

Why Be Good? | The Book of Jōb

“Job’s Friends – Job’s Lament”

Job 2.11 – 3.11

4.28.24

2.11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him. ¹² When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. ¹³ Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.

Afterward Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. ² And Job said, ³ "Let the day perish on which I was to be born, And the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.' ⁴ "May that day be darkness; Let not God above care for it, Nor light shine on it. ⁵ "Let darkness and black gloom claim it; Let a cloud settle on it; Let the blackness of the day terrify it. ⁶ "As for that night, let darkness seize it; Let it not rejoice among the days of the year; Let it not come into the number of the months. ⁷ "Behold, let that night be barren; Let no joyful shout enter it. ⁸ "Let those curse it who curse the day, Who are prepared to rouse Leviathan. ⁹ "Let the stars of its twilight be darkened; Let it wait for light but have none, And let it not see the breaking dawn; ¹⁰ Because it did not shut the opening of my mother's womb, Or hide trouble from my eyes. ¹¹ "Why did I not die at birth, Come forth from the womb and expire?"

This is our second week in *The Book of Jōb*. If you were unable to be with us last week (and if you hope to hear more of this series) I highly recommend you listen to the introduction (“*The Set-Up*”) from last Sunday... I HOPE it actually will set up the series for you (see website/app).

We said, last week that *Jōb* is a wisdom-book – that’s a kind of informal genre or category of writing found in the Bible (one of many types of literature in the 66 books of the Bible). AND where *The Book of Proverbs* is perhaps the best-known wisdom-book in the Hebrew Bible, *Ecclesiastes* and *Jōb* are a more reflective type of wisdom literature. The *Proverbs* are frequently generalizations of how life often works (or at least OUGHT to work) and they’re often built on a “Do THIS and get THAT” model. “*He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be answered.*” (21.13) It’s generally the case – misers and heartless people offend their friends and later when callous, unkind people NEED help, there’s no one there to help them.

And in an ultimate sense mean people who don't have a genuine change of heart will not be answered even in death (think of Jesus Christ's parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" – 16.19) BUT, let's face it, sometimes uncaring, cruel people who don't care for the poor DON'T cry out in need... and may die very wealthy.

Ecclesiastes and *Jōb* asks WHY that is: why isn't life fair? Why do loving people sometimes suffer profoundly and why do really nasty people sometimes succeed and live what look like very happy lives? And *The Book of Jōb* asks, "What if a truly good (NOT perfect but truly generous and kind) a good neighbor and a true believer in God, what if all the perks were taken away from such a person – would he still fear God, love God and live by God's commands?"

And so "*ha shatan*" – the satan – the accuser asks God if he can use the righteous Jōb as an experiment and God allows it – Job loses everything. His ten children are gathered for a party and a tornado knocks down the house and they're all killed... He loses his business, his employees and finally his health – he's stricken with burning sores from head to toe. He shaves his head, looks like a baby – and is found sitting on an ash-pile weeping... But he will not curse God and die (as his wife suggests)..

Today, some reinforcements show up – three friends from afar – and come to "sit shiva" with Job (that Jewish tradition actually COMES from this passage!) – come to mourn with him ... and... eventually, after Job says how he's feeling, they offer him some advice. That's our topic today: mourning our losses and how friends can help in the process (or not). Let's look at:

- 1) **Friends, Fiends and Foreshadowing**
- 2) **Breaking the Silence**
- 3) **Deepest Regrets and Truest Friends**

First, "Friends, Fiends and Foreshadowing" (have you ever noticed that Friends and Fiends are only one letter different? and sometimes people are hard to categorize "friend or fiend?" We have the word, "Frenemies").

There are ample reasons to see these men (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar) as true friends to the great sufferer. For one thing, if we do our detective work, we can kind of locate their origins. The Jewish scholar, Robert Alter (from UC Berkley) says they come from a "spread of a few hundred miles..." (*The Wisdom Books* p. 17). In that day that was a giant sacrifice to come from that far away.

They make an "appointment together" meaning they confer and cooperate like they're all very old friends who (as we'd say) are "*there for each other.*" They come as a team and they come to (end of v. 11) "*to sympathize with him and comfort him.*" They apparently didn't set out to judge or criticize Job but to relieve him.

When they get there... even from a distance... they can't believe their eyes. He's unrecognizable. His ranch is, by now, a real wasteland. His few remaining sheep and cattle are disheveled and wandering all over – no employees. Job himself – maybe still shaving his head – maybe still sitting on that trash pile, face in his

hands and when they see him, they're aghast. They begin to sob out loud. They tear their robes, throw dust into the air and let it fall on their heads.

They approach him and sit down with him (on the ground) ... and they start the Jewish tradition (still practiced) of sitting shiva. For seven days and nights (like the days of creation!) they sit WITH Job *"with no one speaking a word."* AND WHY? Because (end of first paragraph) *"for they saw that his pain was very great."*

Their friend has gone from the highest heights to the lowest depths. An extremely wealthy man (greatest man in the East!) to agonizing physical pain... He looks disfigured like a nameless beggar. But the physical pain is the least of it. He's mourning the loss of his ten children. His business is bankrupt. His holdings are lost. His standing in the community is gone (whispers in all the land of Uz: *"Have you heard about Mr. Job?"*). AND... severe marital discord.

But for Job, what's worst of all – he's apparently being punished by God and he doesn't know why. His entire way of looking at life was wrong – if this is how God treats the pure and the pious then, *"Why Be Good?"*

And as modern readers, we know that these dear old friends will soon turn on Job. And he'll wonder aloud, *"Why are you guys increasing my pain? What have I done to YOU that you would kick me when I'm down?"* His friends will become fiends and will magnify his heartache.

Even now as they are ostensibly WITH Job... maybe they're wondering, *"Why doesn't he SAY something... ANYthing?"* Our Berkley Hebraist speaks for many Job-Scholars when he asks how these friends go from such deep sympathy and commitment to Job and the friends become fiends. Robert Alter suggests that someone changed the story over the years. He writes *"One might imagine that after the seven days of mourning, they came to the conclusion that he must have been a scoundrel to deserve all this all this suffering but that seems forced."* But I don't think so.

Genesis says creation took place in seven days and for Job's friends, creation is now UN-CREATED in the space of seven days. They're waiting for Job to reinforce their world-view and confess his sin that caused this vast degree of pain but Job's just silent, *"How stubborn can ya be! What MORE can God do to you to bring you to confess and change your ways?"*

And after his first speech – we'll see it: the friends have become fiends. They'll each get three speeches – each cycle gets more extreme and more aggressive toward Job.

But for now... after seven days of Creation in reverse, finally Job breaks the silence. Ch 3 opens: *"Afterward Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, 'Let the day perish on which I was to be born, and the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.' May that day be darkness; let not God above care for it, nor light shine on it.'" (3.1-4)* (Now they're really aghast!)

Now before we look at Job's opening statement, let me point out that there's a difference in the writing. We can't print it this way every Sunday because it takes more room but starting in Ch 3, we move from simple narration to verse. *The Book of Job* is a poem... an epic poem that begins with a short "frame-story" and ends with a short frame story. And even people who know the book usually only know the story and not the 40 Chapters of poetry – the vast majority of the book – it's a wisdom poem. We should remember that as we try to understand it.

Job breaks the silence: "Afterward Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said, "Let the day perish on which I was to be born, And the night which said, 'A boy is conceived.' May that day be darkness; Let not God above care for it, Nor light shine on it". (Job 3.1-4)

Not only is this saturated with the deepest pain and despair but Job is uncreating creation. The phrase, "*May that day be darkness*" is basically a reverse quotation of the third verse of the Bible, "*Then God said, 'Let there be light!' And there was light.*" Job: "*Let there be dark!*"

Job is not contemplating suicide – he's wishing for Univers-ide – the uncreating of the entire Cosmos. There's this piling up of words, "day and night ...darkness and light..." He's not cursing God but he IS cursing the day he was born. He hates his situation so much (and who wouldn't?) that he wishes he was never born.

Scholars have noted that Job's cursing hits on every day of creation – light and dark (Day ONE). Next Job speaks of God attending to the cloud in v. 5 and we think of Creation Day TWO – water in the firmament above.

Day FOUR – where God separates day and night and Job mentions (v. 6) the days of the calendar. Next, he mentions this mythological beast from the deepest ocean, ("Leviathan" in v. 8) reminding us of Creation Day FIVE: "Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and God created the fish and the great sea monsters."

Tortured Job asks v. 11 "*why did I not die from the womb*" reminiscent of Creation Day SIX, "Let us make man..." And finally, Day SEVEN (we failed to include it but v. 13 speaks of Job having NO REST reminding us of God resting on the Seventh Day. (see John E. Hartley, p. 102).

Job is saying, "*I'm in so much pain that I wish I was never born... and if the only way to accomplish that was to erase the whole of creation... SO BE IT!*"

And you know... the one day that's missing... in Job's cursing the day he was born and his attempts to undo, un-create creation... the day Job leaves out... is Day Three ... the Third Day. This is the Day when vegetation came out of the soil, when DIRT PRODUCED LIFE-SUSTAINING FOOD, "*Then God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them'*" (Gen. 1.11) The Third Day is when life came out of death.

And throughout the whole Hebrew Bible (as Dr. Warren Gage has documented; *Milestones to Emmaus: The Third Day Resurrection in the Old Testament*) over 40 times it's the Third Day when fortunes change. Over 40 times armies hopelessly outnumbered; death is immanent and THEN on the third day, IMPOSSIBLE AS IT IS – the tide turns, and life comes out of death. Esther is delivered from death on the Third Day (Est 5.1-2)... over and over... on and on – as vegetation came from dirt, life comes out of death on the Third Day... UNTIL, in the ultimate fulfillment of creation and the start of a NEW Creation Jesus Christ, the True Vine, the Tree of Life comes out of the earth on the Third Day. “He rose on the Third Day according to the Scriptures.” WHAT SCRIPTURES?

Job has no resurrection in mind... He is bereft of hope. He skips the third day because at this point, he only wants to die or to NEVER have been born. He can't think of resurrection – it's too good to be true. He can only despair... and yet... in the fulness of time, Job's Redeemer will bring indelible HOPE to a world lost in fear, in guilt, in regret, despair and deepest pain – Jesus Christ will rise from the dead on the third day – Life Himself, will come out of death, out of the dirt and make life worth living even when there is pain all around. New Creation!

It's because of this that we can express our deepest regrets to God openly and honestly. We can face things like a daughter who's not a believer in Jesus Christ and we regret so many things we wished we did differently. We can find ourselves diagnosed with illness and medically speaking, no hope. We can ask, “Why am I single?” OR “Why is my marriage so broken, loveless and hopeless?” or “Why didn't I make different decisions in my 20's?” or “why can't I break free from the grip of depression?” – we can be very open and honest about our deepest regrets because we remember the Third Day and its great fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Job didn't see it yet... but he will... Job curses the day he was born but Jesus Christ will bear the curse and turn death into life.

And we have the privilege to help those around us see it: a reason for hope and a rescue for even the deepest despair... even rescue from death itself. Jesus Christ said to His disciples, “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; *but I have called you friends*, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.” (John 15.15)

And Jesus invites the People of Resurrection to become truest friends because we hold in our hearts the answer to the deepest regret and despair – the Third Day – when vegetation came from dirt, when life came out of crucifixion, when the Dead Savior came out of the Tomb. We have the privilege to speak THAT TRUTH in LOVE (Eph 4.15) to those who lose sight of hope to the point they wish they'd never been born.

Only remember this – before you come rushing in quoting Bible verses – learn what even these comfortless comforters knew: sit quietly for a time. Weep with those who weep. Attention is not an easy thing to give – it's costly. As Simone Weil said, even when you know you're a good listener, you're probably NOT as good as you think you are.

If you really have the Third Day hope...and a true belief in the Resurrection of the Greatest Sufferer – *if you believe in the God who raises the dead*, be patient with people.

Trust the Spirit of God to lead you and WAIT ON HIM... Learn to truly listen to suffering people. And then when they speak shocking and even appalling things (cursing the day of their birth and wishing they were never born...) maybe listen some more... and then... when you've REALLY listened and given your attention, point to Him, the only One who can turn death into life.

Q U O T E S

Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough.

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: "What are you going through?" It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled "unfortunate," but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way.

This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.

Only he who is capable of attention can do this.

– Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" (in *Waiting for God*, 1951)