

Job's Despair

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning. If you've not met before, my name is Ali. I'm the minister here. Really, really good to see you. Really good to have you with us this morning. We're going to look at this passage, Job chapter 3, as Angus has mentioned, and as we've just no doubt picked up as we've read through it. It's a stark passage. It's a bleak and a raw kind of passage, and yet really important for us to remember this is part of God's word to us. This is God speaking to us, and so it is good for us to dwell on and to work our way through that this morning. So let's do that together. As always, it would be worth keeping that passage open in front of you as we do that just now. C.S. Lewis, the Oxford University professor, the famous author, and the great Christian thinker, wrote a book in 1940 called *The Problem of Pain*. It was looking to deal, he said, with the intellectual problem raised by suffering.

And it is. It's a really interesting book. I would kind of recommend it. I think it makes some great points. It kind of achieves what Lewis set out to do. However, 20 years later, in 1960, Lewis lost his wife after a prolonged battle with cancer. His sorrow was obviously enormous, and he wrote a second book. This one was called *A Grief Observed*. And the difference between these two books couldn't be more stark. The wrestling that Lewis goes through in this second book, as he isn't studying grief, he's not observing it from a distance. Instead, he is consumed by it.

He's right there in the midst of it. The two books don't contradict each other. Lewis doesn't reject what he's written earlier. But the nature of them just highlights this huge gulf that there is between talking about suffering and actually going through suffering.

And in a lot of ways, we make a similar move this morning as we move into Job chapter 3. We spoke last week about the opening couple of chapters of Job, how they set the scene, how they lay the foundations for this book. We saw the two things, really, the reality of righteous suffering, how Job was a righteous man, and yet still this loss, this suffering came. And we saw, secondly, God's sovereignty over suffering, how God was still in control, how as difficult as it is to get our heads around it, God had a purpose even behind Job's suffering. Those are the two kind of bedrocks we want to hold on to as we make our way through Job. If you weren't around last week or if you're on crash or anything, I'd recommend listening to that on the website because it kind of sets the foundation for the rest of what we're going to look at as we make our way through this book.

But having heard that introduction, in some ways looking on at Job's suffering, observing it, well, this week we are plunged into that suffering as we wrestle with Job's experience of it.

[3 : 01] We mentioned last week how the book of Job is really a kind of an epic poem. Chapter 3 is where that poetry begins. You can kind of see that in the layout of the text in our Bibles. And it's worth asking before we look at the specifics, well, why poetry? Why is this book speaking of huge suffering given to us in this way? Why did God inspire this as a book of poetry? And I think it's because, first and foremost, poetry is the language, the medium of emotion. Throughout human history, at times of great emotion, great joy, great love, great loss, people turn to poetry, people turn to song to try and express that as best as they can. And so that's why we have this poetry here in this book, because we are dealing with the raw emotion of suffering, the turmoil that Job went through, and how in that his words are able to give voice to the many, many others who have suffered since.

And so that's our plan this morning. We want to take seriously that as we try and wrestle through these emotions that so often come with suffering, and this poetry that looks to convey them.

So we're going to kind of move through this chapter, and it's three major kind of movements. And as we do that, without trying to break up the flow too much or lose the emotion that it carries, also be thinking about what we can learn about that experience of suffering, and what we can know about God in the midst of that. So let's look through this chapter together.

And the first major thought of the poem as it opens is this, that Job wishes he'd never been born. That kind of sets the scene, doesn't it, for how dark this chapter and Job's emotions are at this point.

Verse 1, Job looks back to those kind of two fundamental moments of the beginning of his existence, the day that he was born, and nine months earlier than that, the night when he was conceived.

[5 : 18] Let that day be darkness, he says, verse 4. That night, let it not come into the number of the months, he says, verse 6. Job wants these moments that brought forth his existence to simply have never existed, to be blotted out the calendar, to be replaced with darkness and nothingness, that he would have never been born.

It's such a bleak opening to this chapter, isn't it? Especially when we think that actually these are key moments in life that we associate with joy, aren't they?

You know, a woman becomes pregnant, expecting a child. There might be kind of anxiety around that, but overall it's joyful news. We're having a baby. The response to that is excitement, is joy.

The day that that child arrives, or those twins arrive, as we've had recently in church, again, such a happy day. We send congratulatory messages. We pray prayers of thanks.

Families celebrate. No doubt that was the case around Job's birth, too. But not now, he says. If only those moments had never happened.

[6 : 26] If only I'd never been born is his beginning to this chapter. It's shocking stuff to read, isn't it? It perhaps makes us feel uncomfortable. And I wonder how you find yourself wanting to respond to Job.

Or perhaps to put it another way, how would you find yourself wanting to respond to someone who we didn't know as a character, a hero even from the Bible? How would we respond to someone else saying these kinds of things?

I wish I'd never been born. Saying even, really, I wish I was dead, as Job will go on to say. And I'm sure for many of us, the instinct would be to respond by saying, you know, you can't say that.

No, you can't talk that way. You don't really mean that. And yet here we see Job doing just that in the Bible. Job, remember, who is righteous. Job, who God will affirm.

At the end of this book, my servant Job has spoken about me. What is right, God says in the final chapter. And yet here is Job chapter 3, pouring out the depths of his despair.

[7 : 32] And perhaps we were much happier, more comfortable with Job's response that we looked at last week. Where he said, naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away.

Blessed be the name of the Lord. We hear that, and we say, well, well done, Job. That's incredible. You're dealing really well with this situation. And yet we move into chapter 3, and I think we see, really, the reality of human nature.

Still Job knows what he knew back in chapter 1 and 2. He knows what is true. And yet the fact is, he doesn't always feel like. And he doesn't always experience that.

We might say, you know, he has those kind of good days, days where he's able to hold on to that earlier response. And then other days like this, where he is just washed away again by the sheer scale and sorrow of what has happened to him.

And isn't that just reality? And doesn't that just kind of ring true to us? If we've even had the smallest taste of what Job had been through, or know others who've been through the same. And this chapter shows us even more viscerally, even more emotionally than last week.

[8 : 43] The sheer depths of suffering and despair that good people, righteous people like Job can go through. People who know and trust in God. Job wishing he'd never been born.

The author, Christopher Ashe, has written a couple of books on Job. Really good books. They've been a great help to me in getting to grips with it. I'd really recommend that. He writes about his time preaching from this chapter, Job chapter 3.

He says this, Now when C.S. Lewis wrote, His book, Grief Observed, that we mentioned earlier.

Those reflections and response after the death of his wife. It was interesting. A number of his readers didn't like that book. They struggled to believe that a Christian writer could be so close to despair as Lewis kind of laid out how he was feeling.

Some thought it must be a work of fiction. Others said, you know, how can this intelligent, faithful Christian man feel these things? And we can't help but recognize that if they'd read chapter 3 of Job, that they would have had a much better understanding and appreciation of what Lewis was saying there.

[10 : 15] We're not looking here at a chapter that is going to fix things. And please don't even think after the eight weeks or so we're going to spend in this book of Job, that our problems are going to have gone away, and that we'll be able to sort out everyone else and their problems.

This is a book that opens up the depths of suffering and encourages us when we come across that to mourn and weep and struggle alongside those suffering.

The truth is we are often not good at that in the church. We want to try and fix people. We want to try and sort out all their issues. We think it's only by kind of presenting as this cheerful group who have no kind of worries.

That's the way that we would kind of attract people into church. And there should be something positive about knowing God and the gospel. And clearly we're not talking here. What we're not seeing in Job is someone who is just kind of grumpy and grumbling.

But the most important thing in the church is that we're genuine with ourselves and with others, that we allow others to be genuine, even about the hardest at times. Job chapter 3 is a great lesson for us as a church in that.

[11 : 27] Job wishes he'd never been born. We need to recognize that still people, perhaps you this morning, feel that, have felt that, will feel that. And we don't just want to try and put that right, tell people they should feel this instead.

Rather, as God's people, we want to draw alongside those who are suffering. Draw alongside in love to listen, to accept, to try and understand those dark and hopeless feelings that people go through.

So there's the beginning, really the first kind of 10 chapters of, 10 verses, sorry, of this chapter. Job wishes he'd never been born. So let's continue to the next movement as Job's lament really gets deeper and even darker.

This is some of the hardest stuff to read in this middle section. Why does Job have this despair? Of course, we've seen all that he has been through, all that he's lost. But he kind of summarizes it in verse 10.

Why does he want to curse and get rid of this day and this night that brought about his birth? Because, he says, it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor hide trouble from my eyes.

[12 : 37] And this idea of trouble, really trouble versus rest, is going to shape the remainder of this chapter. You see them paired together in verse 17.

There the wicked sees some troubling and there the weary are at rest. You see them paired together in the final line, verse 26. I have no rest, but trouble comes. The situation is this, that Job sees only trouble, only the pain and hardship and suffering of the world.

And yet he recognizes that he needs rest. He needs relief. The tragic part of this second section of the chapter is that the only place he sees that rest is in the grave.

And that's the second movement here, verses 11 to 19. Job desires the rest of the grave. And again, this is hard stuff to read. Let me read verse 11.

Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? Why did knees receive me? Or why the breasts that I should nurse? For then I would have laid down and been quiet.

[13 : 41] I would have slept. Then I would have been at rest. This middle section goes on to speak about how the rich and the poor both end up in the same place.

And how it is the only place where the wicked stop causing trouble. Where the weary can have rest. Where the prisoner is at ease. Where the taskmaster is silenced. Where the slave is at rest.

These are such hard words to hear, aren't they? We don't expect to find words like this in the Bible. These probably aren't the kind of words, the things that we are talking about that you expected to be hearing when you turned up to church this Sunday morning, kind of like any other Sunday.

And yet they are in God's word to us. And actually they remain so current. In the UK, the biggest cause of death for men under 50 is suicide. For women, that rate is slightly lower.

But it's still significant. It's so hard to think, isn't it? For so many people, that death does appear to be the only way out. The only way to rest. And this is really, really important as we look at this middle section.

[14 : 45] Remember what we're saying. What we're seeing here as Job speaks poetically to us. It's not saying that this is true. It's not saying that this is right. It's not saying that actually death is the answer.

You know, it's so important we don't mishear the Bible as affirming that. But again, what this passage is doing is opening our eyes to the fact that people do feel this.

Good, upright, righteous, Christian people. Job did feel this. And it's making it clear to us we can't just dismiss that and tell people to stop.

The answer might not be right. But the feelings are very real. And if we ourselves have felt that or are feeling that, it means that we can know that the Bible and God himself takes those feelings really seriously.

And we can be open and honest about that. Because the truth is that we do live in a world full of trouble. A world which is not as it should be.

[15 : 48] There's a great song called Sorrow by a band called The National. One of the verses says this. Sorrow found me when I was young. Sorrow waited. Sorrow won.

I live in a city sorrow built. It's in my honey. It's in my milk. It's a song that speaks about that. That kind of all-encompassing feeling of sorrow. Of trouble.

Of suffering. Of pain. That people live in. How all-consuming and hopeless that can leave us feeling. As if. As if the grave is the only place that can offer rest.

And again, I'm really keen that we don't try and sort of soften this chapter. I'm really keen that we don't sort of try and provide these intellectual solutions to the incredible emotional experience that Job is going through here.

We want to recognise the reality of that in Job and in others that we see and perhaps in ourselves as well. I do just want to take a step back here though and see how in this chapter and in the book of Job as a whole, one thing remains true.

[16 : 54] That Job never doubts the existence of God. Sometimes the fact that there is trouble. The fact that we live in a world of suffering. We can be tempted to think.

We can be lent to think. And certainly people will tell us, well, then there can't be a God. That suffering disproves God. If God was really there, he would make it all stop. And yet I think actually this section of Job shows us that that is not accurate.

It's the fact that Job understands that he is designed for rest, as it were. It's the fact that this trouble that comes to him is not how things should be.

That is what is causing him distress. That's what's causing him to look enviously at the grave, to seek the rest of death. But that only happens because he knows that these things that are coming upon him aren't as they should be.

Christianity, the book of Job, certainly doesn't offer neat solutions to suffering. It doesn't wrap things up in a bow and kind of say, you know, there's your questions answered.

[17 : 59] Everything will be straightforward from now on. But I think it does. Well, it does make more sense than a world without God. Because if we get rid of God, we've got no foundation to say there's anything wrong with suffering.

It just is. We can't complain about it. We can't mourn it. We can't recognize the injustice in it because there's no reason that we should expect anything else.

Again, C.S. Lewis says, A man can't call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. In suffering, in these times of trouble, whether for us or for others, our hearts are broken.

Because we recognize that in some way that our world is broken. That this isn't how it's supposed to be. And yet as we say that, as we think that, we're also saying that there is something good and true and right.

There is how things should be but on. And as we think that, we're actually far closer to the Bible's description of our world and our existence than any other worldview.

[19 : 04] We're actually describing what the Bible lays out as a world created by God in perfection and yet marred by the fall. No longer what it was designed to be. Job seeks the rest of death.

People experience that hopelessness still today. We want to recognize that. We want to draw alongside those people who are suffering in that way.

And not dismiss that experience for a moment. And yet actually remembering that the very fact we can think that. That surely that can't be right. That surely the grave, surely death can't be where we're supposed to be putting our hope.

Surely these things that are happening to us or those we know and love, surely they're not fair. And the fact we can think and ask those questions shows us that there is something more that we are looking for.

Something more that we are expecting. Something more that we are needing to put our hope in. And the tragedy again in Job chapter 3 is Job had lost sight of that.

[20 : 06] Job seeks the rest of death. And that leads us then to the final section of this chapter. And I know once again this is kind of tough stuff. You were maybe hoping that in the third point that Job would perhaps turn a corner here.

We'd be able to speak more hopefully about his situation and what he knows about God. That's not what happens. This chapter doesn't have what we might like to call a happy ending.

Instead Job concludes still experiencing this darkness. But really kind of expanding his viewpoint from just his situation, what he's going through.

Kind of to humanity in general. The direction of travel is this. Job wishes he'd never been born. Job desires the rest of death. And finally Job asks the question for all who suffer, what is the point in life?

I kind of get it repeated two times. Verse 20. Why is light given to him who is in misery and life to the bitter soul? Verse 23. Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?

[21 : 15] Job says with all of the suffering in our world, what is the point in life? Why are people brought into the world to live a life of pain and suffering?

That question of why kind of echoes through the book of Job. It continues to echo today in the experience of those who are suffering. What is the point in life?

The fascinating thing about that question, it is a question that the Bible speaks directly to elsewhere. The Apostle Paul will write in the New Testament. He will say that to live is Christ.

Jesus himself will say that to live is about seeking above all else God's kingdom. One of the famous documents of Christian history that the Westminster Catechism begins by saying the chief end of man.

Really the purpose of life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. And those are brilliant, true, biblical answers to that question. What is the point of life? Notice that the book of Job doesn't say any of those things.

[22 : 22] The book of Job here in chapter 3 doesn't even answer the question at all. It is simply left hanging there. Why? Why? And Job concludes with these incredible lines.

I am not at ease, nor am I quiet. I have no rest. But trouble comes. We leave Job in this chapter wrestling with the seeming hopelessness of his situation and the hopelessness of the world.

I am wondering what is the point of life. And again, I think more than anything that brings us back to the big point, the big takeaway of this chapter. Looking at this passage has brought to mind for me certainly the countless number of times that I have been so quick to try and solve people's problems when they've been experiencing hardship.

So quick to tell people why they shouldn't be feeling like that. So quick to tell people what they should think instead. So quick to say what the right attitude is.

And yet so slow to simply come alongside, to listen, to mourn, to weep. And that is something I need to repent of.

[23 : 49] I'm sure I'm not the only one in this room in that situation. And perhaps as we think that, we're then left with the question, well, is there any hope here in Job chapter 3 at all?

Is there anything that can be said? We don't want to speak too soon. We want to listen. But is there anything that can be said at all? Or is Job actually right? We don't want to force this chapter simply to kind of turn a corner and say something happy and then sing a cheerful song and go home and say, well, it's all fine in the end.

We want to feel the weight of this passage because it describes how many people, including Christians, experience the world. But we do also want to see how this suffering, how this depth of despair also points us forward again to Jesus as the ultimate blameless sufferer.

And to do justice to any chapter in the Bible, we have to see how it is ultimately leading us to him. And this is a dark, dark chapter in the Bible.

Perhaps one of the darkest of all, but there is one that is darker still. As Jesus hangs on the cross and breathes his last, we are told that darkness came across the whole land.

[25 : 07] Jesus cried out with a loud voice saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, which means my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus too experienced that, that utter desolation that Job is going through, that emotional turmoil that this chapter lays out for us.

And that doesn't take away the reality of suffering. We don't just kind of connect the dots to Jesus and say, well, you know, there we go. That's that all sorted. Let's put it to one side.

And yet we do have to let that make a difference. And the difference has to be that even in this suffering, even in the midst of this feeling of hopelessness, that actually there is still hope.

It might seem too dark to see it. It might feel like holding on to the thinnest of threads. But that truth, that gospel truth, that after darkness does come light, there is a far greater rest than the grave, that one day the trouble of our fallen world will come to an end.

Because God, through Jesus in the gospel, has done something about it. Jesus experienced this ultimate suffering and loss and despair on the cross, experiencing separation, even in that eternal relationship that he'd shared with his heavenly father.

[26 : 32] And yet, in his glorious resurrection, he came through that other side. And this chapter teaches us about the reality of sorrow, the depths of real desperate suffering that people go through, including those who trust in Jesus.

And again, we need to hear that because that can often make us feel uncomfortable. And often we do kind of want to just fix those things. And we can't. But the message of the gospel does promise that if we hold on to Jesus, or actually more accurately, as Jesus holds on to us, that he will hold us fast.

That even in the depths of that sorrow, even when we feel completely hopeless, he will lead us home. He will give us the rest we search for, true rest, eternal rest.

That might not be in this life. Again, as Job says, many people seem to have a whole life of suffering. It's just one thing from another, and we just can't make sense of it.

You know, it never kind of sorts itself out. It will never be okay in the end. We can never look back and make sense of it, as we're always so tempted to say. It's the suffering that continues and continues.

[27 : 44] And yet, still, Jesus promises an eternal rest. Not the rest of the grave, but a rest beyond the grave for those who trust in him.

It's in him that the weary truly are at rest. It's in him that's suffering that truly find peace. In the meantime, we weep with those who weep.

We mourn with those who mourn. As we hold on to the only hope that there is out of Jesus Christ. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your words of the Bible.

Lord, you tell us that it is living and active. It is sharp like a double-edged sword. It pierces us to our very souls. And Lord, we recognize that particularly in this chapter we've just looked at together.

A challenging chapter. And yet a chapter that shows that you understand and you take seriously the despair that can come upon us. As we live in a world which is not in the perfect state in which you created it.

[28 : 52] But which includes that suffering that sin has brought. Lord, we pray this morning whether we are going through these experiences ourselves that we've spoken about.

Or whether we are drawing alongside those who are losing hope. We pray that you would give us grace and patience and wisdom to know that this is not a sign of your abandonment.

To pray that you would sustain us through these times. We ask that as a church you would be helping us to be honest with one another in how we're feeling. That we wouldn't just be seeking easy answers or to try and fix each other's problems.

Just to put a brave face on it. But Lord, that we would walk through these times together in genuine love for one another. And Lord, we thank you that however we are feeling.

That there is this certain truth. That there is hope in Jesus. And we thank you that he has suffered. That he has experienced abandonment. And that one day we can have rest and experience full relationship with our Heavenly Father.

[29 : 56] We look ahead with great anticipation to that day where suffering will be no more. And we place ourselves into our hands now to sustain us until we get there.

Not by our own doing. Not by our own attitude. But by Jesus and what he has achieved for us. And in our place. We pray all of these things in the precious name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.