

# All is Darkness

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Do let's turn up our third chapter of Job again, if it's closed.

I'm conscious that as we heard the chapter read a few minutes ago, that may well have been a difficult experience for many of us, because this is one of the darkest and most painful chapters in the whole Bible.

And I want to acknowledge that fact at the very beginning this evening. Though I hope that we'll also see, even within this third chapter of Job, that there are particles of light as well.

Now for the sake of those who weren't able to be here a week ago, let me first very briefly run over the story so far from chapters 1 and 2. Job is introduced to us in chapter 1 as a man of great wealth and also great godliness.

But Satan, who is implacably hostile both to God and man, asks God for permission to test Job to the nth degree.

[ 1 : 0 9 ] Because Satan wants to demonstrate that this godly man is nothing but a fair-weather believer. In other words, a believer who's perfectly happy with God as long as everything goes well for his life, as long as life is sweet and favourable, but who will curse God and turn away from God if his life goes badly wrong, if his possessions, his family and his health are taken away from him.

Now God allows Satan to do this to Job. And so in quick succession, we see Job losing his possessions, his herds and flocks and his servants and so on, all ten of his ten grown-up children who are killed in a freak storm, and then finally his health breaks down very badly.

And Job ends up in chapter 2, verse 8, sitting amongst the ash heap, scraping his painful sores with a piece of broken pottery, but still not cursing God.

And we noticed four things last week from these terrifying first two chapters. First, that Job is a believer with real integrity.

Secondly, that Satan is an adversary with real power. Third, despite Satan's hostility, the Lord's sovereignty is completely uncompromised.

[ 2 : 3 1 ] And fourthly, we saw that the Lord allows profoundly painful things. To happen. Now we also noticed, at the end of chapter 2, the arrival of Job's three friends, who come to comfort him, because they hear about what he's going through.

When they arrive, they hardly recognise him, chapter 2, verse 12, because his sufferings and his illness have so disfigured him. And although they weep loudly when they see him, they find, as verse 13 puts it, that they have nothing to say to him, at least nothing at this stage.

They have a great deal to say later, but nothing when the hugeness of Job's suffering first confronts them. Now it's an interesting fact that in the Hebrew text, the first two chapters of Job and the last chapter, which is chapter 42, are written in prose.

But the great majority of this book, beginning at chapter 3, is written in poetry. And you'll see that fact reflected in the very way that the text is set out in our English versions of the Bible.

So in the prose sections, the lines fill the column four square, but in the poetry sections, the beginnings and the endings of the lines are all indented. So it's interesting to ask, why the author or the editor should have chosen to write the bulk of this text in poetry?

[ 3 : 52 ] Well, the answer is, probably for much the same reason that Shakespeare wrote his plays in poetry and not in prose. At the risk of oversimplifying, prose lends itself to conveying facts, to bullet points and neat systems and tidy arguments.

It's the language of the head, you might say. Poetry, by contrast, is more the language of the heart, the language of the emotions. If you could wrap up the problems raised by protracted suffering in just a few neat and tidy arguments, then maybe prose would suffice.

But thinking about long-drawn-out suffering requires a medium which expresses emotion as well as argument. And all that takes time. If Job's problems had an easy solution, we could jump straight from chapter 2 to chapter 42, and we could have all our questions answered in five minutes.

But it isn't like that. It's not like that with deep suffering. It takes time for Job, and it takes time for sufferers today to wrestle and to groan and to express their feelings in full colour.

The book of Job is rather like the unfolding of a great drama. But it's all speeches. There's no action after those first two chapters. First Job speaks, here in chapter 3, and then his different friends, the three friends, answer him in turn, and then Job replies several times.

[ 5 : 24 ] Then a fourth friend turns up, Elihu, and then finally the Lord speaks, but still in the powerful and vivid voice of poetry. The subject matter here is somehow too big for prose.

Now isn't that what protracted human suffering tends to be like? You know how the mind churns things over, backwards and forwards. The bleakest poetry, if I can put it like this, tends to come into our minds at three o'clock in the morning, doesn't it?

When pains and problems seem to be at their most insoluble. So let's thank God that here in the book of Job we have a piece of writing which is so well crafted for the task of suffering man expressing his pain and then of God replying to the sufferer.

All right, to chapter three now. Chapter three is the opening burst, the first explosion of Job's inner feelings as he begins to wrestle with everything that has just happened to him.

Let me read verse one again. After this, after all his losses, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. Now cursing is an important component in the opening section of the book of Job.

[ 6 : 43 ] If you turn back over a page, you'll see that in chapter one, verse five, Job is fearful lest his children might curse God. In chapter one, verse 11, Satan is seeking to get Job to curse God to his face.

Satan repeats that point in chapter two, verse five. And then we find Job's wife inciting Job to curse God in chapter two, verse nine. But Job refuses.

And yet in chapter three, verse one, we find that Job is prepared to curse something. He's prepared to curse the day of his birth. He simply wants to blot that day out of the calendar.

Look at it. In verse 11, he wishes he could have been a stillborn child. Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb, and expire? In verse 12, he wishes that if stillbirth had been denied him, at least he could have starved to death immediately.

Why did the knees, his mother's knees, receive me? Or why the breasts that I should nurse? And this is dreadful suffering, isn't it? Just think of the day of your birth, 17th of November, 1979, or whenever it may have been.

[ 7 : 57 ] Can you imagine wanting simply to put that date through the shredder or to burn the calendar for that month in a furnace? Suffering has reduced Job to the point where he is hating his very existence.

And we have to acknowledge that although Job is not cursing God, he's certainly implying criticism of God. Look at verse 23. Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?

He's criticising God for giving him life and for then hedging in that life so tightly as to make it unbearable. And doesn't verse 26 sum up the tone of the whole chapter?

I am not at ease, nor am I quiet. I have no rest, but trouble comes. Peace, quietness, rest. All human beings long for those things, at least in some measure.

But Job is utterly denied them. He has nothing but turmoil and pain. And isn't his turmoil made much worse by the fact that he is a believer?

[ 9 : 09 ] If he thought that there was no God in the universe, he would have no logical cause to complain about his sufferings. But his problem is that he believes not only that God exists, but that God is good.

How then can such a good, powerful, sovereign God allow these things to happen to him? What I'd like to do now is to bring to you four points which I hope will enable us to get a grip on what is happening here in Job chapter 3.

First, Job is at the extreme of human anguish right at the edge of what is bearable. Now, I don't suppose many of us have suffered so painfully that we have wished that we'd never been born.

But Job's suffering is so terrible that that is his genuine wish. Look at verse 4. Let that day, the day of my birth, be darkness. May God above not seek it, nor light shine upon it.

Now, doesn't this set our own times of suffering in perspective? I wonder what you and I might have had cause to complain about in the last week or even in the last year.

[ 10 : 23 ] Wasn't it trivial compared with what Job had to go through? We've all met people who have said to us, there's always somebody worse off than me.

Haven't you often heard that? Especially from older people. There's always somebody worse off than me. Now, that's something that Job could not have said. We're meant to understand that his suffering and his trauma was the worst that a human being can endure.

Think of it. Within the space of a few minutes, he lost all his wealth, his servants, and his ten children. And then very soon afterwards, he experienced a dreadful breakdown of health.

This is the extreme of human pain. And this happened to a believer. One of the lessons of the book may be that believers are sometimes asked by God to face levels of suffering in this life which unbelievers are not required to face.

Now, looking a bit more carefully at the text of chapter 3, let's notice how Job's thoughts are dominated by death. In verses 3 to 10, he wishes that he'd never been born.

[ 11 : 33 ] In verse 11, he wishes that he could have died at the moment of his birth. In verses 13 to 19, he thinks enviously of all those who have died, kings and rulers, stillborn children, captives, slaves.

His thought is, lucky them, they're not having to go through what I'm having to go through. In verse 21, he speaks of those who long for death, obviously a description of himself.

And in verse 22, of those who rejoice when they reach the grave. Do you see how death is one of the dominant themes of this chapter and indeed of the whole book of Job?

In fact, death, the subject of death, is mentioned in every one of the 42 chapters of the book of Job. Extreme suffering forces the sufferer to brood upon the subject of death.

Death becomes a potent and horrible enemy. and yet, ironically, it is seen to be preferable to continuing in a life of extreme pain. In verse 5, that phrase, deep darkness, is the same phrase as the one translated the shadow of death in Psalm 23.

[ 12 : 50 ] Suffering draws a person to the point where he feels that he is at the gates of death itself. And when you run your eye over verses 3 to 10 again, don't you think that those verses are like a reversal of the opening chapters of Genesis?

Think of Genesis 1 and 2. The lights are being switched on everywhere. Darkness is overthrown. Chaos is replaced by order. In Genesis, the morning stars twinkle and make the new world smile.

But here, Job wishes that all the lights would go out. That God's care, verse 4, should be withdrawn. That blackness and darkness in verses 5 and 6 should overwhelm light.

That joy in verse 7 should cease. That dawn in verse 9 should be extinguished. And in verse 8, that Leviathan, Leviathan, the sea monster who represents chaos and the devil himself should be roused up into destructive action.

Now, Job's sufferings, of course, were partly physical. But it's the mental torment of the man expressed here which we must not underestimate. And he was a believer.

[ 14 : 08 ] God allowed Satan to afflict this fine, godly man to the point where he wishes he had never been born. So there's the first thing.

Job is at the extreme of human anguish. Now, second, Job's pain requires our careful listening.

I think the temptation is for us to skip over a chapter like this or at least to skim read it very quickly without really engaging with it. Do you know how sometimes if we're watching the television, especially the news, something appears which is particularly horrible, something that depicts great suffering.

You know, I wish they wouldn't do it really but you know the way sometimes the camera is brought to bear upon somebody who's just lost their family and you have to watch them weeping and agonising. And our instinct at that moment is to get up and switch the television off because it's too painful for us to engage with what we're looking at.

However, God has put this third chapter of the book of Job into our Bibles for us to read. Not to skip over, still less for us to cut out and drop in the bin.

[ 15 : 22 ] This chapter is here to help us and to teach us so we do need to listen to it very carefully. Jesus was described as a man of sorrows acquainted with grief.

Acquainted with grief. So his followers too need to be acquainted with grief if we are to get to know him better and become like him. So we need to read this chapter thoughtfully thoughtfully and to engage with Job's pain.

We're going to see next week when we read chapter 4 in a fortnight's time when we read chapter 4 that Job's friends his so-called comforters don't listen to him carefully and in fact are quick to condemn him.

They start telling him that if he were a true believer all these awful things would not and could not have happened to him. But one of the big lessons of this book of Job is that these awful things do happen sometimes to real believers.

Now there's a very practical lesson in all this in loving other people. If we are prepared to listen to Job's pain here and not to skim read it it will help us to listen to our friends when they go through great pain.

[ 16 : 36 ] Just imagine that you hear one day that your good friend has just suffered some terrible blow. The death of a child perhaps or receiving a horrible diagnosis following a visit to hospital.

So you hear this news about your friend and instinctively you say I must go straight round and see her as fast as I can and you shoot round to her house with great anxiety because you don't know what state you're going to find your friend in.

You knock on the door. She comes to the door. You go in and you sit down. You don't know what torrent of pain and grief may be about to flood over you. But if you've read Job chapter 3 you'll be prepared for the worst.

You'll be less taken aback if your friend says that she wishes she'd never been born. You'll know that such words can come even from experienced believers like Job.

They came from him a man who was not only godly but wise. Your friend when she receives this awful blow may even say that she thinks that God is against her.

[ 17 : 45 ] That's more or less what Job says here in verse 23. Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden whom God has hedged in? Think of that metaphor.

God is stifling him. That's what Job thinks. Hedging him in and squeezing the life out of him. Job has lost confidence in God. He feels that God is no longer his friend no longer his helper.

And your friend who's going through terrible trauma might feel like Job that God is no longer accessible. That prayer is useless. Why pray to God?

C.S. Lewis felt like this after his wife died and he records his thoughts in this extract from his book A Grief Observed which I'd like to read.

Meanwhile where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you're happy so happy that you have no sense of needing him so happy that you're tempted to feel his claims on you are an interruption if then you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise you will be welcomed by him with open arms.

[ 18 : 59 ] But go to him when need is desperate when all other help is vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and the 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 becomes. There are no lights in the windows.

It might be an empty house. was there ever anyone in it? We need to listen carefully to the voice of grief and then we'll be better able to love and support those who grieve.

That is one reason why Job chapter 3 is in the Bible. Job's pain requires our careful listening. Now thirdly let's notice how Job is completely honest.

This third chapter is not a soliloquy. He's not just speaking to himself at the bottom of the garden or in the greenhouse. He's speaking to his three friends who've come to see him and he is telling them exactly how he feels don't you think?

[ 20 : 15 ] He's not holding anything back. Some Christians some believers when they go through intense suffering think that they really ought not to tell the truth about what is going on inside them.

They say to themselves I mustn't let the side down. Christians are supposed to be happy so I'll just keep smiling I'll pretend to be something which I'm not really.

But here is Job not only a godly man but a wise man and yet he is completely honest. He's hurting so much that he wishes he were dead and he says so.

Quite refreshing this level of honesty. But this kind of honesty also enables us in the long run to be healed and strengthened.

This is one of the little particles of light here in this third chapter. Let me draw a parallel like this. Imagine a man who is seriously ill and in great physical pain and he goes to his doctor and he says to his doctor Doctor I've got a very small pain.

[ 21 : 21 ] OK says the doctor if it's a very small pain I'll give you two paracetamol to be taken three times a day for a week and you'll be fine. And of course the man is not fine.

If he'd been honest with the doctor the doctor would have realised how serious his condition was and he might have been able to help him. But his dishonesty makes healing and recovery impossible.

Now again imagine yourself going to this friend of yours who's just suffered a terrible blow. I'm OK she says I'm all right but you go home thinking she's not OK she can't be OK she's not being honest she's holding me at arm's length probably holding the Lord at arm's length as well.

But if on the other hand when you go to your friend she weeps and wails and throws herself around the house you can then put your arms around her and comfort her and the healing and the recovery begins.

Honesty with our friends helps us to be honest with God and when we're honest with him we begin to be open to the strengthening message of the Bible.

[ 22 : 33 ] Job remember came through all this in the end. That's the good news we're not going to see that for a few weeks but I'll just say it as a kind of trailer he came through it all in the end but he had to begin by being honest both with himself and with God.

And let's notice fourthly how Job is not prepared to turn away from God in his suffering. He argues with God he pours out his perplexity to God he agonises with God but he doesn't write him off he doesn't turn away from God.

Now in this respect contrast Job with the modern clever atheist the modern atheist will look at the problem of suffering and evil and he will say well that proves it God cannot exist if he existed and if he were good and if he were powerful as Christians claim he would prevent suffering and human life would be all joy and pleasantness but life is full of pain and that demonstrates that there cannot be a God.

Now Job is not like that atheist. He believes that God exists and he believes that God is good and he believes that God is powerful and that is why his pain is even more painful and more confusing for him but he knows that the answer to his pain lies not in rejecting God but in clinging to God.

If Job is right in verse 23 when he says that God is the one who has hedged him in then he knows that it's God he must deal with if the awful hedge is to be removed.

[ 24 : 18 ] If God is the one who allows us to suffer then God will be the one who will ultimately bring us relief and joy. The answer friends will never be to turn away from God or to pretend that he doesn't exist.

The answer will always be to come to him in our suffering as Job does. And there's another reason why suffering Christians can be very much encouraged and that is that God is deeply acquainted with suffering himself from the inside.

Centuries after Job lived and died God came to earth in human form. There was one occasion you'll remember it when Job when like Job the Lord Jesus had three friends with him three friends who couldn't understand what he was facing.

He had to say to them in the garden of Gethsemane could you not watch with me one hour? And those three friends like Job's comforters couldn't perceive what was going on they couldn't share his sufferings or grasp what he was going through.

Then on the following day as he hung upon the cross even God the Father abandoned him for a while. When he cried out my God my God why have you forsaken me he knew that he really was God forsaken temporarily.

[ 25 : 49 ] The atheist who glibly dismisses God is making a tragic mistake he has underestimated God he doesn't know him but God knows his people and he knows their sufferings.

Jesus has suffered more than Job did more than you or I ever could and Jesus walks with his people in their sufferings.

That's why we can turn to him when we suffer not away from him. He is the one who understands the pains that Christians go through and he is with us he's promised it to the end of the age.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray to him. Lord Jesus it brings us joy and encouragement and relief to think of you as the man of sorrows and we know indeed that part of the message of the gospel is that we must be conformed to you that we shall be made more and more like you not only in the resurrection in the end but in your sufferings too.

We think also dear Lord Jesus of the way in which we're promised that when we're welcomed into the heavenly places the tears will be wiped from our eyes and we shall enter that great realm where there is neither pain nor death nor suffering nor mourning nor crying and so we thank you dear Lord Jesus for the way that you have born so much more than we could ever bear and we thank you for this man Job who in a sense represents the human race and represents us believers believers we thank you for dealing with him partly as an example to us that we should learn and we pray indeed that these lessons from your word should be written upon our hearts and we ask it to the glory of your holy name Amen Amen Amen Amen