

## HOW MAY A CHRISTIAN RESPOND TO SEVERE SUFFERING?

*2* <sup>11</sup>When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the calamity that had come upon him, they each came from their own home and, meeting together, they agreed to go to console and comfort him. <sup>12</sup>When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. They began to wail and to weep; each one tore his robe, and they tossed dust into the air and upon their heads. <sup>13</sup>So they sat with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights. No one spoke a word to him, because they saw that his grief was very great.

*3* After this time, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. <sup>2</sup>Job said, <sup>3</sup>May the day on which I was born perish; and the night which announced, A boy is born! <sup>4</sup>May that day be darkness! May God above not take care of it; neither let a ray of light shine on it! <sup>5</sup>May darkness and the shadow of death claim it for themselves; may a mass of clouds settle over it; may all that blackens the day terrify it! <sup>6</sup>As for that night, may thick darkness seize it; may it not be included among the days of the year; may it not be entered in any of the months! <sup>7</sup>May that night be sterile! May no shout of joy be heard in it! <sup>8</sup>May those who curse the day curse it, those who are ready to stir up Leviathan. <sup>9</sup>May its morning stars be darkened; may it wait in vain for the daylight, neither let it see the first rays of dawn; <sup>10</sup>because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb, nor did it hide trouble from my sight.

<sup>11</sup>Why did I not die at birth, and expire as I came out of the womb? <sup>12</sup>Why did the knees receive me, and the breasts that I might be nursed? <sup>13</sup>[If I had died], I would now be lying down in peace; I would be asleep and at rest <sup>14</sup>with kings and counselors of the earth who built ruins for themselves; <sup>15</sup>or with princes who had gold, who filled their houses with silver—<sup>16</sup>or [why could I not have been] like a miscarriage that is discarded? Then I would not exist, like an infant who never saw the light—<sup>17</sup>there the wicked cease from causing trouble; and there the weary are at rest. <sup>18</sup>There even the prisoners are at ease; they do not hear the shout of the taskmaster. <sup>19</sup>The insignificant and the great alike are there; and the slave is freed from his master.

<sup>20</sup>Why is light given to those who are in misery, and life to those whose souls experience bitterness? <sup>21</sup>[Why is life given] to those who long for death—but it does not come—and who dig for it more than for hidden treasures; <sup>22</sup>to those who rejoice exceedingly and are elated when they find the grave? <sup>23</sup>[Why is life given] to a man whose way is hidden, one who has been hedged in by God? <sup>24</sup>My shrieks come as my daily food; my groanings are poured out like water. <sup>25</sup>What I most feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me. <sup>26</sup>I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, only turmoil. (Job 2:11-3:26)

### **Introduction**

When Job's three friends receive word of all the calamity that has befallen Job, they come to comfort and console him (2:11.) They find Job in such a state of misery and severe suffering that they did not recognize him (2:12.) That is to say, Job was almost beyond recognition and his condition was beyond comprehension; the three friends could not believe what had happened to him. All the friends could do was sit with Job in total silence, for *"they saw his grief was very great"* (2:13.)

Following this seven-day period, Job himself breaks the silence, giving expression to the most extreme sentiments that he has felt in his heart because of the severity of his suffering.

When subjected to severe suffering, the Christian may be tempted to respond with extreme sentiments—as was the case with Job. In the light of the rest of Scripture, we must seek to understand what is a legitimate response to severe suffering and what is not. As we study Job 2:11-3:26, let us consider the subject, “How May a Christian Respond to Severe Suffering?”

### **I. If You Are Subjected to Severe Suffering, You Must Refrain from Cursing the Day of Your Birth**

Job curses the day of his birth (3:1-5.) *“May the day on which I was born perish”* (3:3.) Job is requesting that the day of his birth be erased from the calendar; let it no longer be numbered among the days of the year. Job wishes that he had never been born, but the only way that such a wish could be realized would be to have the day of his birth removed from the calendar (Hartley, p. 91.) *“May that day be darkness!”* (3:4a.) This curse directly counters God’s first words in creating the world, *“Let there be light”* (Gen. 1:3.) Any day ... that remained in darkness never came into being (Hartley, p. 92.) *“May God above not take care of it,”* (or, *“May God above not attend to it”* Hartley’s translation of vs. 4b, p. 90.) Whatever God attends to (or, cares for, שׁוֹמֵר) is blessed and has life, or existence; what He does not caringly attend to perishes. Speaking of the wild beasts, the Psalmist says to the LORD,

*“These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. <sup>28</sup>When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. <sup>29</sup>When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust”* (Psl. 104:27-29.)

*“May darkness and the shadow of death claim it for themselves”* (3:5.) Job wishes that the day of his birth had itself been swallowed up by death; he wishes that it had died and never come into existence—like a pre-mature birth whose life is extinguished before it has begun.

Job also curses the night of his conception: *“May the day on which I was born perish; and the night that announced, A boy is born!”* (3:5.) Again he says, *“As for that night, may thick darkness seize it; may it not be included among the days of the year; may it not be entered in any of the months!”* (3:6.) As with the day of his birth, so with the night of his conception: Job wishes that it had never existed, his desire is that it be removed from the calendar. *“May that night be sterile!”* (3:7.) If that night had been sterile then no conception could have occurred during that time and, consequently, Job would not have been conceived and would never have been born. *“May those who curse the day curse it, those who are ready to stir*

*up Leviathan*" (3:8.) Job calls upon the most ardent blasphemers to curse the night of his conception; those hardened blasphemers who are not even afraid to arouse Leviathan are called upon to apply their curses to that night when Job was conceived. Note: Leviathan was a mythical monster who allegedly inhabited the sea and was the personification of all the forces of evil; it originated out of an awareness of the demonic powers employing the monstrous creatures of nature to terrify and destroy man and exert an evil dominion in the earth.

Job once more returns to pronouncing a concluding curse on the day of his birth: *"May its morning stars be darkened; may it wait in vain for the daylight, neither let it see the first rays of dawn"* (3:9.) Here is a reference to Venus and Mercury, which shine brightly and herald the end of the night and the coming of a new day. Job desires that these "stars" withhold their light and thus prevent the dawning of the day of his birth.

In verse 10 Job now explicitly states the reason why he wishes the day of his birth and the night of his conception to be cursed: *"because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb."* On the contrary, that day was the occasion of his birth; it allowed him to be born and to enter into the world. Job goes on, *"nor did it hide trouble from my sight."* His birth ushered him into a life that would eventually be filled with pain, sorrow and severe suffering. Job curses the day of his birth because if that day had never existed Job would not have been born; consequently, he would never have encountered the grief and trials that he must now endure.

Job now proceeds to express his wish that his birth had been a still birth that was dead in the womb and would thus never have entered into this world of suffering (3:11-12.) *"Why did I not die at birth, and expire as I came out of the womb? <sup>12</sup>Why did the knees receive me, and the breasts that I might be nursed?"* If he cannot remove the day of his birth from the realm of time and history, he wishes that at least he could have had his own life removed from time and history. Or, given the fact of his birth, Job laments that he was not abandoned by his mother at the time of birth and left to die: *"Why did my mother feed me with her breast milk?"* (3:12b.)

Speaking from the depths of his severe suffering, Job curses the day of his birth: he laments the fact that he ever was born. But this is not a legitimate response for a Christian to make, even though he may be subjected to the most severe suffering?

To do so is to seek to overturn, cancel, nullify, reverse, and deny God's purpose for your life; it is to countermand God's decree for our life (cp. Psalm 139:16; also, Jeremiah 29:11) and to overlook God's ultimate purpose for us as believers in Christ (cp. 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14.)

*... your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came into existence. (Psl. 139:16)*

*I know the plans I have for you, declares Jehovah, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jer. 29:11)*

*... we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. <sup>14</sup>He called you to this through our gospel, so that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 2:13-14)*

To do so is a form of shrinking back from God's calling and the purpose He has for our lives:

*You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. <sup>37</sup>In just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay. <sup>38</sup>But my righteous one will live by faith," and "If he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." (Heb. 10:36-38)*

To do so is to go contrary to the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. Referring to the approaching day of our Lord's crucifixion, Luke writes, "*As the time approached for him to be taken up [to heaven via the cross], [Jesus] resolutely set out for Jerusalem* (Lk. 9:51.) In the garden of Gethsemane our Lord prayed, "*My Father, if it be possible, may this cup be taken from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will*" (Matt. 26:39.)

## **II. If You Are Subjected to Severe Suffering, You May Request Deliverance by Means of Death**

Having introduced the subject of death (3:11-12,) Job now contemplates the peace he would find in the grave. Had he died, he would have lain down and been quiet; he would have slept and been at rest (3:13.) Note: During the Old Testament era, prior to the accomplishment of Christ's work of atonement, it appears that at death both the godly as well as the ungodly entered into a state of soul sleep. Prior to the atonement made at Calvary, God, in His justice, could not receive the godly into heaven; and again, He could not, in His justice, consign the ungodly to hell but hold back the godly (who also are sinners by nature) from the same fate apart from the atoning work of Christ. Therefore, prior to the finished work of Christ, both the godly and the ungodly at death entered into the same temporary state of soul sleep. As an example, consider the godly king Hezekiah, as he speaks about the prospect of his death, he laments:

*I said, In the prime of my life I shall go to the gates of Sheol; I am deprived of the remainder of my days. <sup>11</sup>I said, I shall not see Jehovah—indeed, Jehovah—in the land of the living; I shall no longer look upon man or be with those who*

*dwelt in this world. <sup>12</sup>Like a shepherd's tent, my [earthly] dwelling has been pulled down and taken away from me. Like a weaver, I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom. From day until night you [are intent on bringing my life to] an end. <sup>13</sup>I waited patiently until dawn; but like a lion, he breaks all my bones. From day until night you [are intent on bringing my life to] an end. <sup>14</sup>I cried like a swallow or a crane; I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes looked wistfully to the heights. O Lord, I am oppressed, be my surety. ...<sup>18</sup>Sheol cannot praise you; death cannot sing your praise... <sup>19</sup>The man who is alive—the man who is living—he [is the one who] will praise you, as I do this day. (Isa. 38:10-14, 18a, 19a)*

In the rest of death, Job would enter into the company of men of high estate (3:14-16.) He would find rest along with kings and counselors who built ruins for themselves (3:14.) This apparently is a reference to their mausoleums and memorials, which after their death, are left to crumble into ruins. But in the peaceful sleep of death they are oblivious to the disrespect done to their memories. In death Job would also join the princes who filled their houses with silver (3:15,) but have left it all behind as they sleep in the dust of the grave. Together with the great (the famous and the rich), Job would join the infant who never saw the light (3:16) What Job is saying is that all people, no matter what their status in this world, enter into the same state of death. In these utterances Job is reflecting upon the vanity and the transitory nature of fame and fortune in this world.

In verses 17-19 Job continues to depict the grave as a place of peace and rest. There a man no longer faces the terror of the raging wicked (3:17a.) There the weary laborer is delivered from his burden and enjoys a peaceful repose (3:17b.) There the prisoner and the slave are free from the tyranny of their masters (3:18-19.)

Job laments the fact that he is not dead and greatly desires to depart this present world in order that he might enter into the peace of the grave (3:20-23.) He gives voice to the question, *"Why must those who are in misery and whose lives are bitter go on living?"* (3:20.) Those who find themselves in such a state of misery long for death, they seek death with greater desire than those who seek after the treasures hidden in the earth (3:21.) These wretched men rejoice with exultation when death finally comes and removes them from their suffering (3:22.)

Job asks the question, *"[Why is life given] to a man whose way is hidden, one who has been hedged in by God?"* (3:23.) Here is a man whose destiny and purpose ("his way") is "hidden" (i.e.; it is incomprehensible; life has become futile and meaningless to him.) Furthermore, this is a man who has been *"hedged in by God;"* i.e.; God has surrounded the man with a wall so that he cannot escape his predicament. Job, aware that his present calamities are not the just consequence of any willful transgression on his part, finds his present situation incomprehensible and begins to question the meaning of life: if life is

characterized by misery and meaninglessness, then the state of tranquil soul sleep in death is far preferable to life in this present world.

To further explain why he so greatly desires death, Job testifies to his present condition: *“My shrieks come as my [daily food]; my groanings are poured out like water”* (3:24)—Job’s daily food is agony and mourning; this is what life now consists of for him. *“What I most feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me”* (3:25)—Job’s worst expectations have come to pass. Perhaps, even in the time of his prosperity, he had a pre-moition of what lie ahead, and it has now come upon him in full measure. *“I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, only turmoil”* (3:26)—not only is Job deprived of the blessing of peace and rest, he experiences the opposite, namely, turmoil (trouble and calamity.)

Again speaking from the depths of his severe suffering, Job expresses his desire to die: he greatly longs for the peace he would find in the state of soul sleep that seems to have characterized death in the Old Testament era. With certain qualifications, Scripture seems to indicate that this is a legitimate request for a Christian to make, especially when he finds himself engulfed in a state of severe suffering.

It is a desire expressed by both Old Testament and New Testament saints:

Elijah: *he ... went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, Jehovah,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.”* (1 Kgs. 19:4)

Simeon: *Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. <sup>27</sup>Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, <sup>28</sup>Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: <sup>29</sup>Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, now let your servant depart in peace, <sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation ...* (Lk. 2:25-30)

Paul: *... for me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup>But if I continue to live in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me, so I do not know what I shall choose. <sup>23</sup>I am torn between the two. I have the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.* (Phil. 1:21-23)

But it is a desire that must never be achieved by the taking of one’s own life (i.e.; suicide). Consider John 10:17-18, a passage in which Jesus points out that the only reason He is yielding His life—allowing His life to be taken—is because it is His Father’s will; of Himself He did not have the right to take His own life or allow it to be taken: *The Father loves me because I lay down my life—I lay it down*

*in order that I may take it again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it away from me, I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it again. I received this commandment from my Father (Jn. 10:17-18.)*

It is a desire that must always be subjected to God's approval. Note Philippians 1:21-25, a passage in which Paul makes clear that his desire to depart and be with Christ is subordinated to the knowledge that God had more work for him to do on earth:

*... for me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup>But if I continue to live in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me, so I do not know what I shall choose. <sup>23</sup>I am torn between the two. I have the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; <sup>24</sup>but for your sake it is more necessary for me to remain in the body. <sup>25</sup>Being confident of this, I know that I will remain and continue to remain with you all for your progress and joy in the faith. (Phil. 1:21-25)*

## **Conclusion**

When subjected to severe suffering, the Christian may be tempted to respond with extreme sentiments—as was the case with Job.

What we discover from Scripture is this: 1) we must refrain from ever cursing the day of our birth; 2) we may request deliverance by means of death; but 3) that desire must always be subject to God's approval and never achieved by our own means.