful to see three elements in this. Some say the only way you can read Scripture, like this in the Old Testament, is to look at it in its original context and see what it meant to those who wrote it. That is the full gamut of its meaning. Others come to the Scriptures and say, I will open the Scriptures at a passage and see what God is saying to me now. Never mind what it meant originally—the Holy Spirit will bring it straight to me now. I guess we have all had experiences of how the Scriptures have suddenly spoken to us directly in that way, with something that pertains to our life, that concerns us in the present. Between those two, there is a missing link somewhere. I think it is because we disregard the work of the Holy Spirit in the writing and bringing together of the Scriptures. Those who originally wrote the Scriptures were obviously writing them for their own time, and in their own context. But we believe the Scriptures were written under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit. Look at 2 Peter 1:20–21:

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God

Whatever the writers understood by what they were writing, and the context in which they were writing it, the Holy Spirit was operating in what they wrote, and in the fact that what they wrote was preserved, and in the fact that what was preserved was included in the Scriptures. They knew what they were writing, to a certain extent, but the Holy Spirit had a plan, which encompassed the whole of what God was going to do in history, and in the gathering of these Scriptures. Even those who wrote those things sensed this. Turn back to 1 Peter 1:10–12:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory.

While these great prophets and others were writing these things—such as the servant songs of Isaiah—they would have said, What am I really saying here? I know this is going beyond my own time: when is it going to be fulfilled? How will it come to pass? They were longing to see the full dimensions of what they were talking about:

It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

There were things being revealed through them that even the angels did not know or understand, but which have now come to us in the gospel of grace.

That is why I am bold in speaking of the Book of Job to speak of things like the resurrection of the dead in connection with the hope that Job had. I hope that is not too complicated for you to follow. That is a good framework to have. The three elements of looking at the Scriptures are:

- First we must understand what they mean in their original context. For that we need all the help we can get from the biblical scholars.
- Then we must attempt to see what the Holy Spirit intended by them in the context of the whole plan of God, from beginning to end. For that we need to be soaked in the Scriptures and their whole mindset, and know them through and through.
- Then, with that work done, we can receive God's direct word for us now, today. For this we need, with open Bibles, to wait prayerfully on the Holy Spirit of God.

That, I believe, is a full use of the Scriptures. I trust that comes through with what we are doing in the Book of Job.

This is consistent with the constant thrust of the New Testament. Paul in Romans 3:21, when speaking of the grace of justification, says it is something that goes beyond the law of God, but the law and the prophets (of the Old Testament) bear witness to it. Job was one of those prophets. There are constant longings, hints, glimpses, through the Old Testament, of what God would do in Christ, with faith and hope set on that, even while it remains yet unknown.

While we are in the New Testament, it would be good to look at the reference to Job in James 5:10–11:

As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

The endurance or steadfastness of Job, the purpose of the Lord, the compassion and mercy of the Lord, are fully testified to in the Book of Job, as James says here.

At the end of Hebrews 11, where there is that great roll-call of the men and women of faith, it says that these all set their faith on what God was going to do which has come to us now (verses 39–40):

all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Isn't it wonderful to see how we fit with the great saints Abraham, David and Job; and yet they were waiting and longing for what we know; and they sensed there was something still to come that would not be complete until we were here to be a part of it! It is a great place to be, to know where we are in all of that.

TO GOD ALONE I TURN

We saw in chapter 14 of the Book of Job that he spoke of his death: there was the hint of the release and the resurrection to be effected by God Himself. Even if that was not a coherent thing in Job's own mind, that is where his faith and hope were set. Look now at chapter 16, that we have looked at before. Notice here the contrast with the friends, the comforters. In chapter 15 Eliphaz has just set forth his faith and said that the wicked come to an end and there is no hope there, there is complete despair. Eliphaz does not mention God much at all: he says that the wicked have stretched their hand against God and bidden defiance to the Almighty, but he does not say that God brings them to this. He just says that is what they do, so this is what happens to

them. It is Job all the time who brings it back to the direct personal relationship and action of God. Listen what he says about God (*italicised here*) in 16:7–17:

Surely now *God* has worn me out;
he has made desolate all my company.
 And *he* has shrivelled me up,
 which is a witness against me;
 my leanness has risen up against me,
 and it testifies to my face.
He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me;
he has gnashed his teeth at me;
 my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.
 They have gaped at me with their mouths;
 they have struck me insolently on the cheek;
 they mass themselves together against me.
God gives me up to the ungodly,
 and casts me into the hands of the wicked.
 I was at ease, and *he* broke me in two;
he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;
he set me up as his target;
 his archers surround me.
He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy;
he pours out my gall on the ground.
He bursts upon me again and again;
he rushes at me like a warrior.
 I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin,
 and have laid my strength in the dust.
 My face is red with weeping,
 and deep darkness is on my eyelids,
 though there is no violence in my hands,
 and my prayer is pure.”

Job allows the action of no one else but God in his sufferings. So to whom else can he turn for release from suffering and for vindication but to God? 16:18–21:

“O earth, do not cover my blood;
 let my outcry find no resting place.
 Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven,
 and he that vouches for me is on high.
 My friends scorn me;
 my eye pours out tears to God,
 that he would maintain the right of a mortal with God,
 as one does for a neighbour.”

If all is the action of God, to whom else can we turn but to God for mercy and vindication. Job is saying, ‘God is the one who is doing all this to me’. A bit like the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:39: ‘See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.’ So, Job says, ‘my witness is in heaven . . . my eye pours out tears to God, that *he* would maintain the right of a mortal with God, as one does for a neighbour’—even though he expects soon to die.

‘HE WOULD GIVE HEED TO ME’

Turn now to chapter 23. Here is the longing of Job that he will come before God. It is a very strong and a very confident longing:

23:1 Then Job answered:
2 'Today also my complaint is bitter;
his hand is heavy despite my groaning.
3 Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
4 I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
5 I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.
6 Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.'

Remember back in 9:13–21, where Job was particularly feeling the pressure of his sufferings, and was aware of the unchallengeable power of God:

God will not turn back his anger;
the helpers of Rahab bowed beneath him.
How then can I answer him,
choosing my words with him?
Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.
If I summoned him and he answered me,
I do not believe that he would listen to my voice.
For he crushes me with a tempest,
and multiplies my wounds without cause;
he will not let me get my breath,
but fills me with bitterness.
If it is a contest of strength, he is the strong one!
If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?
Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me;
though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.'

There is almost a hopelessness there, that he could ever get any way with God if he was face to face with Him, because of God's great power; that even if he did come before him, even what he tried to say about himself would come out sounding perverse and condemnatory, and he would not be able to get anywhere with God. There are times, too, when Job speaks out of turn, and God has a word with him about that later on. We can understand the kind of pressure he is under there. But in chapter 23 he seems to have come to a position of greater sureness and certainty. Earlier, in answer to his question in verse 6, 'Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?' Job knew jolly well that if He did, Job would not stand a chance. Now he says, 'No: God is so much greater in power than I am, but *He will not use that advantage that He has against me*. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No! He would give heed to me!' What a wonderful understanding of the relationship that he had with this great God! And the tenderness of that great God, and the readiness of the great God to speak and to listen to the one whom He has made, and whom He loves:

23:6 Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.
7 There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.'

us to know that in such circumstances; and all that time not to depart from the commandment of His lips, and to treasure in your bosom the words of His mouth:

23:11 My foot has held fast to his steps;
I have kept his way and have not turned aside.
12 I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.

Some translations translate verse 13 as 'He is unchangeable', but it literally says, 'He is in one'—He is one. 'Unchangeable' suggests something unfeeling or inflexible, but here Job is saying much the same as Deuteronomy 6:4: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one' or 'The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.' He is the one from whom *all* things have come. There is no division in God. So what God does to bring suffering is not over against any purpose of His that He might have to bring release and salvation. God is one:

23:13 But he stands alone and who can dissuade him?
What he desires, that he does.

It is good to know that. If we are not happy with what God does, then we will say 'What he desires, that he does' in a grim and resentful tone, and put up with it. But that is not at all the tone in which Job is saying this. That is more like what the comforters were saying. Job is thrilled that what God desires, that He does, because that is his hope.

23:14 For he will complete what he appoints for me;
and many such things are in his mind.

Meanwhile, as we have seen, none of this is evident in what Job is presently going through. Job's faith must be entirely reliant on the sustaining faithfulness of God to him, in the darkness:

23:15 Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
when I consider, I am in dread of him.
16 God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
17 If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!

I SHALL SEE GOD

We have seen before that the highest expression of Job's faith is in chapter 19. Before we come to that, let us hear again from Francis Anderson's commentary, page 209:

What Job is seeking is confirmation from God, in contradiction of what his friends have been saying, that his right relationship with God, which, throughout his whole life had been grounded in 'the fear of God' and not in the merit of his own good deeds, was unimpaired. Job's expanding faith will now embrace his sufferings as something between himself and God within that right relationship.

The thing that has been most important to Job right through, in the days of his prosperity and now even more urgently in the days of his adversity, was his relationship with God: the fact that he had always loved and feared God and had known God relating with him. That is the very thing that he never wants to let go of,

FAITH IN A SAVING GOD

I am sometimes asked, What about the people who did not know about Christ or do not know about Jesus: are they saved? That is not a question that we have to give an answer to. Whether you are interested in that question or not, Jesus told this parable in Luke 18:9–14 to delineate what saving faith is all about:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

That is a good description of the attitude that the comforters were having; not that they trusted that they were righteous: they thought that is what Job was doing and despising them, but we have seen that is not the case. They did come to a position of despising Job.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Sometimes that parable can be taken perversely to say that if you really crawl to God and humble yourself to Him, if you say, 'God, I am a terrible person', then God will say, 'Good on you! Yes, I will justify you.' That is not what is happening here. Look at the prayer of the tax collector: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' It is a very clear, open, honest prayer. It has tremendous faith: it is saying, 'God, be propitious, be favourable, to me, a sinner'. In a sense, it is asking God to do the impossible. How could God ever look favourably on a sinner? God can only look favourably on a sinner if He is propitious—if He Himself does something to propitiate the wrath He must have against sin, and to pay it all out. 'God be propitious to me, a sinner.' The tax collector does not say, 'through Jesus Christ our Lord'. But he is praying, in effect, to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He does not know how God is going to do it, but he says: 'God, I believe—my faith is—that You can do something to make Yourself propitious to me, and I am trusting You to do it'. Is not that exactly what David did, so many years before Christ? He believed in the total forgiveness of sins, and in Psalm 51 he said: 'God, *You* do something; *You* make me clean'. David perhaps had no idea how God would do that, but he trusted that God would do it. Abraham had the same faith: he believed in God, and was justified. He believed in the God who, in His historical purpose, that He was beginning to set out before Abraham, would bring something to bear that would make propitiation for sinners. That was the basis also of Job's faith, however incoherent it might have been, however dimly perceived, yet it was there, and it was strong: 'God, be propitious to me, a sinner. And I am sure that You are such a God that You can do that, and receive me before You, upright and blameless, face to face, with great joy.'

This is the faith that has now been opened out to us in the preaching of the apostles, and in the gospel of grace that has come to us, and so we stand with Job, and with all those who have gone before as well. As we hear these things, we can have the same conviction that Job had, on perhaps even surer grounds than were available to him at the time—though God was still the same God then as we know Him to be now. This is what John writes in his first letter, 1 John 5:13–15, 20:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him . . . And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.