

JOB CHAPTER 3

In Chapter 2, we left off with Job's friends having come to console him. Their shock at his terrible state leave them wordless.

But why is Job silent? Is it a silence of acceptance or a silence of shock and bewilderment? Is Job's silence one of peace or is it a silent protest against the unhinging of the world as he has known it, a silence of doubt and fear that his deepest beliefs cannot withstand the scrutiny of his experience of suffering?

Many scholars have argued that, given the totally different writing styles and character portrayal in the story of chapters 1,2,42 versus the poetry in 3-41, that we are dealing with two Jobs, not one. There are others, however, who argue that in spite of the fact that different strands of text have been put together into one whole, we should treat Job as one and not two. Does Job as a human being hold together if we follow the latter route?

Consider this possibility. Job has lived his whole life with a certain faith in God. The God who has blessed him is the God who is in charge of the whole world and all that happens in it. Even if we humans don't understand why certain things happen as they do, there is a purpose in it from God's point of view. But once things happen to Job as they do, the unhinging of his "traditional" faith begins to happen. Initially, his way is the way of faithful acceptance – "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord." "Shall we receive good at the hand of God and not the bad?"

But then there is Job's wife's comments, questioning God's ways if these are, indeed, God's ways. Then there is the 7 days of silence with his friends. 7 is an important number in the bible. It is a number of completion. Whether it is a literal 7 days and 7 nights, or something else, we recognize that Job and his friends have to honour the silence for as long as it takes. Only when the time of silence is completed do the words come. It takes a long time, but they come. And words have to come, for grief unspoken and unexpressed is grief not worked through. Job's spirit goes through a major process in the 7 days of silence, and at the end of it he is in a different place than when he began. Now when Job speaks it comes out in paragraphs, not words, inspired by the pain he bears within him, as well as the injustice of it all. What does Job say?

3: 1-10 – Job does not curse God as his wife told him to do. Nonetheless, he begins his discourse by cursing what God has created – life in all its beautiful possibility. "Let the day perish..... Let that day be darkness...." God created the day and the night Genesis 1 tells us. Job is cursing the very act of creation itself. It would be better if it were darkness and chaos constantly, without the creation of day or order in the universe.

3: 11-19 – It is natural for human beings to cling to life, even when they suffer. But Job reverses what is natural by longing for death. He speaks about how good those have it who are dead. They are at rest. They have no suffering to contend with. They have no burdens to bear. How lucky are the dead. And remember, at this point in Israel's history

there is no thought of heaven as a place different from hell. The dead are all in a place called Sheol, similar in ways to the Greek idea of Hades. It is a place of lifelessness, where shadows live. It is no life at all. It is death, the end of things. Imagine that for Job, this is preferable to the life he now has.

3: 20-26 – Suffering is further sharpened when one has tasted beauty, when “light” has been “given to one in misery.” Why does God give “light” to “one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?” Now this is interesting, because for many people who have suffered loss, the preciousness, value or beauty of what is lost helps give meaning to a person in their pain. One lives gratitude for having tasted that kind of beauty, and the grief only makes the beauty sparkle that much more brightly in a person’s memory and spirit. In Job’s case, though, the suffering is so overwhelming and dark that any recollection of happiness and good things, of family and life under a God who sheltered them, etc.... only makes the pain he is living that much more acute. It would be easier not to have known such good in his life. It would have been better if light had never been given to him. Maybe if he lived a life of numb indifference he would not suffer so deeply within. But as it is, Job says: “I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest; but trouble comes.”

But consider this. May it be that Job’s speaking out, crying out, cursing and so forth, may be a prelude to something else, perhaps, something positive? We don’t know. We can’t know. But the fact that he has the energy to speak out and does not remain in silence is a good sign that he has not lost his faith but rather is in a profound state of inner wrestling and struggle. How will it all resolve itself? Keep reading....