



THE DARKEST OF PRAYERS

There's a scene in season 6 of *Young Sheldon* where Sheldon Cooper's mum, Mary, prays this to God: "OK God, we need to talk. Are You testing me? Is this a test? Am I Mrs Job? I try to be a good person, but lately it feels like You are smacking me down every chance You get. Which might sound a little ungrateful right now, as I load my new dishwasher – which I love – but can't you pick on someone else for a while?" (Nod to Tevye there I think.)

I.e. she prays, not 'claiming-a-blessing' or 'praying-by-rote', but an *honest* prayer. And today, we're going to look at another one:

Job 2:11-3:26

Job's friends arrive to find him bereft of everything, covered in maggot-infested boils and sitting in a loin cloth by the city dump. The ash heap / dung heap. (So if you'd asked him "How you doing, Job?", he could have said, "I'm in a crappy place at the moment", quite literally.)

Anyway, the friends turn up, and they sit *sheva* for 7 days, which is a well-known Jewish custom when someone dies. The idea is, you stay silent 'til the mourner opts to say something. That tradition comes straight out of Job.

So, all is quiet, for 7 days. And then ... Job speaks. A prayer. Only it's not a nice prayer: not the kind of prayer you're likely to hear on a Sunday morning. Not a 2 stars and a wish kind of prayer, but 1 curse and 2 questions:

"May ... why ... *why?*" (And notice, he doesn't even address God by name!).

What does this teach us about prayer? 3 things:

1) We can bring our anger to God (vs1-10). Job explodes, and literally curses (*qalel*) the day of his birth. He doesn't just pray for this to end: he wishes it had never started in the first place. He wants the week of Genesis 1 to reverse itself, from day 7 to day 1; to go from order to disorder – at least for him.

Look at the language he uses here:

- For God to not care about that day (day 7)
- For the shadow of death to overcome life (days 5-6)
- For the day to disappear from the calendar (day 4)
- For that night to become as barren as a desert (day 3)
- For *Livyatan* (the deep) to be awakened (day 2)
- For the first rays of dawn not to shine (day 1)

Job wants an un-beginning. Why? Because he's *angry*. Now when we read these words it pays to remember verses like Proverbs 26:2, and the fact that Jeremiah cursed the day of his birth (Jeremiah 20:14-15), and Simon Peter cursed himself (Matthew 26:74). The point being: there is power in our words, yes, but they are not all-powerful.

Only God can make a valid curse. Or a curse valid.

No matter how angry we might be.

2) We can bring our despair to God (vs11-19). Next, Job has a George Bailey, *It's A Wonderful Life*, moment. He wonders why he was ever born – then wishes he hadn't been. He wishes he'd been stillborn, that he'd gone to the place everyone must go, from princes to peasants. As a certain proverb puts it, "At the end of the game, the king and the pawn go back in the same box." And Job, he wants that box. Wants *She'ol*.

He wants to die.

To get this across, he uses the language of sleep (a common metaphor for death), but also escape (vs18-19). Like Job, people can reach a point where they can't take any more, whether it's pain or guilt or sorrow or despair, and they want to be free of it. Moses felt it (Numbers 11:10-15); Elijah felt it (1 Kings 19:1-5); even Paul felt it (2 Corinthians 1:8). And, of course, it's the driver for the no.1 killer of men under 25: suicide. The desire to free ourselves from whatever is dominating us, coupled with an inability to express that to someone else, due to loneliness, or fear of what others might say.

Of what people like Job's friends might say.

But what Job and all these other biblical heroes do right is 1) they vent it, and 2) they leave it in God's hands. And in Job's case, God refuses to answer that prayer. Why? Because God is not finished with Job. Not yet. And while you have breath, He's not finished with you.

Hold onto that.

3) We can bring our turmoil to God (vs20-26). Finally, Job asks, "What's the point of life when it's filled with ..."

- Misery. Sorrow. Grief. Anguish.
- Bitterness: towards the situation, and towards God.
- Longing. For what was; for an end to what is now.
- Unhappiness. Where every day is overcast.
- Meaninglessness. The antithesis of purpose.
- Imprisonment. Trapped by our own circumstances.
- Exhaustion. Because sickness can be tiring, right?
- Pain. Whether physical, psychological, or spiritual.
- Fears. If this could happen ... what else?
- Turmoil. Confusion. Chaos.

And the point is? Not so much an answer, but a more honest way of praying than Job has experienced before.

Note: on vs25, there are some who will say, "Aha! That's why Job is going through this! Because he was living in fear rather than faith, and that's become his reality!" Can you see the problem with that logic? It makes a fear of fear itself! And it offers no consolation. But it also makes *us* the central characters in this story, as if *we're* in charge. At best it's superstitious, at worst, it's self-idolatrous.

Instead, the story of Job is a reminder that God will do what He will do. We can decree and declare all we like, it doesn't mean God will give it. And praise God for that!

How many of us have prayed prayers which we would now be regretting, had God granted them?

Let's Be Honest

Job's prayer, like the Psalms of Lament, Lamentations, and Habakkuk, provides us with the license to pray some not-so-nice prayers. I.e. we can be honest before God – He knows anyway! The late Eugene Peterson put it this way, in a conversation with Bono: "Praying is not being nice before God ... it's being open with Him." That's prayer.

And speaking of dark prayers ... Jesus prayed some, too. "Now My heart is in turmoil, and what shall I say ...?" "Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me ..." "My God, My God, why have You have abandoned Me ...?"

May we draw near to the One who prayed like this, for us.