

## ***From the Dust***

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Lent #4 Job Series

## **Job 23**

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Dearest children of God,

How do we deal with God when we find ourselves in the dust like Job? Sometimes faith looks a lot different when we're in the dust than it does when things are going well.

Job chapter 1 ends saying,

*Job 1:22 In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.*

Let's back up for a minute and think about what the writer is referring to by "all this." For the sake of those who may not know the story of Job, let me remind us all. The book starts with this little bio of Job:

*Job 1:1 In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. <sup>2</sup> He had seven sons and three daughters, <sup>3</sup> and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East.*

As the story continues, we learn that in one day, this upright man loses everything just mentioned. Job's sons and daughters are killed by a tornado. His crops and all of his herds are either stolen by bandits or destroyed by a storm. This greatest and perhaps richest man in the East has everything taken away from him. By that measurement, he is reduced to nothing. After that, his body gets covered in sores and by the middle of chapter 2 we find Job literally sitting in the dust, scraping his sores with broken pottery. And there, three friends join him on the ground and cover themselves with dust, meeting Job where he is at. In the dust, a place of lowliness, brokenness and humility if not humiliation. It's a picture of hitting bottom. You can't get lower than laying in the dust. It's a reminder of the frailty of our lives. We are dust and to dust we will return.

Twenty-one chapters later, Job has had time to think. He's had days it seems of listening to his so-called friends try to help him figure out the cause for all his sudden calamity. They keep saying it's got to be his fault. He must have done something wrong. He has to be guilty of something otherwise God would not inflict this suffering on him. That was the mind of the people in that time and place. If you live a right life, good stuff will happen. But if you do wrong, God's gonna get you for that!

But Job's not having it. He doesn't believe he's done anything wrong to deserve the horrors he's been enduring. He's lived an upright and blameless life. Not that Job knows this, but God himself said as much to Satan—two times—in chapter 1 and 2. In any case, Job's not willing to go down that road of self-blame. And he's growing increasingly angry at his friends for their stupid arguments that keep coming back to Job's guilt.

Job continues to hold on to his faith, though it is starting to look different than it did in chapter 1 and 2. Early on, his wife told him to curse God and die. But he hasn't

been willing to do that up to now. However, the words I opened with seem to be getting less true. When he first lost all that was near and dear to him, we read again,

*Job 1:22 In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.*

But now in chapter 23 Job seriously dances around the possibility of blaming God or sinning toward God.

Suffice it to say that Job is low. And he doesn't know exactly why all this trouble has landed on his plate. But he knows who does know. And he wants to talk to God about this. His faith is still alive. He's confused but he's trying to connect with God.

## **Where is God?**

The problem is, Job can't find God. And he's moving from not sinning to complaining.

*Job 23:2 "Even today my complaint is bitter;  
his (God's) hand is heavy in spite of my groaning.*

*Job 23:3 If only I knew where to find him;  
if only I could go to his dwelling!*

*Job 23:4 I would state my case before him  
and fill my mouth with arguments.*

*Job 23:5 I would find out what he would answer me,  
and consider what he would say.*

Job was angry with God or, at least, bitter. He's got a mile-long list of complaints to bring to God. *Even today my complaint is bitter*, he says. In the Hebrew, the word for complaint includes a sense of rebelliousness. Job isn't just accepting God's will, as he did in chapter 1. Now he's challenging God and looking for answers. I think that's a normal part of the faith journey through suffering for many of us. Job is in good company. We are in good company.

You see, Job had lived an upright life. He trusted the Lord. He had everything a man could want. And he knew he was very blessed. He did not hoard his riches for himself. A righteous man, as Job is said to be, would have been there to help the poor and needy. He would have been generous. He was wise—people looked to him for counsel. And not just for financial or business advice. They asked him for thoughts on the deepest questions of life. And of death. Job was highly respected on many levels.

So when everything he held dear is stripped away, he has questions for God. Not only his family and riches are gone. So is his respect among the people of Ur where he lives and previously was considered wise. Now he's being accused by some of his noblest friends of being a big sinner. They say Job has some dark secrets in the closet that God has uncovered and is punishing Job for.

If all of that is not enough, Job is understandably frustrated, if not ticked off, with God. Where in this hell of mine are you, God? I think you owe me an explanation. I want to state my case before you? Call it what you want but it's a cry out of faith. Job believes in God and wants to talk to him. But from Job's perspective, God appears to be absent.

*Job 23:3 If I... knew where to find him....I could go to his dwelling!*

*Job 23:4 I would state my case before him*

But I can't find him.

That's Job biggest issue. He still very much a believer! He doesn't ever say that he doesn't believe in God. He does. Very much! Just look at v.10:

*Job 23:10 But he knows the way that I take;*

He definitely knew that life only makes sense when we hold on to God. But, really, that is hard sometimes, especially when life is really hard and God seems to be silent. Or even absent! Job really believes in God. He just wants to ask him a few questions and "consider what he would say."

Job would settle for just knowing God is near. In v.8 he starts talking about how he looks for God.

*Job 23:8 "But if I go to the east, he is not there;*

*if I go to the west, I do not find him.*

*Job 23:9 When he is at work in the north, I do not see him;*

*when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.*

N.T. Wright says, "He looks to all four quarters of the compass. The Hebrew expressions are more vivid than the English ones. In Hebrew, people orientate on the east where the sun rises rather than on the north (like we do) because of the way a compass works. So Job imagines first going "forward," eastward; God is not there. He then imagines going "backward" or "behind" where he is, westward. He speaks of turning to the north...as the place where God "works" which may reflect the fact that the north was thought of as the location of God's cabinet meeting, the place where decisions are made concerning events in the world; so it should be a good place to find God, but it wasn't. So finally Job turns south, where Mount Sinai was; Israelites were accustomed to thinking of God coming from that direction. That was where Elijah went to look for God when he thought God might be abandoning him to Jezebel, and God appeared to him there. Perhaps God has withdrawn there again? But Job cannot see him." He looks to the east, west, north and south but there is nothing. (*Job for Everyone*)

Job is not the last one to complain about the darkness of life when we don't feel God near to us. The Psalms contain words of the saints bringing their complaints to God. And that, if nothing else, is a big encouragement to us as Christians. We may not always sense the nearness of God, whether times are bad or even good. But that doesn't change God. It doesn't change the fact that God is truly present. Our feelings are not the measure of truth. They are important, and God doesn't discount them. Instead, he welcomes Job's complaint and the complaints of many psalmists throughout history. Our complaints when directed at God are still an act of faith.

The other day I was reading an article by J.D. Greear who writes about a church planter. He tells the story of when he first felt called to ministry, how he resigned from his job in Tennessee and moved his family to North Carolina to attend seminary, only to have everything fall apart. His marriage came within inches of destruction; he went into bankruptcy. The worst, he said, was holding his newborn son as he died in their arms. He said, "I had no words. All I could ask God during that season was, 'Why?' I didn't want to talk about God or preach the words of God. I only wanted to rage against God. All I've done is try to follow him, and this is how he treats me?"

Many believers have gone through dark chapters and thought the same things..., but they've suppressed those emotions, telling themselves, "Real Christians don't ever feel like this."

But take a look at the book of Jeremiah or Lamentations sometime, along with the Psalms. And look at the examples of other historical figures battling through the darkness of the soul. "The prophet Jeremiah was a real Christian, and he said his soul was [dark and] depressed within him.

"Charles Spurgeon was a real Christian, and he told his congregation, "I have spent more days shut up in depression than probably anybody else here." He was said by many to be the greatest preacher to ever live, and he frequently considered quitting the ministry because he was so depressed.

"Martin Luther was a real Christian, and he went through times so dark that his wife would remove all the knives from their home for fear he'd kill himself. "For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell," he wrote. "I trembled constantly. I could find no thoughts of Christ, only of desperation and blasphemy of God."

<https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/christian-your-depression-is-real-so-is-gods-deliverance>

That's sort of where Job is at here in chapter 23 and also in chapter 24. He's complaining to God about God. He's bordering on blasphemy, to use Martin Luther's term. Luther didn't mince words. If you say that someone does not mince their words, you mean that they speak in a forceful and direct way, especially when saying something unpleasant to someone. For example, "The doctors didn't mince their words, and predicted the worst." That was Luther. He had no problem airing his harsh complaints to God from the depths of his despair. And we shouldn't either, especially when we wonder what he's up to and, even more so, where he is.

## **Seeking a Sign of God's Presence**

Did you see that story in the news a few weeks ago about a little boy at a Montreal Canadiens hockey game against Toronto? This 10 (or so) year old boy had lost his mom to cancer recently. And before she died, he promised her that he was going to see Carey Price, the Canadian's goalie, who this little guy admired. So this boy gets to a game and as Price comes off the ice, the boy—dressed in a #31, Carey Price jersey—gets Price's attention. And somehow or other the boy lets Price know that his mom died. And Price reaches up to the kids and gives him a big hug. The boy breaks into tears. And then Carey takes time to be with the boy and console him. He signs all kinds of memorabilia for the boy including his own goalie stick which he gives to him. And the boy is comforted for a time. <https://globalnews.ca/video/5012044/montreal-canadiens-carey-price-hugs-young-boy-who-lost-his-mother>

When I was thinking about that story and the story of Job, I think that's kind of what Job is after. He complains to God and wants answers. But, if you ask me, he just wants a hug. He wants to feel God's nearness. What he lacks more than anything else in this terrible tragedy he's enduring is a sense of God's presence. After all he's lost and been through, he's still holding on to God but he just wants some reassurance that God

is there. Even if he can't get the answers to the questions he has, he just wants to know that God is with him in his suffering.

Job had a moment of bright faith in v.10 while going through some hard questioning. He confessed,

*Job 23:10 But he (God) knows the way that I take;*

Or to put it in the words of Jeremiah 29, God knows the plans he has for us. But Job returns to his struggle in v.11 to 14. And I get that. Our faith is not always strong and stellar. We go through times of questioning and doubt. Then we're up again for a time. But then we're down again. Such is the struggle of faith in the midst of trials. We're not weird or abnormal when that happens. We just want a hug. We want to feel that God hasn't forgotten us.

And let me assure you that he hasn't.

What's really amazing is the grace of God for us even when we are complaining and doubting or feeling abandoned. We might ask ourselves if some of Job's complaining words were sinful. And they probably were. And we'll see next week how God finally answered Job. But today let us see that God did not reject Job, his hurting child. The thought never even entered the mind of God. Rather, we can know that God held his child sort of like Carey Price held that grieving little boy. But God held Job invisibly as Job poured out his complaint. And that's a certainty we have as well.

It doesn't matter if we *feel* God's presence. His presence with us is a guarantee as children of God. We can't necessarily change how we feel at times. But we must let our feelings be informed by the truth we learn from Scripture. That means we must not doubt in the dark what we know is true in the light. In other words, when things are well and we learn from God's Word that God is faithful and an ever present help, we can hold on to that in the dark days. That truth will help us see better through the darkness.

Moreover, the promise of God's presence is made secure through Jesus. In Jesus, God himself has writhed in pain. And he did so for us! He meets us in the dust of life. He knows our struggles, our pain and sorrows, as one hymn puts it. But this is much more than just a "misery loves company" thing. The gospel message is that Christ took our misery upon himself. He understands us better than we can imagine. But even more than that, he has taken the ultimate suffering for our sin and the sin of the world upon himself. Job couldn't find God when he looked for him. But God was still there. For Jesus, however, when he hung on the cross and looked for the Father, there was nothing. And that's why Jesus cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

Job's speech in chapter 23 continues into chapter 24 where he questions the justice of God. And in Christ the justice of God is meted out and satisfied completely. Job does not know what God is up to in his life. And it's true for us too. So when our life is shaken, our faith is expressed in different ways. We cry out to God.

We lament. And we even complain bitterly or rebelliously as Job did. We shout out about the injustice we feel in our lives. Why do we have to suffer when others don't? We might even have feelings of fear or terror, as Job expresses in vs. 15 & 16. The struggle is intense!

And God's ultimate answer is Jesus. There is injustice in this sin-sick world. Lots and lots of it. Enough to make us doubt God's concern. But only if that's where we keep looking. The solution is looking to God himself and seeing that he cares so much about the injustices we endure that he took upon himself the greatest injustice. A sinless God-man suffering the agony of hell in place of sinful humanity.

Romans 8 can comfort us in knowing that God has a purpose for our struggles. Job mentions his hope in v.10 that God is at working, purifying or refining him so that he comes out at pure gold. Paul says similarly in Romans 8 that God works all things together for our good. But Romans 3 says these words in response to the questions of injustice that we feel:

*Rom 3:25 God presented him (Jesus, his Son) as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

God sacrificed Jesus on the altar to clear our world of sin. God set the world free from sin through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins of the world that he had so patiently endured. God himself sets things right. And now he wants us to live in the comfort and victory that Jesus has won for us. God's response to the suffering of Job—and us—and our complaints about his absence and injustice are answered in Jesus.

Jesus met us in the dust of the earth from which we are formed. He took upon himself our sin-weakened flesh, he suffered and died, unjustly bearing the weight of eternal punishment in our place so that God will never, never, never forsake us. Through Christ, we are raised from the dust and guaranteed a secure place in the presence of God for eternity. But we're also promised that—regardless of how we feel—God is not only on our side now, he's also with us and at work in our lives every day. He loves us and nothing can separate us from him, regardless of how we feel.

To recognize our pain and struggles, I'm going to make these red strips of paper available to you. And I invite you take one, write on it your complaint to God, your struggle, your cries, your sense of injustice. Don't put your name on it. It'll be anonymous. Then put it in the box that is on the fire extinguisher holder beside the office door by the mail entrance. You can do that today or else bring it back next Sunday. Then by Good Friday we'll have all those papers connected into a paper-chain, hanging on the cross where Jesus faces the injustices of sin for us. Please do that!

I'll get the deacons to pass a basket with these papers in them as they pass around the collection plates. If they happen to run out, there are more on the back table and also next to the box where you put your filled in paper. So take a strip of paper and write your complaint to God as the offering is received. Then, after the service, put it in that box with same red colour lid that is on the fire extinguisher by the office door. Thanks.

To end, then, someone said, “The greatest Christians in history were not those that God delivered *from* all pain and misery [in the fast and easy way we might prefer] but those he delivered *through* their pain and misery.” So remember that God is ready to walk with you through the darkness of this life and meet you in the dust, regardless of how you feel. Keep your eye on the cross of Jesus and always remember that—because of Jesus—God will never forsake us. He’s got you in his hands and in his heart.