

Women's Bible Study Fall 2017

How to Suffer Honorably: excerpts from Job 3 - 37

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Gretchen Steer



In the Steer household, we really know how to celebrate. This August, we got all our family together – 3 children, two spouses and a boyfriend, and 3 grandbabies, and went to a cabin together. 24 hours later John fell down a flight of stairs and broke 4 ribs, shaved the ends off 3 vertebrae and punctured his lung. After two ambulance rides, he ended up in the Trauma Center at St Mary's, Duluth, where he stayed for the next four days.

Now my husband is a very tough individual. But even strong people cannot cope with that amount of physical pain. One of the hardest things was watching him get moved numerous times – first onto a backboard, then into the ambulance, then onto an exam table, and on and on. I counted nine different times he was shifted with all his broken bones from one surface to another that night, and each time he involuntarily cried out in agony. By the second day, the drugs kicked in, and the hospital CEO graciously arranged for a cake and coffee so we could go on “celebrating” our 40th anniversary.

I have to say, it's really difficult to watch someone you love in pain, whether that pain is physical or emotional. The onlooker cannot change the situation no matter how much they want to fix it. Because suffering is part of the human condition. And we react to it as frail human beings. No matter how strong our faith is, it will be tested, shaken, and hopefully strengthened by suffering.

So this week we are looking at “How to Suffer Honorably”. Last week we heard how very unhelpful Job's friends were, despite their well meaning desire to help. Their worldview told them that Job was being punished by God for wrongdoing. The truth, from chapters 1-2, was far different. Job's experience was permitted by God in his sovereignty, to accomplish God's aims in Job's life and God's glory in this world.

How did Job react? We see 5 common responses to suffering in his words. We are ranging through chapters 3 - 37 today, so please remember that all the references are in the notes, and most of them will also be displayed on the screen.

So let's look at

I. Five Common Experiences in Suffering

In chapter 2:9-10 we read that despite the loss of his children, his property, his social standing and his health, Job did not sin in what he said. And at the end of the story God commended Job for speaking the truth about him. (Job 42:8) So Job's response was not sinful even though it is very human.

All his reactions begin with the words: “I wish”. To say “I wish” is like saying, “Here's what I want to happen, but I don't really think it will.” It's an acknowledgement that reality often falls short of our desires.

Job's first reaction was:

A. I wish I was dead.

Look chapter 3 verse 1:

"After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said, 'May the day of my birth perish, and the night that said, "A boy is conceived!"' (Job 3:1-3)

He repeats this theme at some length in chapters 3, 6, 7 and 10:

"...I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine. I despise my life; I would not live forever." (Job 7:16)

and

"Why then did you bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before any eye saw me." (Job 10:18)

We're talking about honorable suffering, right? So how is it honorable to wish we were dead when we suffer? Because it is honest, and because Job acknowledges God's sovereign right to give him life or death. Job never implies that he would take his own life even in the worst times. Life is the Lord's to give, or to take. So the sufferer might wish they were dead, because who wants to go on living when they are desperately unhappy, but the believer needs to cling to the truth that our life is not our own to end. Listen to his words in Job 6:8-10: **"Oh, that I might have my request, that God would grant what I hope for, that God would be willing to crush me...then I would still have this consolation – my joy in unrelenting pain – that I had not denied the words of the Holy One."** Even though he is miserable Job takes comfort in his own integrity. Job wishes that God would put him out of his misery, but acknowledges that life is God's to give or to take. That is an honorable response to suffering.

Next Job thinks:

B. I wish there was a reason for this.

Just because we know the heavenly background of Job's situation doesn't mean that Job understood God's purpose in testing him. Look at Job 7:20:

"Why have you made me your target?" (Job 7:20b)

And he wonders why God has singled him out:

"... you must search out my faults and probe after my sin – though you know I am not guilty and that no one can rescue me from your hand." (Job 10:6-7)

We do not have the right or perhaps even the capability of understanding why events happen as they do. That's because we do not have the sovereign, omniscient God's eye view that sees the effect of our suffering in our life, along with its purpose in the lives of others. We may gain some clue as the years pass, but we may never know until we see Jesus face to face why we underwent suffering. What makes the difference

between godly and ungodly suffering is the degree of acceptance we show towards God. I believe that Job is included in scripture to give us a closeup view of a godly person working to accept God's sovereign right to permit suffering. We hear this acceptance at the end of the book when God confronts Job in chapters 38 -42. Job responds **“Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.” (Job 42:3)** It is human to question why. But it is honorable to accept that we are not guaranteed an answer in this life. Instead, we have to fall back on our trust of God's sovereign will, even when we don't understand it.

Next Job says,

C. I wish my friends understood.

After reading what Job's four friends said as they were supposedly comforting him, I have to agree. I wish his friends understood too! If you've ever been stumped over how to speak to a suffering person, take a look at Jann's lecture from last week. She provided us with 7 really helpful suggestions on how to help the suffering.

Job's friends implied that his suffering was a result of unconfessed sin. To put that burden on someone only adds salt to the wound, and Job showed some flashes of anger as he defended his integrity to his friends.

“Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid.” (Job 6:21)

Not all of us can stomach the sight of terrible physical suffering. It often comes accompanied by bad smells, bad sights and terrifying feelings of helplessness. We sometimes have to suppress our own urge to run from the room. Job was no different. In chapter 19 Job admits that his breath was offensive and he is loathsome to his family.

But if we are going to follow Christ, we need to be willing to touch the suffering even when they are physically repulsive from disease or injury. How hurtful it must have been to Job to see his friends' fear and loathing of his illness, to have no one touch him with kindness.

But what hurt even more was that they challenged his integrity:

“You, however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! If only you would be altogether silent. For you, that would be wisdom.” (Job 13:4)

And

“...you are miserable comforters, all of you! Will your long winded speeches never end? What ails you that you keep on arguing?” (Job 16:2-3)

Is it honorable to be that blunt to our friends? I think in this instance it was, because we all long to be understood by those who love us. But suffering isolates us. We do not experience grief or pain in the same way as another, and even people we love may stumble in what they say.

I want to speak for a moment to those who have experienced the suffering of divorce. It seems that divorce generates all the feelings of grief and loss that come with bereavement, with the added sting of betrayal, or a sense of failure, and more complex emotions. That makes it even more difficult for friends to speak grace into our lives and to say the right thing. Perhaps we can learn something from Job's bluntness. He did not sin by asking his friends to reconsider the help they were providing. Rather, he was truthful to tell them he needed something different than they were offering.

Next, Job voiced:

D. I wish I had an advocate.

Much of Job has a courtroom-like aspect. Initially there is the court of heaven, in chapters 1 and 2. Satan is constrained by God in what he can do, just as the law restrains us from acting without restraint.

The end of the book has God in the dock, as CS Lewis put it, stating his case for his own sovereignty. But in between Job longs for an advocate, someone to represent him before God.

Job did not live in the time of Christ. He could look forward to a redeemer, a champion, a rescuer, who would advocate for him in heaven, but he could only imagine such a person. These words of Job's, uttered in faith, unwittingly describe the future work of Jesus Christ:

“Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as one pleads for a friend.” (Job 16:19-21)

Yet there is a transition in his thinking, and by the time we reach Job 19:25, Job is speaking about God himself as Job's rescuer and redeemer:

“I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.” (Job 19:25)

And this indicates the faith that Job had. Despite everything, he still believes that he will see God. God has not abandoned him. And when we are suffering desperately and long for an advocate to plead our case before God, we can turn to Christ, who ever lives to make intercession for us in heaven. With an extraordinary insight Job also recognizes that his redeemer will not just intercede before God, but will be God himself, just as Jesus Christ intercedes for us in heaven, yet himself is fully God.

Finally, Job says,

E. I wish my life hadn't changed. (Job 29)

I found chapter 29 kind of heartrending. When we suffer, we think longingly of the days when there was no trouble:

**“How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me...
Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God’s intimate friendship blessed by
house, when the Almighty was still with me, and my children were around me, when my
path was drenched with cream, and the rock poured out for me streams of olive oil.
(Job 29:1-4)**

But it was not just his family nor his material goods that he missed. Job had a position of power and respect in the community:

**Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, because
I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist them.”
(v. 11-12)**

In contrast, now Job is sitting in ashes and scraping his skin with a shard of pottery. No one asks his opinion. He is an object of loathing – just look at what God does to the man who sins against him, people think, and so Job has lost one of the most important aspects of his life – the respect and regard of others.

He ruefully admits,

“I thought, ‘I will die in my own house, my days as numerous as the grains of sand.’” (v. 18)

This should be sobering to all of us. Because when life is going well it is difficult to believe that it will ever change. We can go on planning for the future, but the future may not exist in the same form as the present. When I first saw my husband lying broken at the bottom of the stairs and heard the ragged breathing of his punctured lung, I feared that he was dying or paralyzed. Our life changed in a moment. But instead of being a permanent change, it was instead a wakeup call. We learned forcefully that God numbers our days, and that he has given us some extra days to serve him.

But it is very natural in suffering to long for the past. Like Job, we need to trust in God’s lovingkindness towards us. Even when our future is not what we expected, we can say with Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you.” (2 Cor. 12:9)

So Job’s story is given to us, in part, as a template for how we can suffer as humans, yet with integrity.

But his story also begs the larger question of

II. Why do we suffer?

Although we’ve touched on this in almost every lesson so far, it’s helpful to look at some of the main reasons why God permits suffering in our lives.

First,

A. We live in a fallen world.

This world is beautiful. But it can also be deadly.

“Cursed is the ground because of you...” (Genesis 3:17b)

Nature is gorgeous, but unpredictable, as the folks living in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico discovered in the past two months. As thousands of people flee forest fires in northern and southern California, as hundreds drown in Bangladeshi flooding and thousands die of starvation in Africa, we live in a fallen world, where creation itself awaits the redemption that will come with Jesus' return.

But that's not all. Creation is now a place of life and death, rather than the idyllic life of the Garden of Eden, but this world has been placed, in the permissive will of God, under the influence of evil:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world...” (Ephesians 6:12)

Sometimes it will happen in this fallen world, that another person's evil will impinge on our life. 58 dead and 500 injured in Las Vegas, thanks to one shooter's obscure desire to kill others. Children molested by people we trust. Marriages broken over sexual sin. What is most important, when evil brushes up against us or our loved ones, is to understand what Job couldn't have known – that the evil coming into his life was still constrained by God. It had both boundaries and limits. Satan's work in Job's life was only as far as God permitted it. It is not God's desire that we suffer, but it is God's prerogative to permit suffering, and through it to make himself known to us.

A second reason is

B. To show the works of God.

When Jesus was asked why a man was born blind, and whether it was due to his sin or his parents', Jesus responded:

“This happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (John 9:3)

The works of God might have been to display the deity of Christ, in showing his healing power. Or the works of God might have been some larger purpose which we cannot understand, in which this blind man was only a bit player. What is important to remember is that God in his sovereignty, permits suffering, but only as much as we can bear. We see this in Job's story:

“The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, he is in your hands, but you must spare his life.’” (Job 2:6)

We don't really have an answer as to why Job was singled out – only that his integrity remained intact, and that God restored to him all he had lost. It's important to remember that this trial passed first through the hands of a loving God, whose intention was not to break Job but rather to display his majesty and his sovereignty over our lives. After meeting with God in chapters 38-42, we hear Job responding “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust

and ashes.” (Job. 42:5-6). No longer does Job justify himself. Instead, in the face of God’s holiness, he can only repent and worship. God permits us to suffer so that we may see and understand his glory.

Another reason God permits suffering is

C. To identify with Christ.

Jesus warned his followers:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

Taking up one’s cross is hardly a pleasant pastime, but it’s a rewarding one, because it makes us identify with Jesus. Peter goes on to say,

“If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” (1 Peter 4:14)

We are blessed when we suffer for the name of Christ. In a sense, Job suffered for the name of God, because he was the object lesson for an entire community. Suffering causes us to identify with Christ, who is our suffering Savior.

Next, we are sometimes called to suffer

D. To mature in our faith.

Sometimes we suffer as Christians so that our faith can grow up.

“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.” (2 Cor. 4:8-10)

The death of Jesus signifies self sacrifice, but also resurrection power. If we never encounter hardship, let alone suffering, we do not grow up in our faith any more than children can grow up if we do everything for them.

Sometimes God permits us to suffer

E. To test us.

The Old Testament recounts many times when God tested the Israelites. You see, when everything’s great, there is no way to measure what our faith is really made of. Our faith is revealed in adversity – either it collapses, or we cry to Christ for rescue and discover our faith is strong enough for anything.

One of the few godly kings in the O.T. was Hezekiah, who honored God. Yet at the end of his life, we are told that

“...God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart.” (2nd Chronicles 32:31)

When tested, Hezekiah acted unwisely, by showing an enemy nation all his riches. Of course they came back and stole everything. When tested, Hezekiah failed to be wise by looking to God for guidance.

Peter is quite blunt in his letter:

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Peter 4:12)

God will test us through suffering, but he also equips us to cope with it.

There is one other way we suffer, and that is when we experience the consequences of our sin. Even though one could make a case that this suffering is deserved, it can still serve to make us more Christlike and mature our faith, if we are willing to repent and learn the lessons that suffering teaches us.

So,

III. What Can I Learn from Suffering Honorably?

First,

- **I will become more like Christ.** When I think of Jesus, I see him utterly committed to doing his Father's work in this world, even at great cost. Hebrews tells us that although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. We can learn that same obedience to God's will when we gracefully seek to learn what we can learn through our suffering. We will become more like Christ.

Second,

- **I will empathize with others more.** When we have suffered we understand what it is like for someone else, even though the cause of their suffering is different. It should make us more attentive to the needs of hurting people around us. Even Job was moved to pray for his friends in chapter 42, and this marked the turning point in God's restoration of his life. Suffering should make us more empathetic to the pain of others.

Third,

- **I will find a rescuer.**

We have an 11 year tradition in Bible study of me telling “rustic camping stories”, relating to my annual backpacking trip with my siblings. This year was going to be our last really tough hike, an 8 day, 58 mile trek in Northern Yosemite.

Long hikes require extra gear and food so we set off carrying 45 pound packs. After 20 miles and three days we reached Benson Lake, the “Riviera of the Sierras”. We were carrying a satellite device which provided weather reports. And by Wednesday morning the news wasn't so good. It predicted a high chance of heavy rain or snow coming in by 7 pm. And it wasn't going to get any better for five days, which meant we'd run out of food if we stayed put.

Now the success or failure of this trip hinged on four crucial decisions. I'll start with the second one, which was to carry a satellite device which gave weather reports. The information on Tuesday made us decide not to continue on our route into the really high passes ahead of us. This decision may have saved our lives. The third crucial decision

came as we sat mulling over the updated weather at Benson Lake...do we wait out the storm in a secure camp, or do we make a run for it? We voted to try to get over the nearest pass, hopefully before the weather hit. 5 ½ miles later we had climbed up 2000 feet and hunkered down in a canyon. At 7:01 pm, as predicted, it began raining and we crawled into our tents for one of the longest nights of my life. It rained, and rained, and rained. I have spent enough time in England to know that nothing is waterproof if it gets rained on long enough. Hour after hour, I waited for the tent to breach and gallons of cold water to pour in on us with no way to get warm.

At 3 am we discovered the rain had turned to snow and the roof was sagging dangerously. The snow never let up until morning. I read Psalm 27 aloud: **“For in the day of trouble, he will keep me safe in his dwelling: he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent.”** Then I turned to Luke’s account of Jesus calming the storm. The words leaped off the page. When the disciples awoke Jesus in their boat because they were afraid of the storm, the first thing he asked them was, **“Where is your faith?” (Luke 8:25)**. Where was my faith? I’m afraid that it was missing in action for much of that terrible night. We were 15 miles backcountry in deep snow. The temperature was in the mid 20’s. This is what we saw when we awoke in our wet tent – covered packs, wood too wet to start a fire. But worst of all, the trail was completely hidden.

It was then that the Lord answered our prayers by sending an experienced guide leading a group of 9 college students. They didn’t pause but explained they were hiking out. This was our fourth crucial decision, to trade the safety of a camp for a dangerous journey where we were miles from safety. And so we hastily packed and began following their footsteps, mile after mile.

The water had risen, so the frequent river crossings were more dangerous. We did them barefoot or in crocs to keep our boots dry. The snow in the meadow hid the water, so we often broke through it, wetting our feet. The terrain had changed drastically with the snow.

Much of the way led through narrow canyons. We picked our way down them, every icy step a chance to slip off and die. And then it began to snow again, and the snow filled in the lifesaving footsteps we were following. But my brother tirelessly broke trail hour after hour, checking to make sure we were ok, carrying our packs across river crossings we were too tired to navigate safely. After 10 ½ miles, we reached a campsite. I had a cup of hot water that tasted better to me than anything I’ve ever had to drink. Night was already falling. Too exhausted to eat, we fell into bed and tried to stay warm in our damp sleeping bags and wet tent.

In the morning it was 15 degrees. The sun was out and the entire world was frozen, including the bear vaults containing our food, our unlightable stoves and our boots. It took 20 minutes to force our feet into frozen boots. But within an hour we reached Barney Lake, only 4 miles from the trailhead, and we knew we were going to make it. We felt like the Donner party – only we had survived, and most of them hadn’t.

In human terms we owe the credit for our survival to my brother. He had the strength and knowledge to keep us going. But what I have not mentioned is the crucial first

decision – the one we made before ever setting out - that we would carry an SOS device. If you pushed that little red SOS button, a Search and Rescue team would try to retrieve you. Now, whether they could get there in time in a snowstorm in that terrain was not certain. A fall into the river could have killed us from hypothermia. A broken leg, a heart attack – we dreaded it all, and none of it happened. Although we had an SOS, we were saved, not by the SOS button, but by the Rescuer Jesus Christ, who heard our prayers. He sent that expert tracker along when we needed footsteps to follow. He preserved us from hypothermia. But most importantly, Jesus kept me from despair.

For the most difficult aspect of this whole experience was not facing death, but rather, the enormous guilt of having left our loved ones and voluntarily put ourselves into this life and death situation. Our poor kids, who had seen their father nearly die in August, might have to face something worse if I didn't return home. So the remorse of that decision was far harder to bear in that long night than the physical hardships that followed.

But we had a Rescuer, and the God who created the storm and the Sierra also gave us a safe passage through it.

You and I have an SOS button, and it is symbolized by the cross in this picture. We don't have to wait until we are dying to send out an SOS and call our great Rescuer for help. Because when we suffer, Jesus is the only person who can truly help change the situation. Job instinctively knew that he had a rescuer - God. We know with complete certainty that the Lord who died to save us will also rescue us from despair, because he suffered and was tempted just like us, yet without sinning.

So our SOS button is cross shaped. And it holds Jesus, who loved us and laid down his life in order to rescue us. Jesus, in the end, is the key to suffering honorably, by rescuing us.

WBS is a ministry of Autumn Ridge Church – Rochester, MN 55902
Questions: ouren.jennifer@autumnridgechurch.org
www.autumnridgechurch.org