

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: GOD...in the Storm

(Studies in the book of Job)

The Hard Grace of Lament

(Job, chapter 3)

Study #3

Introduction: Grumble, grumble, grumble...

One of the highlights stories of the Bible is the story of the Jewish people's rescue from Egyptian slavery by God's mighty hand.

The Jews were miraculously delivered from the Egyptians by God's parting of the Red Sea. Then, after receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, they started walking toward the land of Canaan, the land that God had promised would be theirs.

Sadly, not long after they started that hike they disobeyed the Lord and He punished them, sentencing them to forty years of wandering around in the wilderness before they would get another chance to enter the Promised Land.

Pretty early on in those wilderness wanderings, the people of Israel did something else bad. In Numbers 11 we read that God's *[1]...anger was kindled and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.*

When you want to build a bonfire in the wilderness, you start off with "kindling." The first fuel to the fire is grass and small twigs. The slender grasses will ignite the twigs. Then you add larger branches and logs until you have a roaring inferno.

Something the Israelites did had been like putting twigs and small branches in contact with burning heat. Somehow, they had kindled the wrath of God.

So, what had they done that was so out of line? I want to know - and you probably do, too! Whatever it was, we want to avoid doing what they did! So listen to the first words of Numbers 11.

[1] Now the people became like those who complain¹ of adversity in the hearing of the Lord"

Whoa! Can you imagine that? Somebody *complaining* when they are in the midst of adversity!? I certainly wouldn't ever do something like that. Would you?

They grumbled. They complained. Grumbling is bad. It was in Old Testament times and it is frowned upon today, too.

Over in the New Testament we read about how important it is that we not whine, gripe, and complain.

The Apostle Paul writes, *[Philippians 2:14] Do all things without grumbling or disputing; [15] so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation among whom you appear as lights in the world.*

OK. Complaining is bad. Don't grumble. Got it. And then we open our Bibles to the book of Job, specifically to Job, chapter 3.

When Job lost his material wealth and his ten children, he worshiped God.

When he lost his health and suffered chronic, debilitating pain due to an outbreak of boils all over his body, he held fast to his integrity and accepted adversity - just like he had accepted blessing - as from God.

¹ Aside from Lamentations 3:39 ("Why should any living man, or any mortal, offer complaint, in view of his sin?"), this is the only time this particular word for *complaint* occurs in the Hebrew Old Testament.

After some time had passed Job finally opened his mouth to speak. Here is what he had to say:

[1] *Afterward Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth.*
 [2] *And Job said,*
 [3] *“Let the day perish on which I was to be born,
 And the night which said, ‘A boy is conceived.’*
 [4] *“May that day be darkness;
 Let not God above care for it,
 Nor light shine on it.*
 [5] *“Let darkness and black gloom claim it;
 Let a cloud settle on it;
 Let the blackness of the day terrify it.*
 [6] *“As for that night, let darkness seize it;
 Let it not rejoice among the days of the year;
 Let it not come into the number of the months.*
 [7] *“Behold, let that night be barren;
 Let no joyful shout enter it.*
 [8] *“Let those curse it who curse the day,
 Who are prepared to rouse Leviathan.*
 [9] *“Let the stars of its twilight be darkened;
 Let it wait for light but have none,
 And let it not see the breaking dawn;*
 [10] *Because it did not shut the opening of my mother’s womb,
 Or hide trouble from my eyes.*
 [11] *“Why did I not die at birth,
 Come forth from the womb and expire?*
 [12] *“Why did the knees receive me,
 And why the breasts, that I should suck?*
 [13] *“For now I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have slept
 then, I would have been at rest,*
 [14] *With kings and with counselors of the earth,
 Who rebuilt ruins for themselves;*
 [15] *Or with princes who had gold,
 Who were filling their houses with silver.*
 [16] *“Or like a miscarriage which is discarded,
 I would not be,
 As infants that never saw light.*
 [17] *“There the wicked cease from raging,
 And there the weary are at rest.*

[18] *“The prisoners are at ease together;
 They do not hear the voice of the taskmaster.*
 [19] *“The small and the great are there,
 And the slave is free from his master.*
 [20] *“Why is light given to him who suffers,
 And life to the bitter of soul,
 [21] Who long for death, but there is none,
 And dig for it more than for hidden treasures,
 [22] Who rejoice greatly,
 And exult when they find the grave?
 [23] “Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
 And whom God has hedged in?
 [24] “For my groaning comes at the sight of my food,
 And my cries pour out like water.
 [25] “For what I fear comes upon me,
 And what I dread befalls me.
 [26] “I am not at ease, nor am I quiet,
 And I am not at rest, but turmoil comes.”*

Well, we didn’t see THAT coming.

We’ve been very impressed with Job after our first two weeks looking at his story. But now, after having just been reminded about what a bad thing it is to complain, we wonder if we were too impressed with Job too soon.²

Well, relax and take a deep breath, because Job is engaged in something other than full-blown complaint.

He is not actually “grumbling” as the Bible defines it. He is offering up a lament, and we find lament scattered throughout the Bible.³

² In literary terms, it may be best to view Job’s lament here as “rhetoric of outrage”, a sort of speech designed to give full voice to the suffering of his apparently meaningless loss and to direct the expression to the God who without question allowed it all to happen. His words are intended less to inform and more to inflame. (so Carson, quoted by Reitman)

³ Laments in Psalms, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Job all follow the same general format. This suggests that the writers were all following a generally accepted literary form, as poets do today. It was a form evidently known throughout the Ancient Middle East cultures.

Lament...

Dozens of the psalms are lament psalms.⁴ And there are laments found in other places, too, among them, Jeremiah (chapters 15 and 20), Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes.⁵

Some laments give voice to a grieving *community*. Sometimes a psalm was written to express the distress and grief of a group of people. They would “lament” when it seemed that the odds were *against* believing that God was really with them.

One example of this type of psalm is Psalm 137. It was written against the backdrop of the Babylonian Exile (587-538 BC) when the people of Israel had to live outside the land of Palestine.⁶ They wondered how it was that God had allowed them to suffer such hardship.

Much more common, though, is the *individual* lament.⁷

Hannah, who eventually became the mother of Samuel, expressed her grief in a lament. In 1 Samuel 3 we read that she had been unable to conceive and could not bear a child. The author of 1 Samuel records her lamenting her barrenness as she cried out to God.

Many of the songs of individual lament are of this variety. They arise out of a situation of personal pain.

⁴ Some have wondered if “lament” is the best term to describe these psalms, as “lament” may speak of a morbid focus on human agony or guilt or an overly pessimistic view of life - and this is NOT the mood of the psalmists. The psalmists are concerned not with distress *as such*, but with taking it before God, who they know is the judge and at the same time the redeemer, with sovereign power over all distress. (Chistoph Barth)

⁵ Psalm 88 is another extreme lament. After 18 bleak verses, it ends with “darkness is my closest friend.” (This would be a better translation than the NASB’s “*My acquaintances are in darkness.*”)

⁶ Joel describes a situation of lament because of a locust invasion. Joel 2:17 and following preserves the actual lament which the priests were to utter on the occasion.

⁷ Individual laments include Psalms 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 39, 40, 41, 42-43, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 88, 89, 109, 120, 139, 140, 141, 142.

The worshiper IN THEIR PAIN would seek the Lord and express grief and sorrow and confusion. That’s lament, and lament is not at all a bad thing.

We even hear Jesus speaking words of lament.

We remember that He cried out, [*Matthew 27:46*] “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” from the cross. That is a direct quote from Psalm 22, a psalm of lament.⁸

The extended passage I just read - Job 3 - is a lament. Most Bible scholars are in agreement that Job’s lament is about the bleakest and the most extreme example of lament found anywhere in the Bible.

I want to take some time here to speak about lament, generally, before we look at Job’s lament, specifically. As opposed to grumbling and complaining, which are toxic and bad, lament is actually a good thing.

Of course there are similarities between grumbling and lament.

...vs. *grumbling*

Both grumblers and complainers verbalize their anguish, their anger, and their confusion. So a grumble can sound an awful lot like a lament.

But a lament goes further than a complaint. A lament involves deeper emotion than a grumble. Lament lays out the difficulties of life with no stuttering, but in its honesty also asks, seeks, and knocks to comprehend the heart of God.

A lament involves the energy to search. It doesn’t shut down the quest for truth. It has passion to ask questions of God. It doesn’t simply rant and rave. It doesn’t jump to conclusions. The function of lament and all of its use of pain, anger, and confusion is to move toward God.

And God’s people have always engaged in lament. For what reason have people like us lamented?

⁸ [*Luke 23:46*] “*Into Your hands I commit My spirit*” is a quote from Psalm 31, another psalm of lament.

WHY do God's people lament?

Well, we lament because we are confused about God's ways. We lament because to our perception He seems, at times, to be absent or uncaring or both.

Our faith is based on what God has done. The faith of the people of God has never been based on propositions about things that are true about God.

The propositions are true - He IS faithful, just, holy, loving - but the faith of the believer has always been rooted in the conviction that God has, *in time*, stepped in and acted. He has intervened and performed wonders.

- The destroying angel passed over the Israelites in Egypt.
- The Red Sea parted.
- Water appeared in unexpected places in the desert.
- Quail was provided for food.
- Manna fell from heaven.
- Jesus raised the dead and walked on water.
- Jesus was raised from the dead!

And we *lament* because we very often don't see what we believe we should see from a miracle-working, stepping-in and intervening God.

THIS is the problem with which we, the people of God, habitually wrestle.

Of course, in Jesus, we know more about God than those in the Old Testament did. In Jesus, God has "come near" in a way that He had not in Old Testament times.

And yet, we still live in what is often referred to as the great Already / Not Yet. Yes, the Kingdom has come. No, it is not fully realized. The dawn is breaking, but the sun isn't quite all the way up yet.

Today we find ourselves in the transition period, that time between God's promise and the final, complete fulfillment of the promise.

NOW is when faith is put to the test. In the future, all will be well. Now, all is not well. And when by faith we understand what should be (and what ultimately WILL BE!) and do not see it, when we don't experience it, we lament.

Lament is not a faithless exercise. Faithless people complain and grumble.

Or, faithless people feel a pressure to always put a good face on things. Faithless people pretend "all is well" when it's not.

Faith-filled people hope and trust. Believing people - because of their faith - will courageously look reality in the face and desperately, honestly lament what is.

That is what we see in Job today.⁹

We have been witnesses to his great losses of children, wealth, and health. At least weeks have passed since his troubles began (*months*, actually, if we are reading Job 7:3 correctly).

He has just spent seven days and nights in silent grief in a state of utter collapse surrounded by his good friends. But Job can no longer contain himself. Chapter three contains the speech he gives.¹⁰

Job Laments His Creation by God (vv. 1-19)

Job Curses the Day of His Birth (vv. 1-10)

This speech divides, roughly, into four stanzas. Each stanza has one main thought.

The main thought in the first stanza (vv. 2-10) is this:
Despite the blessings of his "life before the losses", given his current suffering, it would have been better if he had never even been born.

⁹ The section (3-31) begins and ends with lament (3, 29-31), with an extended, acrimonious debate in the middle (4-27).

¹⁰ This chapter supplies the literary bridge to the lengthy debate that follows between Job and his three friends as the book shifts from prose to poetry, shifting back to prose only at the epilogue.

Extinction would be better. Annihilation is to be preferred.

[3] *“Let the day perish on which I was to be born,
And the night which said, ‘A boy is conceived.’*

[4] *“May that day be darkness;
Let not God above care for it,
Nor light shine on it...”*

[10] *Because it did not shut the opening of my mother’s womb,
Or hide trouble from my eyes.*

Without stopping to catch his breath, Job continues with the second stanza.

Job Curses the Fact of His Life (vv. 11-19)

When we come to the second stanza (vv. 11-19), there is, again, one main thought. It is this:

He wishes he hadn’t been conceived, born, nurtured, or cared for. He wishes that he had been allowed to die.¹¹

[11] *“Why did I not die at birth,
Come forth from the womb and expire?”*

Yes, this is strong language. But, no, Job hasn’t “lost it.” He hasn’t gone off the deep end. He knows exactly what he is saying and he means every word of it. This is a man who is facing a ghastly ordeal with eyes wide open. He is perfectly sane facing an insane life. He is utterly broken.

Listen to these words from Mike Mason, the author of The Gospel According to Job (a very good book, by the way):

There is a point at which every one of us throws in the towel. Not that we abandon faith or God. But we eventually get sick and tired of trying to put a good face on things. This (Job’s speech) is not sin. It is honesty. It is calling a spade a spade. Job is a forthright and plainspoken man, the sort of person who isn’t afraid to say what is on his heart.

Mason’s words explain why, after all this time of silence, Job cuts loose and speaks as he does. He has “had it.” He can’t take it anymore.

¹¹ Ecclesiastes 4:2-3 is similar to Job 3. Non-existence is preferable to the utter futility of innocent suffering.

Maybe you are uncomfortable with Job’s death-wish talk. Maybe his negativity tempts you to squirm with distaste and to turn away. Don’t turn away!

Learn from Job.

His lament is a prayer, and prayer need not always be positive and upbeat and optimistic. We need not feel the pressure to always rise from our knees deeply encouraged and filled with fresh hope. It is possible to have prayed well and to emerge from prayer still down in the dumps.

What God wants from us is not the observance of religious protocol. He wants us to be real with Him.

Is it hard for you to believe that what Job says here could ever be said by a true believer? Are you shocked that someone with a reputation for walking with God, someone noted for holiness, would utter these words?

Take this to the bank. Walking through life and doing so with God is, at times, like being awake during open heart surgery - a surgery performed with no anesthetic.¹²

When there is stabbing pain, trust cries out. It is only mistrust, fear, and suspicion that keeps silent. Job’s dark words here speak of his faith.

Maybe now is the time for each of us to ask a question of ourselves. That question would be *“What kind of hope do I actually have?”*

Is your hope a genuine hope that God is good, that all the promises in the Bible are true, that He will do what He says He will do? It is? Great!

And how does THAT hope manifest itself when something (to say nothing of everything!) makes it appear that He’s not all that good and that His promises don’t have a snowball’s chance in San Antonio of coming to pass?

Do you lament? Or do you keep a stiff upper lip, maintaining a grim stoicism? Do you feel a pressure to smile, to pretend that you aren’t in pain? Is your hope - is MY hope - the kind of hope that hides from reality?

¹² Thanks to Mason for these thoughts.

While painful to hear, Job's honesty points the way for us to respond when life hurts. He keeps on speaking and he certainly doesn't lighten up.

Job Laments that God has "Hedged" Him in (vv. 20-23)

Just as in the first two stanzas there was one thought, so here, in the third, there is one thought. Here it is:

Hedges have a dual function. They keep things out and they keep things in. God's hedge has kept blessings away from Job.

At the beginning of the story, Satan had accused God of putting a hedge of protection around Job. Satan told God, "*Of course Job 'loves' You. You have built a hedge around him and have allowed nothing but blessing to come his way.*"

God had cocooned Job with sweetness and light. Post-trials, though, Job sees the "hedge" quite differently now.

**[20] "Why is light given to him who suffers,
And life to the bitter of soul,**

**[21] Who long for death, but there is none,
And dig for it more than for hidden treasures,**

**[22] Who rejoice greatly,
And exult when they find the grave?**

**[23] "Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
And whom God has hedged in?"**

We like to pray for a hedge of protection against natural and human and demonic powers. We like to think that God will keep all evil from us. Jesus even taught us to pray, **[Matthew 6:13] "Deliver us from evil."** (or, "*the evil one*")

But - and here's the important thought - God often allows evil / trouble / affliction / problems / persecution / Satan's "thorns" (See 2 Corinthians 12:7-10) to find their way to our door.

Job complains of being surrounded by a pyracantha hedge that keeps out good, not evil.

Job wants to die, but can't seem to find a way to pull it off. He won't (or can't?) commit suicide and God won't give him the ultimate relief of death that he seeks.¹³

Job Laments His Great Pain and Suffering (vv. 24-26)

The cry of lament ends with the fourth stanza and it, like the others, can be summarized by one thought:

The one thing Job had feared most has happened.

**[24] "For my groaning comes at the sight of my food,
And my cries pour out like water.**

**[25] "For what I fear comes upon me,
And what I dread befalls me.**

**[26] "I am not at ease, nor am I quiet,
And I am not at rest, but turmoil comes."**

We know Job's losses.

Piled on top of his lost health and wealth, piled on top of the loss of his children and his physical pain, piled on top of his wife's temptation to just get it over with - "**Curse God and die!**" - is his confusion over the ways of God.

As much as anything Job can't understand why the God he has worshiped his whole life has allowed his life to become a never-ending nightmare.

All of this, taken together, is what Job, in happier times, would have told us he feared the most. And it has happened.

He didn't stub his toe. His life came apart at the seams.

So, should I now ask, "*What do you fear the most?*" or "*What is your worst nightmare?*"

¹³ Troubled by the thought that Job despaired of life? Look at Acts 27:14-20 where we read of the Apostle Paul's experience of a violent storm on the Mediterranean that lasted for two weeks and that ended in shipwreck on the island of Malta. Luke writes that they (Paul, Luke, and others) came to the point where **[20] all hope of...being saved was gradually abandoned.**

Wouldn't that be a bit melodramatic? Maybe. But isn't it patently obvious that the author of Job wants us to ask ourselves exactly those questions?

We are invited to put ourselves in Job's sandals, walk a few miles and wonder, "*What would I do if what happened to him happened to me?*"

Conclusion:

With that thought dangling, let me preview where we're going over the next couple of weeks.

From here, our looks into the life of Job move us into the debate stage. Following Job's lament, his three friends offer their various thoughts on Job's sufferings and we'll spend a couple of weeks listening to what they have to say, learning from them what NOT to say to our own suffering friends!¹⁴

But today, we've heard a serious man, a God-fearing man offer up a lament. As we wrap up, I want us to think about what Job's lament might say to us. I offer two thoughts.

First, a thought about compliance.

Compliance

What parent wants a disobedient child? No parent. All parents want their children to know how to obey.

But all parents also want their children to learn discretion and discernment. Parents want their kids to learn to not obey the stranger who invites them to get into his car. Not all commanders are to be obeyed.

So parents teach their children to obey authority figures (policemen, teachers, and others) with some discretion, and themselves (the parents) implicitly.

When Mom or Dad says to not play in the street, don't play in the street. When we tell you to not touch the stove, don't touch the stove. Period!

So, we want compliance, but with some commands and commanders, we want compliance with discretion. Ask questions. Get the big picture. Know the "why" of the command.

Now consider the story of Job.

We know exactly what led to Job's affliction. We know that it was because of a wager made in heaven between God and Satan. Upon reflection Job can seem to us to be little more than a pawn in a cosmic chess match. (He's not, but it can seem that way.)

So, we think, why not tell Job about the heavenly wager? If he knew the reason all these trials had come his way he would have had a much easier time trusting and would have, in the long run, done waaaay better with his trials. Why not just give him the "big picture"?

The answer is actually a huge part of the story of Job, and what I'm about to say, you'll hear me say again. But here it is, in a nutshell: God wants us to trust Him even when - maybe *especially* when - we don't know the "big picture." He wants our 100% implicit compliance.

A simple explanation of the meaning of his suffering might have helped Job obey.

But, what Job needed more than anything else IF he was going to worship and walk with God rightly was to know that obedience is required even when he doesn't know why. THAT obedience, the kind that says, "*I will obey even when I don't get it. I will worship no matter what*" is the path to follow if he wants to know the Lord.

When you suffer, you would love to know the "why." Of course. I would, too.

¹⁴ Job's lament supplies the point of departure for the ensuing discourses involving his friends, Elihu, and God Himself in his quest to figure God out. No doubt, the perceived irreverence of Job's lament is what prompted his three friends to respond after seven days of silence.

God may often withhold the “why” so that we will learn the grace of trust-in-the-dark, which is the trust that, in the long run, brings us closest to Him.

The second closing thought has to do with the freedom that Job’s example gives you and me, today, to lament.

Freedom to lament

Job’s lament was not an indication that Satan was winning the bet with God. Job has not sinned by offering up a lament. His lament is an expression of faith in a God he simply doesn’t understand.

And when you face trials of whatever variety, you are facing clear evidence that the world in which you live is broken. Things now are not as they were created to be.

God’s beautiful creation is marred beyond repair. He will one day remake it. That day hasn’t yet come. So, you suffer.

That is worth lamenting.

It is worth lamenting in His presence, while seeking Him, while worshipping Him.¹⁵

So, we are to express our pain not simply because it provides a “healthy release.” No, it is the path to intimacy with God. It is the first of the God-ordained ways to respond to evil and injustice.

We read Job’s brutally honest lament and find freedom to do the same, ourselves. We lament as a cry of protest that things are not as they should be. And when we learn the hard grace of honest lament we learn to trust God in the storms of life and come to know Him better.

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerhous: The psalms of lament (and Job’s) do not simply reflect our experience; they are meant to form our experience of despair. They are meant to name the silences that our suffering has created.