
JOB 3

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TEXT

II. FIRST CYCLE OF SPEECHES

CHAPTER 3

Job's Complaint. ¹ After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed his day. ² Job spoke out and said:

³ Perish the day on which I was born,^a
the night when they said, "The child is a boy!"

⁴ May that day be darkness:
may God* above not care for it,
may light not shine upon it!

⁵ May darkness and gloom claim it,
clouds settle upon it,
blackness of day* affright it!

⁶ May obscurity seize that night;
may it not be counted among the days of the year,
nor enter into the number of the months!

⁷ May that night be barren;
let no joyful outcry greet it!

* *His day*: that is, the day of his birth.

^a Jer 20:14.

* *God*: in Heb. *'Eloah*, another name for the divinity, used frequently in Job.

* *Blackness of day*: that is, an eclipse.

- ⁸ Let them curse it who curse the Sea,
those skilled at disturbing Leviathan!*
- ⁹ May the stars of its twilight be darkened;
may it look for daylight, but have none,
nor gaze on the eyes of the dawn,
- ¹⁰ Because it did not keep shut the doors of the womb
to shield my eyes from trouble!
- ¹¹ Why did I not die at birth,^b
come forth from the womb and expire?
- ¹² Why did knees receive me,
or breasts nurse me?
- ¹³ For then I should have lain down and been tranquil;
had I slept, I should then have been at rest
- ¹⁴ With kings and counselors of the earth
who rebuilt what were ruins
- ¹⁵ Or with princes who had gold
and filled their houses with silver.
- ¹⁶ Or why was I not buried away like a stillborn child,
like babies that have never seen the light?
- ¹⁷ There* the wicked cease from troubling,
there the weary are at rest.
- ¹⁸ The captives are at ease together,
and hear no overseer's voice.
- ¹⁹ Small and great are there;
the servant is free from the master.
- ²⁰ Why is light given to the toilers,
life to the bitter in spirit?
- ²¹ They wait for death and it does not come;
they search for it more than for hidden treasures.
- ²² They rejoice in it exultingly,
and are glad when they find the grave:
- ²³ A man whose path is hidden from him,
one whom God has hemmed in!*
- ²⁴ For to me sighing comes more readily than food;
my groans well forth like water.

* *Leviathan*: a mythological sea monster symbolizing primeval chaos. It is parallel to Sea, which was the opponent of Baal in the Ugaritic legends. Cf. 9:13; 26:13; 40:25–41:26; Ps 74:13–14; 104:26; Is 27:1.

^b Jb 10:18–19.

* *There*: in death.

* *Hemmed in*: contrast the same verb as used in 1:10.

- ²⁵ For what I feared overtakes me;
what I dreaded comes upon me.
²⁶ I have no peace nor ease;
I have no rest, for trouble has come! ¹

COMMENTARY

Some of Job's prayers are wild, and must have seemed dangerous to his dignified friends. His audacious attempts to reach the mind of God leave us breathless, and must have worried his cautious friends. **He is passionate; they are cold. Job is dreadfully in earnest, and transparently honest. He tells God exactly how he feels and just what he thinks.** There could hardly be better prayers than that.²

Another general feature of Job's speeches cannot be emphasized too strongly. Scholars who find his volcanic outbursts in the dialogue utterly different from his tranquility in the prologue⁵ **overlook the fact that nowhere does Job bewail the losses of chapter 1 nor the illness of chapter 2. In this he is utterly consistent. His concern from beginning to end is God; not his wealth or health, but his life with God. It is because he seems to have lost God that he is in such torment.** This vivid consciousness does not remove the particulars of his human life—his work and his family and his body—from the scene as having nothing to do with God. *Nothing could be more alien to his thought, and to Israelite religion in general, than to isolate the relationship with God as the only thing of value for a man*, rendering him indifferent to poverty, callous in bereavement, heedless of pain. **On the contrary, the relationship with God is known in and by means of these ordinary things. Without them Job does not only lose his humanity; he loses God. Already we are prepared for an answer that comes, not when God (alone) confronts Job (alone), but when God is found in his world (the Yahweh speeches) and when Job finds himself once more surrounded by animals and friends and family.**³

¹ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Job 3:1–26.

² Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 104.

⁵ See the Introduction (pp. 44ff.) for the use of this alleged contrast to assign the prose and the poetry to two different sources.

³ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 104–105.

But much of Job's utterance is in an entirely different direction. **Job is not arguing a point; he is trying to understand his experience.** Hence he often talks to himself, struggling in his own mind. **He is also trying to retain (or recover) his lost friendship with God.** Hence he appeals to God again and again. His prayers may shock his religious friends, but at least he keeps on talking to the heedless God. **His friends talk about God. Job talks to God. And this makes him the only authentic theologian in the book.**⁴

In the first speech the spectacle of human misery is presented with a poignancy that is quite overwhelming. Job is stunned because he cannot deny that it is the Lord who has done all this to him. Even more piteous than his question 'Why?', which the best answers of his friends cannot satisfy, is **his desperate need to find again his lost Friend.**⁵

Overcome by dismay yet observant of tradition, Job's friends offer consolation in sympathetic silence, waiting for Job to speak. **Job at last breaks the silence.** The words that gush forth from his agitated soul surprise everyone. His words are bold and caustic. Wishing that he had never been born, Job curses the day of his birth.⁶

CURSING THE DAY OF HIS BIRTH (3:1-13)

The fact that Job's first words are those cursing the day of his conception and birth, regretting that he ever had a life in this world, tells us something important. Notice how his intense pain and feelings of foundational loss in every domain of his life – all that gave it meaning – causes him to overlook all the BLESSINGS that he had in this life up to a week ago, when he felt daily the consolation of children, wife, stature for the right reasons in his community, fame, and people all around him who knew him as a good man. That Job could overlook so obvious a thing means that all of that, all of those Blessings, do not match the LOSS OF RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD that he is feeling. All of those BLESSINGS seem suddenly to have been an illusion of sorts, in as much as they kept Job from seeing that something (apparently) had gone really wrong with him and God. Why?! What was it?!

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the startling sentiments expressed in this speech do not mean that Job has cracked under the strain. There is no hint that the Satan has finally

⁴ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 104.

⁵ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 105.

⁶ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 89.

made his point. The bourgeois etiquette that has dominated the mores of Western Christendom, especially in the Puritan tradition, is no guide to the rightness of Job's speech. **Self-control is something quite different from not showing one's emotions. Job is no Stoic, striving to be pure mind with no feeling. The Bible knows nothing of such dehumanizing philosophy; but we stand in a long tradition of a pallid piety that has confused the Christian way⁷ with the noble but heathen ethic of the Stoa.** Further perversions were fostered by various kinds of Gnosticism and Manicheism, until Christian perfection is defined as the triumph of reason over passion,⁸ sometimes masquerading under the Pauline terms 'spirit' and 'flesh'. Its prescription for the afflicted is torpid resignation to the unquestionable will of God, a strict curb on all feelings, or at least on the outward expression of them, with disapproval of the weakling majority who cannot walk calmly in the furnace with 'tranquillity undisturbed by the fierce fires of passion'.⁹ **It is little wonder that this tradition has *not* taken Job as its patron saint and has found James's reference to his 'patience'¹⁰ incredible, and his overmastering sorrow,¹¹ his outburst of anger, unspiritual.** But Job is a man bereaved, humiliated, and in pain.⁷

⁷ The history of interpretation of that fruit of the Spirit generally translated 'self-control' (Gal. 5:23) is very instructive in this regard. From that self-mastery that releases the energies of an athlete into a superb performance (1 Cor. 9:25) it withers to a purely negative suppression of desire, especially condemning the gratification of bodily needs so that sexual continence, for instance, becomes in itself a great virtue.

⁸ One need only refer to the reiterated theme of William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Here is a typical passage: 'The Religion of the Gospel is only the refinement, and exaltation of our best faculties, as it only requires a life of the highest Reason, as it only requires us to use this world as in reason it ought to be used, to live in such *temper*s as are the glory of intelligent beings ...' (*Editio princeps*, 1729, p. 75). Commentators trained in such piety could only conclude that Job was a great sinner for being so emotional.

⁹ Froude in a letter to Carlyle.

¹⁰ Jas. 5:11, AV. The word really refers to **the active virtue of endurance, of steadfast persistence**. Cf. NEB.

¹¹ The example of Jesus (Mark. 14:34) should forever silence all criticisms of Job, for His tears (the Logos took a human body in order to weep with it) make it true—*res est sacra miser*. **The deep hold that the virtue of the 'stiff upper lip' has taken in Anglo-Saxon standards of propriety (especially for men) can be traced to the impact of Cicero and others on Renaissance man.** See, for example, de Montaigne's essay *On Sadness*. In our day the press continues to applaud public figures who are stoical in bereavement. Job's friends show a limited capacity to 'weep with those who weep' (Rom. 12:15), and our embarrassment in the presence of mourners betrays a similar failure all too often.

⁷ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 106–108.

Verse 3 – In this verse Job refers to himself as a *male* (*geber*).¹⁵ The several Hebrew words for “man” emphasize various aspects of his being, e.g., *ʾiṣ*, his strength, or *ʾādām*, his earthiness and limitedness (cf. *ʾāḏāmâ*, “earth, ground”), but *geber* connotes a powerful man, particularly in contrast to a child or a woman. In the darkest hour of his crisis, Job refers to himself as a full-blooded, stalwart person. Thus his curse is not designed to eliminate from the human race a weakling unworthy of dignity. Rather he views himself as a distinguished person who has been shamed by misfortune.⁸

Verse 4 – In seeking to remove the day of his birth from existence Job commands, *That day—let it be darkness!* This curse directly counters God’s first words in creating the world, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). Any day or block of time that remained in darkness never came into being. That is the reason Job piles up words for darkness in vv. 4–6: *darkness* (*ḥōšek*, vv. 4a, 5a), *deep dark* (*šalmāwet* v. 5a),¹⁶ *cloud mass* (*ʾānānâ*, v. 5b), *blackness* (*kamrîr*, v. 5c),¹⁷ *gloom* (*ʾōpēl*, v. 6a).⁹

Verses 6-7 – Job next addresses the night of his conception. It was a night when life was conceived, life that challenged the disordered lifelessness of darkness. That is, each birth participates in the victory of cosmos over the forces of chaos. In celebration of that victory a

¹⁵ See H. Kosmala, “The Term *geber* in the Old Testament and in the Scrolls,” in *Congress Volume: Rome 1968*, VTSup 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1969), pp. 159–69.

⁸ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 92.

¹⁶ *šalmāwet* used to be taken most often as a compound word, *šēl* + *māwet*, and translated lit., “shadow of death” (so AV). Others (e. g., Dhorme; KB, p. 964) posited the revocalization *šalmût*, i.e., it is the combination of a word for darkness, *šelem* (cognate of Akk. *šalāmu*, “be dark”) plus the abstract ending *-ôt*. But D. W. Thomas (“*šalmawet* in the Old Testament,” *JSS* 7 [1962] 191–200) argues that *māwet*, “death,” possesses superlative force; thus he explains that the expression “shadow of death” means “very deep shadow, thick darkness.” It is the darkness encountered in a mineshaft (28:3) or in the region of the dead (10:21–22; 38:17). Amos also uses this term to refer to the darkness prior to creation (5:8). In Job 28:3 and 10:22 *ʾōpēl*, “gloom,” accompanies *šalmāwet*.

¹⁷ It seems best to understand MT *kimrîrê* as a noun form from a root *kmr*, “be black,” hence “blackness” (cf. Syr.). Grabbe (*Comparative Philology*, pp. 29–31) seriously doubts this position; the cognate evidence is weak and the Syriac root means “be sad, mourn.” He also notes that *bmryry ywm*, “bitterness of the day,” appears in Sir. 11:4 and *bmrwry ywm* (a slight variant with the same meaning) in the Thanksgiving Hymn, 1QH 5:34 (cf. M. Mansoor, “Thanksgiving Hymns and Massoretic Text,” *RevQ* 3 [1961–62] 259–66), which for him “leaves no alternative” that the root must be *mrr*, not *kmr*. But the parallelism suggests that *kimrîrê* is the subject of the verb and that it connotes some type of darkness. Dhorme associates it with the mist or fog that hides the sun. Influenced by Rashi and Ibn Ezra, Gordis finds here “the demons of the day.” He thinks that *mʾrîrê* is related to Arab. *mara*, “pass, pass by,” and refers to demons in flight. He takes the *kap*, then, as the asseverative *kap̄*, also known in Ugaritic (R. Gordis, “The Asseverative Kaph in Hebrew and Ugaritic,” *JAOS* 63 [1943] 176–78).

⁹ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 92.

joyful shout (*r^onānā*) breaks the stillness of the night, proclaiming that a new life has been conceived and darkness has been defeated (v. 7). But the hopeful expectation of that moment has eventuated in the bitter pain of Job's present suffering.¹⁰

In this cursing prayer, Job is doing something that I have often seen as a regular (bad) habit of people who find themselves trapped in a misery of life. **They want a do-over.** Their pain is so significant that they desire “another chance” to “get it right” this time. Think of the addict's misery here. But what turns out to be the case is that there is no do-over; never could be. What a person has done, his or her responsibility for the misery, permanently changes him or her. The only way is to go forward, to accept what is, and to look for help as one goes. Remember Ged the Archmage and Arren in “The Dry Land” in Le Guin's *The Farthest Shore*:

Ged said nothing. As soon as they halted, he had sunk down, sitting on a lava-boulder, forspent, his head hanging. **Arren knew that the way they had come was closed to them. They could only go on. They must go all the way.** Even too far is not far enough, he thought. He looked up at the black peaks, cold and silent against the unmoving stars, terrible; and once more that ironic, mocking voice of his will spoke in him, unrelenting: “Will you stop halfway, Lebannen?” He went to Ged and said very gently, “We must go on, my lord.” [Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Farthest Shore* (The Earthsea Cycle Series Book 3), chapter 12. Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Kindle location 2614.]

What Job prays is kind of a “do-over” in the sense that he prays never to have been born.

Verse 9 – Job continues his imprecations by cursing *the first rays of dawn* (lit. “eyelids of the dawn”) that begin to etch their way across the horizon and *the stars of its twilight*, Venus and Mercury, which shine brightly and announce the end of night. **These first signs of light on the horizon foreshadow a new victory of light over darkness. A new day is beginning to be created. Job pronounces this curse to prevent that victory from taking place.** If his curse is effective, the night will continue to reign. Light will never shine on that day.¹¹

There is something to be said for a “curse” that is written with such poetic power, skill, and beauty. A “curse” should be ugly, written ugly. Job's “curse” is beautiful.

Verses 11-12 – In agony Job asks *Why did I not die at birth?* If he had been given no breath, he would have expired as he came from the womb. He would simply have been transported from the womb to the grave. Next Job asks, *Why did the knees*, most likely his father's, but possibly

¹⁰ John E. Hartley, [The Book of Job](#), The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 93.

¹¹ John E. Hartley, [The Book of Job](#), The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 94.

his mother's, *receive him?*²² **In holding the newborn the parents bind themselves to the child, signifying their acceptance of the infant and the responsibility of raising the baby, and the breasts that I should suck?** He wishes that he had been discarded, left to die unattended.¹²

Because of how Job speaks, we imagine that this all primarily about him. But this simply does not match the descriptions of the kind of mature and spiritually deep man Job was. Job's agony is as much or more about his family, and all of those who depended on him and his wife by way of resources and encouragement and wisdom. They are all gone! His children, all of them, killed in a moment. WHY would he ever have wanted with his wife to bring beautiful children into the world only to see them die, or each of their children to have their rich lives snuffed out? Perhaps what Job is doing in this "curse of the day I was conceived/born" has far more to do with anger at what their children had taken from them just as they were into the productive and creative parts of their lives.

Verse 13 – In the theology of this book, judgment is not postponed to the afterlife. It is only in a negative sense that the turbulence of life abates (verse 13) and the inequalities of life become irrelevant (14–19). **In spite of the vagueness with which the living conditions of Sheol are described, the continuation of conscious personal existence and identity after death is clearly believed. The book knows nothing about the heaven of bliss or the hell of torment in later eschatology, but there is never a thought that death means *extinction*.** In fact, Job provides a long list of the denizens of Sheol, ranging from those who had achieved the highest eminence (kings and others, verse 14) to those who had achieved nothing (the stillborn, verse 16).²⁹ **He envies them all, for nothing happens in the grave.**¹³

²² Cf. B. Stade, "Auf Jemandes Knieen gebaren," *ZAW* 6 (1886) 143–56. Although taking a child on the knees may be a father's act to show his acceptance of and concern for his child (Gen. 50:23b; cf. 30:3), it often refers to the motherly custom of gladly taking up the newborn infant to nurse it (cf. Isa. 66:12). She thus recognizes it as her own and commits herself to its nurture and upbringing.

¹² John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 95.

²⁹ This is only one of several good reasons for leaving verse 16 in its present position, instead of moving it around as has become fashionable in modern translations (JB, NEB, NAB).

¹³ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 114.

A LAMENT (3:14-26)

Verses 14-19 – The social inequalities are evened up in the grave. This is summed up in verse 19, which says that the small and the great, the slave and his master are now all alike. Two lists of representatives of the two ends of the scale are given, with nice symmetry. There seem to be four categories in each list: *kings, counsellors, builders, princes* (or rich) in verses 14 and 15; the wicked, the over-worked, criminals, the exploited in verses 17 and 18. This grouping makes it clear that verse 16 is in its proper place in the middle, while verse 19 sums up the whole by bringing both classes together.¹⁴

In light of the comment by Andersen above, I think of the all too typical response to Death – the reality that one’s life is not completely in one’s power – is **to build up security, or what seems like security (worldly possessions)**, but the possession of which actually intensifies the experience of Death: “I have now even more to lose!”

Verse 17 - Sheol is the place of rest and relief (verse 13). Even *the wicked*, far from receiving their long overdue punishment, find repose. It is less likely that he means that they are now prevented *from troubling* others. The same word is used at the end of verse 26 to describe Job’s present ‘agitation’. It implies that *the wicked* live in a state of emotional disturbance which happily ends for them in death. **We are already near the bitter thought that being good or bad makes no difference in the end.**¹⁵

Until very late in the Old Testament biblical perspective does the idea of an *afterlife as something that one lives, a kind of Time within which a person has ongoing experiences*, start to appear. Long before there was an understanding of the afterlife as the dull place, the gray place, the vague place – the great Leveler of worldly stature. Persons *did* exist there, in the Afterlife (Sheol), but there was no activity there at all – **nothing mattered there.**

The only way to “solve” what Andersen remarks – “the bitter thought that being good or bad makes no difference in the end” – is to lay claim to the insight that Life is about learning how to exercise it wholeheartedly in the present moment. It is not to be for such a person about “gaming” the next stage – the Afterlife – by acting “in the hope of rewards” later.

Verse 20 – So far Job has found life intolerable (verses 3–10) and death desirable (verses 11–19). Now he strikes deeper into the problem by asking *why* any of this should happen at all.

¹⁴ Francis I. Andersen, [*Job: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 114–115.

¹⁵ Francis I. Andersen, [*Job: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 115.

Light and life are similar, since the realm of death is a dark place. **Why should the result of God's good gift of life be that those who have it wish to be rid of it?**^{32 16}

Verses 24-26 – The last three verses of Job's speech are so unintelligible in the Hebrew original that translators have had to take various liberties to secure reasonable English. The words *sighing* and *groanings* are not strong enough. The latter describes the roaring of lions, and reading *km-ym* instead of *k-mym*, which requires no change in the text, yields a more powerful simile: 'my bellowings cascade like the sea.' The apparent reference to *my bread* in the preceding line has defeated all commentators, unless 'my flesh'³⁴ affords a clue. ***Sighing is too feeble a sound to express Job's tragic sorrow. The impression is given that groans come from his whole body.***¹⁷

Verse 26 – Dhorme distinguishes the words as *ease* (*šālâ*) for mental rest, *quiet* (*šāqat*) for physical rest, and *rest* (*nûah*) for rest in general. That delineation may be somewhat artificial, but the rest Job desired encompasses both poise and tranquility. A person with a deep sense of serenity may enjoy life to its fullest. **Conversely, one lacking repose is filled with deep agitation, which encompasses physical torment, agony of mind, and social discomfort. Such is Job's case.** He exclaims, *turmoil comes!* The word for turmoil (*rōḡez*; cf. v. 17) describes the agitated state that results from complete lack of peace.¹⁸

³² Although translations agree in making *him that is in misery* and its parallel *the bitter in soul* the indirect objects of the verb *given*, this makes sense only if it means, 'Why does God keep on giving light and life to such persons, instead of letting them die, as they would prefer?' But the enquiry is more fundamental. **Why is life given at all, since it results only in exhaustion (see comment on *trouble*—the same word—at verse 10) and disillusionment (the bitterness describes someone who has nothing to live for, especially a desolate widow).** The preposition thus points to the outcome of the gift, not the recipient.

¹⁶ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 116.

³⁴ Cf. Pope, p. 51 (on Job. 6:7).

¹⁷ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 117.

¹⁸ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 100.