Damn the Day, Damn the Night . . . "Why, Why, Why?"

The "Cup of Pain"

At the end of chapter 2, the narrator assures us that Job "did not sin with his lips" (2:10; cf. 1:22); despite "all these troubles [Hebrew: "evil"] that had come upon him" (2:11), he refuses to curse God. When Job next "[opens] his mouth" (3:1), he speaks words that stand this assurance on its head. We may prepare ourselves for hearing what he says by reflecting on these words from one of the characters in Jane Smiley's short story, "The Age of Grief":

> I am thirty-five years old, and it seems to me that I have arrived at the age of grief. Others arrive there sooner. Almost no one arrives later. I don't think it is years themselves, or the disintegration of the body . . . in spite of ourselves we have stopped to think about it. It is not only that we know that love ends, children are stolen, parents die feeling that their lives have been meaningless.

What does faith require—and permit—when the barriers that protect us from grief break down? When the "cup of pain" we did not ask for is the only drink we have? Job's words in chapter 3, spoken from the ash heap of suffering, model two responses. Both are conventionally regarded by contemporary communities of faith as "over the line," as examples of things we should not think, let alone say. And yet, both are deeply rooted in scripture's witness to "what is right" (42:7, 8) when servants of God like Job speak the truth about life as they know it.

Sources

Jane Smiley, "The Age of Grief," in *The Age of Grief: A Novella and Stories* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987), 154.

Curses and Laments

First, Job curses the day of his birth (3:3-5) and the night of his conception (3:6-9). In the Hebrew Bible, to speak a curse (or a blessing) is to utter words that are understood to set in motion the very action the curse articulates. When Job curses the day of his birth, he expresses the wish that that day had never existed, that it had never been included among the days of the year, in essence, that he had never been born (3:10-12). His wish intends to be more than a mere utterance. It is an act that seeks to bring about the very death that his misery has forced him to contemplate but has not allowed him to experience. Moreover, the seven curses he speaks in verses 3-10 offer a rhetorical counterweight to the traditional affirmation that the life God created for human beings in seven days was meant to be "very good" (Gen 1:31). Whereas Gen 1 reports seven primordial acts of divine creation, each structured formulaically—"and God said," "let there be," "and it was so," and "it was very good"—Job's curses offer what one scholar has called a "counter-cosmic incantation." In effect, when God calls Day 1 into being, Job says, "Let that day be cursed." When God says of Day 2, "let there be," Job counters by saying, "Let that day be cursed also"; and so on, day by day, Job denounces each of God's primordial hopes and expectations for a world that should be, but in Job's experience is not, "very good." The best example of this negation is also the most dramatic. When Job says, "Let that day be darkness!" (3:4), his words effectively call for a reversal of God's first creative act, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3).

On the one hand, Job's words seem absurd—after all, once born, he cannot unbirth himself—and so we may discount what he says as little more than rhetorical hyperbole, an all-too-human attempt to give expression to the enormity of his grief. On the other, if our life experiences resonate with those of Smiley's character, as cited above, we may know that once we've been forced to drink from the "cup of pain," honesty may turn faith's affirmations into words we would never have contemplated.

Study Bible

The parallels between Job's seven curses and the seven-day pattern of creation in Gen 1 are not exact, but they remain significant for interpretation. The chart below draws upon S. E. Balentine, *Job*. Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2006), 84.

Job 3:3-10	Genesis 1
v. 3 Let the day perish	
v. 4 Let that day be darkness	v. 3 Let there be light
Let God *above* not seek it	v. 7 The waters that were under the firmament
Let not light shine on it	
v. 5 Let gloom and deep darkness claim it	v. 2 Darkness covered the face of the deep
v. 6 That night—let thick darkness seize it	v. 14 Lights . . . to separate the day from the night . . .
Let it not rejoice among the days of the year	for seasons and for days and for years
Let it not come into the number of months	
v. 7 Yes, let that night be barren	
Let no joyful cry be heard in it	
v. 8 Let those curse it who curse the Sea	
those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan	v. 21 God created the great sea monsters
v. 9 Let the stars of its dawn be dark	
Let it hope for light, but have none	v. 15 Lights to give light upon the earth
Let it not see the eyelids of the morning	

Second, Job laments (3:11-26). His lament weaves together questions about the life he has experienced (3:11-19, 24-26) and the God he believes is responsible for it (3:20-23). In both cases the key question is "Why?" The Hebrew interrogative that introduces verses 11 and 20 typically conveys a strong note of protest—"Why has X happened (it should not have)?"—and, by extension, a tone of angry despair.

"Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire?" (v. 11)

"Why is light given to one in misery,
and life to the bitter in soul?" (3:20)

That despair is the governing motif of these words is further indicated by the recognition that even in lament Job remains alone. Typically, laments address God directly, include a petition for God to answer, and end with a note of confident expectation that God has heard and will respond. Job appropriates the language, but not the spirit of hope that sustains lament. He refers to God only indirectly (3:23) and ends up where he began, in the painful solitude of grief searching for an echo that does not come (3:24-26). He does not appeal to God, and he does not seem to expect that there will be a response to his anguish from any source.

Job's lament, particularly the question he raises in verse 20, moves him a step closer to naming God as the one responsible for his suffering. Most translations obscure this move with a passive and impersonal rendering of the verb "give": "Why is *light given* to one in misery?" (3:20 NRSV, emphasis added; cf. REB, NIV, NAB). The Hebrew verb, however, is active, not passive. The Tanakh (New Jewish Publication Society translation) captures both the sense and the implication of this with its translation: "Why does *He* give light to the sufferer?" Job does not yet explicitly identify God as the one he holds accountable for his plight, but he understands that there is an active agent behind his suffering. Someone or something "gives" what has come to Job; it is not merely "given." Job points a finger of accusation at God.

On the other side of his pained questions Job presses his truth about the "misery" (3:20; NRSV translates the same word as "trouble" in 3:10) that life brings to one and all. Why must people continue to live when pain reduces life to no more than a "longing" for a death that will not come (see 3:21) or to "digging" like a treasure hunter for a grave that cannot be found (see 3:21-22)? Under such circumstances life becomes meaningless. One can neither live fully nor die completely. All that remains is a miserable existence defined by "sighing" and "groanings" (3:24), "fear" and "dread" (3:25). As Stephen Mitchell has put it, to be trapped in a life where there is no "ease," no

Reflections

Do you think that God should be held accountable for suffering? Why or why not?

Sources

Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 14; William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act V, Scene 3, lines 322-23.

"quiet," and no "rest" is to live like one whose "nightmares have come to life."

"Speak What We Feel"

Sooner or later, the "age of grief" comes, uninvited, to one and all. Whenever it arrives, we, like Job, may find that silence cannot do justice to the pain that sunders our soul. The truth of the rumblings within us will perhaps respond to the invitation offered by the Duke of Albany in the final scene of *King Lear*: "The weight of this sad time we must obey; Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (V, iii, 322-23). "What we feel" may be spoken with anguished words that curse the forces of death and destruction. To do so may be futile, even absurd, for reality will often force us to concede that nothing we say will change the facts on the ground. To speak in such ways may also cross the line of what others believe we "ought to say." But Job reminds us that such speech is also an act of faith. It signals a refusal to believe that life is defined by nothing more than brokenness and loss.

Job also laments, and here too his words offer support for bearing the weight of sad times. In Israelite tradition, lament is a faithful and authentic way of questioning what is wrong with life. To ask "Why?" is to determine not to be a passive bystander in the face of suffering. It signals a fierce restlessness, a resolve to believe that someone will listen, someone will care, someone will come, if not with answers, then at least with a shared conviction that our questions matter. By drawing upon the resources of the lament tradition, Job demonstrates that he believes his questions matter to God. The trajectory of Job's faith extends to Jesus, who, when "deeply grieved, even to death," asked his disciples to remain awake with him while he prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matt 26:38, 39). When the cup did not pass from him, he too found in Israel's laments the words to say what he felt: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46; cf. Ps 22:1).

Reflections

When the bottom falls out of life "for no reason" (Job 2:3), dare we speak what we feel, especially if in doing so we say things that others regard as inappropriate?

1. Identify experiences in your own life that have caused you to ask "Why?" What emotions (e.g., doubt, fear, anger) do you express by asking these questions? How and why do you think it is important to speak such things out loud?
2. In what ways has the community of faith helped you ask such questions? In what ways has it discouraged you from asking such questions, that is by offering other models for what you "ought to say"?
3. At the end of chapter 2, a suffering Job sits in submissive silence, and God seems proud to call him a faithful "servant." At the end of chapter 3, Job curses and laments, and it is God who is silent. If God were to respond to Job's curses and laments, what do you think God might say? Will God still consider Job to be a faithful servant now that he has broken silence with words like these?