

When God's People Suffer: Grieving Through Suffering

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 March 2012

Preacher: Jonny Grant

[0 : 00] And before he does, just by way of introduction, this word, Psalm 88, it's on page 597. O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you.

May my prayer come before you, turn your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of trouble, and my life draws near the grave. I am counted among those who go down to the pit.

I am like a man without strength. I am set apart from the dead, with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.

You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily upon me. You have overwhelmed me with all your waves. You have taken from me my closest friends, and have made me repulsive to them.

I am confined and cannot escape. My eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, O Lord, every day. I spread out my hands to you. Do you show your wonders to the dead?

[1 : 15] Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness?

Or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion? But I cry to you for help, O Lord. In the morning my prayers come before you. Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death. I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me. Your terrors have destroyed me.

All day long they surround me like a flood. They have completely engulfed me. You have taken my companions and loved ones from me. The darkness is my closest friend.

It's miserable. Well, it's a psalm that Job could have written himself.

[2 : 15] It is very dark. But we need to learn from these experiences in life. So I'm going to ask if you'd turn please to Job.

Chapter 2. It's on page 510.

There's some sheets and pens going round with notes if you would like to follow on.

As I say, we're going through the book of Job. Today we're just really looking at chapter 3. Next week we're going to be going from chapters 4 to 27.

So we're going to be taking some bigger chunks. But this is a lament. It's Job grieving as he remembers the loss of his family, his health and his wealth.

[3 : 32] So let's pray and ask for God's help as we look at this section together. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Our Father God, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the stories and the people that we meet.

Not just made up stories, but real people. Real lives. Real events. Help us to learn from it.

But we pray that we would also meet their God through it. And that as we seek to understand what it is to grieve when suffering comes.

That our focus and our minds would be turned upon a God who is the source of all compassion. And all comfort. Amen.

[4 : 42] Amen. The God who does not leave us. But the God who is always with us. So we pray for your help in Jesus' name.

Amen. So Job chapter 2 verse 11 through to chapter 3 verse 26.

When I was at college, I had a good friend called Stephen. Stephen was married. He had grown-up kids.

And most of his working life was always with people. And while he was at college, he was voted in as the student president. He was very mature.

He was wise. He was a caring kind of guy. He had experienced all kinds of different things through life. So that he could be a help and a support to others. He was understanding of people's situations.

[5 : 41] Now soon after that, he ended up in hospital with cancer. And I went to see him. And during the time I was there, I was with him about an hour, I'd say, altogether.

He said absolutely nothing. I walked into the ward. And he just looked straight through me. And for the entire time, he just looked blankly into that open ward.

I tried to talk to him. There was no response. I prayed with him. I no doubt tried even to be humorous. Looking back, I was trying to bring him out of his despair.

I was trying to give him hope. I was trying to give reasons and answers. But sometimes it's right just to grieve.

The writer of another wisdom book, it's called Ecclesiastes, says this. There is a time for everything. And a season for every activity under heaven.

[6 : 48] A time to be born. And a time to die. A time to weep. And a time to laugh. A time to mourn. And a time to dance.

A time to be silent. And a time to speak. You see, sometimes there is no room for joyful singing or for happy worship songs.

Sometimes there are no words of comfort or hope. Romans 8 verse 28, which says, All things work together for good for those who love God, is not always the appropriate thing to say.

Sometimes we just need to weep and mourn. Like Job in chapter 3, we just need to grieve before God.

Job, as we saw in chapters 1 and 2, has experienced enormous suffering. And for reasons that we're not given and that we struggle with, God had given Satan permission to inflict terrible suffering in his life.

[7 : 58] Job loses his family, his grandchildren. All his children are wiped out. He loses all his wealth and his servants. And he also loses his health.

Remarkably, though, Job responds with great faith. Look at chapter 1 verse 20. It says there that, It's a remarkable response, considering everything that he's gone through.

Now, although his faith proves genuine, his faith is not without struggle. And through his mourning and through his weeping, he opens his heart to God.

He lets out how he feels and what he thinks before God. And listening to Job in this chapter, it helps us to see how we too should learn to grieve ourselves and how at times we should maybe understand how others grieve in their suffering.

So the first thing is this, the loneliness of suffering. As we'll see, Job had friends who came to support them.

[9 : 40] And we can have friends who can support us in times of suffering. But even though friends come, there is still a terrible loneliness. Look at chapter 2 verse 11.

We're introduced there to Job's three friends. They're called Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They heard about all the troubles that had come upon him.

And they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and to comfort him. It's what we would expect from any of our friends.

And it's the kind of things we would hopefully do for our friends. Verse 12. When they saw Job from a distance, they could hardly recognize him.

They began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes, and they sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and for seven nights.

[10 : 43] No one said a word to him because they saw how great his suffering was. You know, traditionally, funerals lasted for seven days in those days.

It shows how bad Job's suffering was. They were treating him as if he were dead. After all, he had lost all his family.

He had lost his children, his grandchildren. He had lost his health, and he had lost all his possessions. Completely wiped out. But as much as they desire to comfort and they plan that we're going to go and sympathize with him, they're helpless.

They could do nothing, and they could say nothing. All they actually bring into the situation is further despair. They're overwhelmed with the impact of the suffering.

They can't comprehend what has happened to this man. Now, if that's how his friends feel, how do you think Job feels? You see, they witness the suffering, but it's Job who experiences the suffering. [11:58] So when friends come, Job still suffers alone. It's his suffering. It's a pain that they can't bear or lessen.

It's a hurt that they can't release or repair. So Job must suffer alone. Now, I think it's important that we understand that.

As much as we want to help and to support and to bring comfort and care to people, those who suffer, though they're surrounded with family and with friends, there's a sense in which they suffer alone.

Everybody else is a witness to the suffering, but they are the ones who experience the suffering. And that might be your story.

Maybe you've lost a loved one. Maybe you have to deal with disappointment. Perhaps you struggle with health. Maybe you've experienced a relationship breakdown.

[13:05] And people do comfort you. And while we appreciate their prayers and their words, which are invaluable at those times, deep inside, we still feel terribly alone.

Because after all, it's your suffering. It's your heartache. And it's your pain. So there's a loneliness in suffering.

And it's from this dark place of loneliness that Job begins to voice his cries towards God. And as we read through chapter 3, it's not easy listening.

It's like Psalm 88. It's raw. And it reflects the agony and the pain that he's suffering. But let's not be mistaken.

This is not a lack of faith. This is not Job turning away from God. This is real faith in the midst of his darkness.

[14:14] Look at how Job responds as we try to contemplate the suffering that he's in. First of all, Job starts by wishing that he was never born, that he never existed.

Look at verse 3. May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, a boy is born. That night may it turn to darkness.

May God above not care about it. May no light shine upon it. May darkness and deep shadow claim it once more. May a cloud settle over it.

May blackness overwhelm its light. That night may thick darkness seize it. May it not be included among the days of the year, nor be entered in any of the months.

Erase my birthday, he says. Scratch it out with a big marker. Better still, wind back the clock and make sure that my birth never even happens.

[15:26] Verse 7. May that night be barren. May no shout of joy be heard in it. May there never have been any balloons or flowers or cards of congratulations.

Verse 8. May those who curse days curse that day. Those who are ready to rouse Leviathan. Leviathan there is a symbol of one who brings disorder and destruction.

May its morning stars become dark. May it wait for daylight in vain and not see the first rays of dawn. For it did not shut the doors on the womb on me to hide trouble from my eyes.

But as the grieving intensifies and it gets deeper and darker, Job not only wishes that his birth is cursed, Job actually wishes that he were dead.

Look at verse 11. Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed?

[16:45] For now I would be lying down in peace. I would be asleep and at rest. Not only does Job long to die, he wishes that his life never even started.

Verse 16. Why was I not hidden in the ground like a stillborn child, like an infant who never saw the light of day?

There the wicked cease from their turmoil and there the weary are at rest. Captives also enjoy their ease. They no longer hear the slave driver shout.

The small and the great are there and the slave is freed from his master. You see, Job longs to be released from his pain.

He longs to end his days of emotional and physical agony and die and be at rest so it's no more.

[17:50] In fact, the longer Job has to live with this suffering, the more pointless life becomes.

Look at verse 20. Why is light given to those in misery?

Why is life given to the bitter of soul? To those who long for their death? That does not come. For those who search for it more than they do hidden treasure.

Who are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the grave. Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God is hedged in?

You see, to Job, the only reason he can see for living is to experience heartache and sadness. God, it seems to him, has boxed or hedged Job in to a life of inescapable suffering.

Verse 24. For sighing comes to me instead of food. My groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me.

[18 : 57] What I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness. I have no rest, but only turmoil.

It's uncomfortable reading, isn't it? Condescendingly, we look on and we say, well, I'm sure he doesn't really mean it.

Or worse, if we were there, we might want to interrupt him. We could imagine Job sitting in a prayer meeting and he starts crying out to God and we put a hand on his shoulder and we say, Job, don't say that.

It's not as bad as what it seems. But the reality is, he does mean it. Life for Job is as bad as what this is.

Every time he remembers his children and his grandchildren that were destroyed in that tornado, he wishes that he was never born. Every time he thinks about his servants and his wealth being completely wiped out, he longs that he had died along with them.

[20 : 09] And every time he feels the excruciating pain of his illness, every dart and every arrow that goes through his life, he just sees it as wasteful, pointless, and useless.

You know, reading through this chapter, I couldn't help think that Job is perhaps contemplating suicide. Or if it existed back then that he would be going down to visit his local doctor to ask the question about euthanasia.

Look at verse 21. Those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure.

I remember listening to a story of a very godly man. We know him well as a family and as a pastor of a church.

He loved Jesus and he lived to serve Jesus. And in his life, he was struck down with something that brought unbearable physical pain to his life.

[21 : 31] And as he shared his story with us, he told us that how one day he sat on his bed with an open bottle of tablets ready to end his life and leave his wife and his children behind.

Like Job in his suffering, he wished he had never been born. He longed to die and he thought life as wasteful.

You see, that's how God, how people who love God feel at times. This is the story of a man who was blameless, who loved God and who hated evil.

And so we should not criticise or we should never condemn somebody for feeling like that. In hard times, it's a real experience.

And maybe you felt like that at times. For others, your pain is maybe expressed differently. Maybe it's a desire just to hide away, to stay indoors and not meet with anybody.

[22 : 44] Maybe you felt that all your energy is gone and you just want to stay in your bed and you actually haven't got the physical strength to get out of bed and get dressed. just because we are Christians, it doesn't mean that we are immune from the heartache of suffering and the cry of pains that it brings.

Now, before we move on, I want us just to take a little tangent to the left here and just ask this question about euthanasia.

We said here that in chapter 3, I think Job is considering ending his life. Sometimes it's called assisted suicide.

suicide. And if you've been watching the news recently, you will see that it's come up again in the UK. A man who is suffering terribly and he wants to end his life.

And euthanasia is this, I have it up on the screen, it's about the rights of individuals to choose for themselves the quality of life they want and when they no longer enjoy that quality of life to end it.

[24 : 04] That's basically what euthanasia is. Now, as a Christian, as myself, who loves God and who submits to God's word, the Bible, I need to ask myself, is that right?

Is euthanasia an option for the Christian today? Well, the short answer is no. Let me explain. I don't think we could find a person who suffered as much in life than Job. I don't think we've come across anybody who's contemplated ending his life as much as Job as expressed in these chapters here.

But yet, Job never did end his life. Why? Well, Job understood life from God's perspective. You see, it's not about the quality of life, it's about the value of a life.

Not about the quality of life, but the value of life. Let me just show you four things about life from God's perspective that we see through Job.

[25 : 14] I have them all up on the screen. You can just listen. First, Job understood that God is the creator of all of life. So he says, remember that you moulded me like clay. Did you not clothe me with skin and flesh and knit me together with bones and sinews?

You see, it's a reference back to Genesis 1 that God created us in his image. Male and female, he created us. We were designed to live in relationship with each other and with God.

God is our creator and life is valuable. Second, Job understood that God is the sustainer of all life. He says this, in his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind. If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to dust.

So our life, whatever circumstance we are in, is in the hand of God. He is the sustainer of life. And third, Job understood that God is the planner of his life.

[26 : 28] He understood that from the beginning of his life to the very end of it. God was in charge of it. He plans it. And so he says at the very end of this book, I know that you can do all things and that no plan of yours can be frustrated.

life is completely in the hands and the plans and the ways of God. And fourth, as we saw last week, Job understood that God alone is the one who can take life.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. So you see, despite all the suffering, and we see it here, the depths of the darkness and the struggles that Job is going through, through it all, he sees that life is a gift from God and it's all controlled by God.

all of life is precious and valuable to God. Even a life that is suffering to the extent that it is, is precious and valuable to God.

And so we do not have a right to end our life. And I think that's why Job, in all his suffering, never did.

[27 : 52] Well, let's get back into Job a little bit more. We've looked at the loneliness of suffering, the cry of suffering. But this loneliness, yes, it leads to a cry, but there's also a hope within this suffering.

Job's grieving is very deep, it's very dark, but it is not detached. And while he is still struggling with God and he's crying out to God, it's a cry that does go out to God.

Look at verse 11. He has these questions that repeat, why did I not perish at birth? Verse 12, why were there needs to receive me?

Verse 20, why is light given to those in misery? Verse 23, why is life given to a man whose way is hidden? All these questions there's this inner conflict within Job's life.

He's questioning God with all the wise, but he's still turning to God. Yes, he's angry with God and we see the anger intensify as we read through the book, but he's still calling out to God.

[29 : 10] God does not answer from those questions. God does not respond to Job, not yet, he does eventually, but for Job this is where his journey must start.

And if there is anybody who's going to understand Job in all his suffering, it is God who also suffered for him. You see, in faith, Job looks beyond himself to a God as we read at the beginning this morning, the God who is the source of all comfort and all compassion, and this is who he's looking to.

And we know that God did show his compassion and his comfort. Job is suffering alone, but we remember Jesus who went to the cross alone.

Jesus would suffer and die alone. And on the cross, Jesus would cry out in despair. Do you remember those words? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Those words are a quote from Psalm 22. Let me just read to you the first couple of verses of that Psalm, Psalm 22, that Jesus cried out from the cross.

[30 : 38] And listen to the depth of Christ's grieving. He says, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?

Oh, my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer. By night and I'm not silent. This is Job's God. This is God who understands what it is to suffer alone, to cry out, and to have no response. And it introduces us to this God who does understand, Christ who was forsaken for us so that we would never be forsaken by him.

That Christ who suffered alone on the cross did so that we would never have to suffer alone. And it's only here as we come to terms with this, as we cry out to God, that we do find one who does know, a God who does care, a God who understands, a God who has been there, and one who gives hope in the midst events.

But while the hope does come, let's remember it's only through grieving in the darkness that we can begin to see the light of hope come shining through.

[32 : 12] We need to learn to grieve like Job did in our days of struggle and our days of suffering. It's not sinful, it's not wrong, it's right to cry out to our God who understands and who knows what it is to suffer alone.

Let's pray. As we pray, let me just read these words of comfort.

that speak about our God towards his people. Shout for joy, O heavens, rejoice, O earth, burst into song, O mountains, for the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted on his and his people said, the Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.

The Lord answers, can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born?

Though she may forget, I will not forget you. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.

[33 : 55] Your walls are ever before me. Our Father God, as we remember the Lord Jesus who stretched out his arms on the cross, who suffered alone, who was forsaken for us, as we picture those nails in his hands, the scars in his hands, they remind us that our names are written in the palm of his hand, that we will never be forgotten.

God will be our comfort and our compassion in our days of struggle and in our days of suffering. He will not leave us. He will not abandon us because Christ was abandoned for us so that we would never have to suffer alone.

We thank you for who you are and the great God that you are. In Jesus' name, Amen. We are there and there are you