

Job 2.11 - 3.26

Why have you forsaken me?

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 18 June 2023

Job: Out of the Storm [2]

The story so far...

Two weeks ago we met Job from the land of Uz. We don't know exactly where it was – probably somewhere in Edom, to the East of Israel. He is called **¶¶ blameless and upright** by the narrator (1.1), and by God himself twice (1.8, 2.3). We saw how **¶¶** the Satan has real influence, but he **¶¶** isn't God's equal: God is supreme and sovereign. And we saw how God **¶¶** gives the Satan terrible permission to inflict harm on Job – but not *why*.

And, despite the terrible things that happened to him, we saw that Job refused to do wrong (1.22, 2.10). The question is: **¶¶** will Job remain a true believer? As I did last week, I encourage you to read Job's struggles and wrestling yourself, week by week.

One question that I didn't address last time is this: does Satan attack Christians like this today? It's complicated: yes *and* no.

Yes – Peter tells us that the devil prowls around God’s people like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5.8-9). Paul encourages us to put on God’s armour, so we can resist the devil’s schemes (Ephesians 6.11). He is still a dangerous enemy and he still has terrible permissions.

But also no – we live in a world after the cross, on which Jesus triumphed over the powers of evil (Colossians 2.15). Revelation 12 vividly portrays the battle between God and a great dragon, which is defeated **‘by the blood of the Lamb’** (Revelation 12.11). The Satan still accuses, but God isn’t listening, and God’s people don’t need to listen either because **there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus** (Romans 8.1).¹

You see how the deep truths of the cross help us understand and apply even difficult passages in the Old Testament.

A new vicar moved into town and went out one Saturday to visit his parishioners. All went well until he came to one house. It was obvious someone was home, but no one came to the door even after he had knocked several times. Finally, he took out his card, wrote on the back, ¶ ‘Revelation 3.20’ and stuck it in the door. ¶ ‘Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.’

After the service the next morning, he found his card in the collection plate. Below his verse was written ¶¶ ‘Genesis 3.10’.

Pause Anyone know it? ¶¶ ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’

That’s certainly one way to use the Bible...

Job is Alone (2.11-13)

Our passage last week ended with ¶¶ Job, alone, scraping himself with **a piece of broken pottery**, sitting **among the ashes** (2.8) – nothing to do with cricket. It refers to the heap of rubbish, piled up and burned outside the city walls. In Jesus’ day the one outside Jerusalem was called ‘Gehenna’ and he used it as a way of talking about hell, it was so grim (e.g. Matthew 5.22-30, Mark 9.43-47).

Today we meet Job’s **friends: Eliphaz the Temanite, Zophar the Naamathite**, and the shortest man in the Bible, shorter than Nehemiah, or Knee-high-miah: **Bildad the Shuhite** (2.11). Like Job they aren’t Israelites; they represent the best wisdom that the world has to offer. They don’t live near each other – and there were no emails or phones so it took months for them to hear what had happened, to communicate and then travel **together**; in 7.3 Job complains about the **‘months of futility’** he has suffered.

But they are *good* friends. The way we often use the word ‘friend’ today really means ‘acquaintance’, but the word here means much more than that. Proverbs 18.24 talks about the **friend** who is **closer than a brother**. David’s friend Hushai risks his life to work inside the court of David’s enemies (2 Samuel 16.16-17). In *The Four Loves* CS Lewis writes movingly of the rare love of true and genuine friendship; this life **has no better gift to give**, he says.²

Job’s friends **set out from their homes**, and travelled to see Job **to go and sympathise with him and comfort him** (2.11). To some of us that might sound patronising but it’s not meant like that. *They go to him* – even to the stinking burning rubbish heap, to see their friend in his agony. If you have a friend who’s really hurting, that’s a good way to start: to go to *them*, to show them your love and friendship by being *present*.

I remember visiting my Grandad in hospital – he was near the end, and almost unrecognisable. His skin had changed, he’d lost half his body weight – but the hardest thing was the confusion in his eyes. All through his life he did the *Times* crossword while drinking a cup of tea, he taught me so much about generosity, he saw things in a brilliant, straightforward way. All that – my Grandad – was almost entirely gone.

I'm sure many of us here have had a similar experience when we have seen loved ones towards the end of their life. Have that in mind when you hear these words describing Job's best friends:

¶¶ When they saw him from a distance they could hardly recognise him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads.

Job 2.12 (NIV)

They were devastated – and they didn't know what to say. To be honest I don't blame them:

¶¶ They sat on the ground for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Job 2.13 (NIV)

At this point of Job, sometimes people talk about **the compassion of a silent presence**, which is **more eloquent than words**.³ There is truth in that: sometimes simply being with people is not only enough, it's the best thing to do. And certainly once Job's friends start speaking, they show the truth of what my Mum tried to teach me: if you can't say something true, helpful or kind, keep your mouth shut. It's a lesson I am still learning today!

But I'm not sure what happened here was that good. It's a great example of needing to listen to what the Bible *actually* says.

Firstly, **they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads** (2.12). This was to show sympathy – but it was also a cultural symbol of mourning. Then we have the **seven days and seven nights** of silence (2.13): the standard period of mourning.⁴

Perhaps the mourning was for Job's children and servants and all his other losses, but the text suggests it was actually *Job himself* they were mourning for,⁵ like he was *as good as* dead.

Plus, to start with silence may well be the most appropriate thing to do... but for *seven* days and nights? Christopher Ash says:

¶ To sit quietly with a sufferer, to hold their hand, to listen patiently as they pour out their grief is one thing. But... **to refuse to speak a word to a sufferer for seven days and seven nights is eerie and not comforting.**

Ash, Job: The Wisdom of the Cross, 62

But did you notice the text says **no one said a word to him** (2.13)? Ash continues: **it may not have been silence after all, but just a refusal to speak to Job, which is quite another thing.**⁶

Whatever the reason for their silence, Job was **suffering** (2.13) and *alone*. His wife was there, his friends were there, but the image painted for us of Job is a man who is utterly alone.

I remember when I was single going on holiday with a work colleague and her family. We had a lovely busy week together in Cornwall; there were ¶¶ nine of us. And if I ¶¶ zoom out...

At the end of it I drove home. It was late October, and dark when I arrived. I put a pizza in the oven and turned on the TV – and there was a power cut. Off went the lights, the TV and the internet. It was pitch black and utterly silent.

I couldn't even call or text someone because the power cut affected the mobile phone signal too. In contrast to the week I'd just had the loneliness was horrible – but it was temporary. For some the loneliness and suffering has no end in sight.

How might *you* respond to people who are really suffering? Some silence is good, showing love simply by being there. But sustained silence is *not* good. ¶¶ What might you say? What might you ask?

I suggest *not*, 'I know how you feel,' or telling a story about *your* experience; focus on *them* not you. It might help to think about what *you* might like someone to say to *you* when *you* are suffering.

Job is suffering (3.1-26)

For the truth is – and it’s a hard but important truth – for reasons we may not understand, and probably never will, sometimes God takes his children through deep darkness.

After a week of no-one saying **a word to him** (2.13), Job finally breaks the silence (3.1). Last week you may have found it hard that Job worshipped God after all that happened (1.20) – here he pours out raw emotion. He doesn’t sin by cursing God as his wife encouraged him (2.9); instead he **cursed the day of his birth** (3.1).

Chapter 3 is not an easy read. It’s probably the darkest chapter of the whole book. As I read some of it, listen to all the different words for darkness that Job piles one on top of another (verse 4):

‘That day [the day of Job’s birth] – may it turn to darkness;

may God above not care about it;

may no light shine on it.

May gloom and utter darkness claim it once more;

may a cloud settle on it;

may blackness overwhelm it.

That night – may thick darkness seize it.

Job 3.4-6 (NIV)

Now look down with me at verse 11 to see the ‘why’ questions tumbling out of Job’s mouth **¶**:

11: ‘**Why did I not perish at birth?**’ 12: ‘**Why were there knees to receive me?**’ 16: ‘**Why was I not hidden away in the ground?**’ 20: ‘**Why is light given to those in misery, life to the bitter of soul?**’ 23: ‘**Why is life given to a man God has hedged in?**’

Job feels stuck, trapped by what has happened, by God himself. He wishes he had never been born. He doesn’t understand. He sees only darkness, he is **bitter of soul** and full of inner **turmoil**:

‘What I feared has come upon me;
what I dreaded has happened to me.

¶ I have no peace, no quietness;
I have no rest, but only turmoil.’

Job 3.26 (NIV)

Is that a feeling you recognise? I certainly do. He is exhausted by his grief, like when you have no more tears to cry and feel utterly spent. Yet this chapter reminds me of another man in turmoil, in a garden at night, *his* three friends also silent. **¶** Job’s restlessness foreshadows Jesus going back and forth between his anguished prayer and his silent, sleeping disciples in Gethsemane.

For there we begin to see the seeds of hope even in the darkness. They are small, so small in the darkness they are hard to find. But for all *our* loneliness we need never be as alone as Job, because Jesus **suffered and died alone.**⁷

In the garden and on the cross Jesus knew the full depth of human loneliness and suffering, ending with the agonised cry, **‘Why have you forsaken me?’** (Matthew 27.46). On the cross Jesus did not only wear our sin and shame, but our loneliness too.

Sometimes God takes true believers through the darkness and turmoil of Job 3 – but Jesus’ promise holds true: **‘I am with you always, to the very end of the age’** (Matthew 28.20).

The Horse and His Boy

I’m going to end with a reading from **§§** *The Horse and His Boy*, the third of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Shasta is the Boy. He grew up with a bad-tempered fisherman, and runs away with a Narnian horse – which can talk – when he discovers the fisherman isn’t his real father and is about to sell him to an abusive nobleman.

He has many adventures and meets many people. In this passage though Shasta has been separated from all his companions, and he’s lost, riding a horse over a mountain pass in the mist at night.

Once more [Shasta] was alone amid the drip-drip from the trees. He remounted his horse and continued along the road he had chosen. Strange, icy winds kept blowing mist past him though they never blew it away. If he had been used to mountain country he would have realized that this meant he was now very high up – perhaps right at the top of the pass. But Shasta knew nothing about mountains.

Being very tired and having nothing inside him, he felt so sorry for himself that the tears rolled down his cheeks.

What put a stop to all this was a sudden fright. Shasta discovered that someone or somebody was walking beside him. It was pitch dark and he could see nothing. And the Thing (or Person) was going so quietly that he could hardly hear any footfalls. What he could hear was breathing. His invisible companion seemed to breathe on a very large scale, and Shasta got the impression that it was a very large creature.

The Thing (unless it was a Person) went on beside him so very quietly that Shasta began to hope he had only imagined it. But just as he was becoming quite sure of it, there suddenly came a deep, rich sigh out of the darkness beside him.

‘Who are you?’ he said, scarcely above a whisper.

‘One who has waited long for you to speak,’ said the Thing. Its voice was not loud, but very large and deep.

‘I can’t see you at all,’ said Shasta, after staring very hard.

Once more he felt the warm breath of the Thing on his hand and face. It said, ‘Tell me your sorrows.’

Shasta was a little reassured by the breath: so he told how he had never known his father or mother and had been brought up sternly by a fisherman. And then he told the story of his escape and how they were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of his night among the Tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert. And he told about the heat and thirst of their desert journey and how they were almost at their goal when *another* lion chased them. And also, how very long it was since he had had anything to eat.

‘There was only one lion,’ said the Voice.

‘What on earth do you mean? I’ve just told you there were at least two the first night, and –’

‘There was only one: but he was swift of foot.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I was the lion.’ And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. ‘I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept.

‘I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you.’

‘Who *are* you?’ asked Shasta.

‘Myself,’ said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook: and again ‘Myself,’ loud and clear and bright: and then the third time ‘Myself,’ whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all round you as if the leaves rustled with it.

Shasta was no longer afraid that the Voice belonged to something that would eat him, nor that it was the voice of a ghost. But a new and different sort of trembling came over him. Yet he felt glad too.

[As the mist began to clear, Shasta] knew the night was over at last. He could see the mane and ears and head of his horse quite easily now. A golden light fell on them from the left. He thought it was the sun.

He turned and saw, pacing beside him, taller than the horse, a Lion. The horse did not seem to be afraid of it or else could not see it. It was from the Lion that the light came. No one ever saw anything more terrible or beautiful.

After one glance at the Lion's face he slipped out of the saddle and fell at its feet. He couldn't say anything but then he didn't want to say anything, and he knew he didn't need to say anything.

The High King above all kings stooped towards him. The Lion touched his forehead with its tongue. He lifted his face and their eyes met. Then instantly the pale brightness of the mist and the fiery brightness of the Lion rolled themselves together into a swirling glory and gathered themselves up and disappeared.

Pause

[The next day Shasta travelled back along the same path – only this time, it was not dark. The path became] narrower all the time and the drop on their right hand became steeper. At last they were going in single file along the edge of a precipice and Shasta shuddered to think that he had done the same last night without knowing it.

‘But of course,’ he thought, ‘I was quite safe. That is why the Lion kept on my left. He was between me and the edge all the time.’

Abridged from CS Lewis, The Horse and His Boy, 136–141 & 154

¹ For this section see Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, 54–56.

² CS Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 87.

³ David Atkinson, *The Message of Job*, 30.

⁴ As in 1 Samuel 31.13 etc.

⁵ They tore their robes **when they saw him** (2.12) and were silent **because they saw how great his suffering was** (2.13).

⁶ Ash, *Job*, 62.

⁷ *I stand amazed*, by Charles H. Gabriel.