

Life: Comedy or Tragedy?

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Robert. And thanks, Luca. And as Luca said, my name's Archie. I'm one of the ministry trainees here at Brunsfield. I'd be really grateful if you could keep Job 3 open in front of you. You'll find that really helpful as we go through this morning. Let me begin by asking a question. What makes comedy, comedy? Katie and I were recently watching Hot Fuzz together.

It's a well-known comedy. If you haven't seen it, it's a film. And it has some properly hilarious moments in it. But it's not the laughter that makes it a comedy. A comedy is about the shape of the story. This story, it begins with this incredibly impressive fledgling big city police officer. But very quickly, things start to go wrong for him. He loses his girl. He's transferred to the countryside. And when he gets there, he realizes that it's not all as it seems. Murderers left, right and center. It all seems to be going wrong. But spoiler alert, because of course, it ends with him riding into town on horseback and winning the day. That's the shape of a comedy.

It's like a smiley face. Glorious beginnings, a downward spiral, but a hopeful and victorious conclusion. That's a comedy. A tragedy is the opposite. We know the shape of a tragedy, the Braveheart or the Titanic, dare I say Scottish football. It's like a frown, humble beginnings, a triumphant climax, and then a bitter return to the grave. And most stories take one or other of these shapes. They're either a comedy or a tragedy. But what about our story?

What about the story of life? Is life a comedy or a tragedy? What's the shape of our story?

Do we come into this world and then climb and grab and achieve and enjoy whatever we can, making the most of our short time here on earth? And then at the end of it all, do we simply just return to where we've begun? Nothingness, despite the thrills of life? That's a tragedy, is it not? But that's the story that we tell, isn't it? But that really isn't how life goes.

[2 : 29] My life certainly hasn't taken that shape. I wonder, has yours taken that shape? I mean, even if you're one of those lucky enough to have really quite a good life, maybe you even just have a positive attitude in life. You have to say that life isn't always rosy, is it? I mean, you can't guarantee a smooth ride. In fact, what you can guarantee is the opposite.

We all face it at some point, don't we? Horrific suffering. Have you ever lost someone that you loved? I mean, really loved? It's horrible, that feeling, isn't it? If you haven't, you probably will at some point. I think more or less all of us face that at some point in life.

If you've ever been properly ill or injured yourself, real pain, real anxiety, real fear. Have you ever asked yourself, am I even going to survive this?

Have you faced that? Because again, if you haven't, you will. At some point in life, most of us will probably face that kind of real, am I going to survive this sort of suffering at least a couple of times in our lives?

And ultimately, we all face it in the end, don't we, when we face death. So our story, it simply doesn't take that shape of tragedy, that frown, beginning and ending awfully, but with nothing but pleasure in between. Life isn't like that. Life is more complex than that.

[4 : 06] Life is harder than that. Life is more full of suffering than that. We've got to be honest about this as Christians. You know, very often, non-Christian friends of mine will ask me if I'm one of those happy, clappy Christians. Have you ever been asked that? Happy, clappy Christian?

To be honest, I don't think they mean much by it. I think they're just sort of asking whether we have a guitar or an organ when we sing. But when I'm asked if we're happy, clappy Christians, I want to get annoyed. Because the idea that Christianity should be happy, clappy all the time, just makes no sense to me. It ignores the reality of the world that we live in.

Friends, whatever it is that you're facing, I've said this before and I will say it again. Friends, do not be ashamed of your suffering as a Christian. The Bible doesn't promise us a life free from suffering. The Bible doesn't pretend that our lives are going to take that shape of a tragedy. If you've been here at all in the last few weeks, as we've been in Job in the mornings and in James in the evening, it's just been so clear that the Bible doesn't expect the Christian life to be a happy, clappy life. A life without suffering. A life where all we do is rejoice all the time.

But is there a better story? The shape of a comedy? Not a story that says our suffering is funny or that is anything other than complicated as it is. But is there a story that is marked by a downward spiral where things go wrong and life is hard, but a hopeful story that ends with glorious, victorious, eternal peace and rest? What's the story? What's Job's story? Just think about where we've been in the last couple of weeks in Job. Look at what the guy has suffered. In chapter one, everything he owns is taken away. And in that same chapter, his entire family is killed. And last week, even his own health is afflicted. And we might be thinking that that sort of suffering really isn't normal.

Surely Job has done something to deserve it. But of course he hasn't, has he? I mean, do you remember why Job suffered? It was specifically because of his faith, specifically because he trusted God. Job didn't deserve it at all. In fact, Job is often held up as an incredible example of faith. That's how the New Testament frames it. Faith through and despite suffering. He is that. I mean, in chapter one, verse 21, he responds to his first bout of suffering by saying this, the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised. It's what we've just sung, isn't it? And it's a brilliant, faithful response to suffering that. In chapter two, verse 10, something similar. Shall we accept good from God, Job says, and not trouble? Job is a wonderful example of faith in the face of suffering.

[7 : 22] But too often, I think, when we think of Job, we stop at those verses. And we simply say, well, then if we suffer, we just need to keep trusting that our God is good and he is working it all out in his purposes.

And that's true. But this book, the book of Job, it also gives us room to express our curses, our cries, and our questions as we suffer. That's exactly what Job does next. And what we've just had read for us by Robert in chapter three of this story. And it's really powerful. One of the reasons it's so powerful is because it's Hebrew poetry. And much of the rest of this book, in fact, pretty much all of the rest of this book is written in Hebrew poetry. Actually, 30% of our Bibles are written in Hebrew poetry. So I think it's probably worth just noting a couple of things about how Hebrew poetry works before we begin, because it's really not like English poetry. It doesn't have a sort of rhyming or rhythmical scheme to it. I mean, it obviously doesn't have that in translation, but the Hebrew doesn't have that either. Instead, what we get is these repeated, identical or intentionally contrasting ideas.

Have a look at verse 11 of chapter three. We've just had that read for us, but here's a simple example. Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb? Do you see both those lines say essentially exactly the same thing as each other, don't they? They're repeated ideas with slightly different imagery. And there's the other thing about this poetry. It's full of highly charged imagery. Of course, our poetry in English can be too, but in Hebrew, there's metaphor in virtually every single line. And the purpose of that is to engage our imaginations. It's a bit like watching Downton Abbey or Bridgerton on TV compared to reading a history book about the same period. When we are reading poetry, it isn't just there to give us information like history books are. They just give us, make us think in a certain way, don't they? History books. But instead, poetry is art. It's a bit like a TV drama. It's meant to make us feel a certain way. And so in chapter three, as Job offers a curse, a cry and a question, the poetry is simply there to help us feel that with him, to help us sit with him as he suffers. But it also helps us think about our own suffering and what to do with it. So let's dive in together into Job's curse in verses one to 10. You see right away in verse one, what this curse is all about. You see that in verse one, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He's desperately looking back and saying, the day on which I was born was a bad, bad day, a day that should never have existed. Do you see that in verse three, may the day of my birth perish and the night that said a boy is conceived. Not only does he curse the day on which he was born, but the very day on which he was conceived. The day on which mum and dad came together, the moment that two DNAs fused and became one unique and valuable human being, that beautiful day. May that day be cursed. May it in verse four turn to darkness. May God above not care about it. May no light shine on it. Just appreciate the imagery here. In the beginning, God created the world and he said, let there be light. Job says on that day, let there be darkness. Let that day cease to exist. Let that day be uncreated. And do you see how that imagery is repeated in verses five and six? Gloom, utter darkness, a cloud, blackness, thick darkness.

And again, in verse nine, may its morning stars become dark. In other words, as Job looks back, he says, may the sun fail to rise on that day. May it be dark and remain dark. Ignoring all the blessings that he has received. Remember, Job is an incredibly wealthy man. He has a large family, a very happy life. But he looks back and he sees right through all of that to curse that day.

And isn't that just such a normal thing to do when things go wrong? To forget about the good in between and just look back in desperate gloom. And so Job says, will you join me in cursing that day?

[12 : 22] In verse eight, may those who curse days curse that day. Those who are ready to rouse Leviathan. And you're into cursing days. Will you curse that day with me? Job says, will you call upon Leviathan?

We're going to come across this character Leviathan again, but just picture with me for now a great, big, massive sea monster, really just a symbol for chaos and evil. In Hebrew poetry, the sea is basically the go-to anti-God image. Will you call upon that chaos with me, Job says, and curse that day?

And it's a ridiculous thing that, isn't it? Because birth is such a wonderful, joyous thing. The shape of our story, it can't be a tragedy because it doesn't start sad.

And so to curse that day feels ridiculous. And so why does Job do it? Well, at the end of the section in verse 10, to hide trouble from my eyes, I wish I should never have been born.

Then at least I would have been spared this suffering. And that makes more sense, doesn't it? It's not really his birth that's the problem here.

[13 : 41] It's his story. Because it takes the same shape as yours. It's the same shape as mine. A life marked by times of trouble. That's not the shape of a tragedy at all, is it? It's the shape of a comedy.

And Job is stuck looking back. Looking back at his suffering. Looking back at the day of his birth. And we do that too, don't we? I mean, you probably know what it feels like getting stuck in a rut where we can't help but remember.

Maybe you faced some untold trauma. There was a moment in your life that seems to have defined your suffering. Maybe some scars, a constant physical reminder of your suffering.

You might have a very specific moment to blame your suffering on. In my experience, it's all too easy to get stuck dwelling on what could have been. Wishing that what was really wasn't.

It's easy to look back and curse our past. Just like Job does here. In our next section, verses 11 to 19, that curse turns into a cry.

[14:59] Come to verse 11 with me. You see what he says? Why did I not perish at birth and die as I came from the womb? Why were the knees there to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed?

His cry here has a very similar flavor to his curse, doesn't it? The subject hasn't changed. It's classic Hebrew poetry. I wish I should never have been born, he says.

But with that, Job transitions into a cry for rest. I wish I should never have been born, for then I would have rest. Look at verse 13 with me.

For now I would be lying down in peace. I would be asleep and at rest. This is what Job desires. Eternal rest.

The rest in verses 14 and 15 that is experienced by kings, rulers and princes. They had palaces and houses full of gold and silver. They were rich, just like Job was rich, and that was stripped from them when they died.

[16:03] Just as it's been stripped from Job. But the difference is they're now at rest. And that is the rest that Job desires. In verse 17, even the wicked cease from toil and the weary are at rest.

And in verse 18, even captives enjoy their ease and no longer hear the slave drivers shout. All these people, small and great in verse 19, no matter who they are, they all seem to get rest and peace from the troubles of this life.

And Job cries out, give me that rest. Do you see the story that Job is longing for? He longs for his story to be a comedy.

A story that though it's marked by suffering, ends with peace and rest. And we desire that rest too, don't we? In some ways, it's just so natural to echo that cry and the struggles and the pain of life.

Do we not desire and cry out for peace, for rest? It's important, I think, to say that Job isn't being explicitly suicidal here, is he?

[17:15] I mean, he wishes he'd never been born and he wishes that he would die. But he's not attempting or even threatening to attempt to take matters into his own hands, is he? It is natural and good and right for us to desire eternal rest.

But there's no hint here that attempting to end our own suffering, attempting to take our own life, is in any way in God's purposes for bringing us into that rest.

And so if that is you, if your suffering is pushing you to thoughts of how to maybe end it yourself, please, please come and talk to us, because we would love to help.

Finally then, Job's cry for rest becomes a question in verses 20 to 26. Verse 20, let me read it. Have a look at verse 20.

Why is light given to those in misery and life to the bitter of soul? To those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than hidden treasure, who are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the grave?

[18 : 25] What is Job's question? I think he's asking, why, God, do you give light and life to those who seek darkness and death?

Why do you give light and life to those who, like me, seek darkness and death? When all I want is to be swallowed up and have rest from this life, why do you continue, God, to give light and life to those like me who seek death?

Do you see the imagery seeking death like the frenzied treasure hunters? Picture the American gold rush, something like that. I desperately, Job says, I desperately seek to die.

And then in verse 23, he asks the same question again from another angle. Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden? In other words, why would you give life to a man and then hide your blessing and your grace from him?

And that last line of verse 23, whom God has hedged in. If you were here two weeks ago in Job chapter one, you might remember, do you notice the irony here?

[19 : 37] In chapter one, verse 10, Satan describes how God has protected Job, how he's blessed him and seen him prosper. And he says, Satan says that God has hedged Job in.

But here, Job describes God's hedge not as protective, but rather as oppressive, imprisoning him in this world of grief and suffering.

And so Job is asking God, what's the point? Why do you give life only to withhold your blessing and trap us in suffering?

We know how this feels, don't we? You ever ask that question, why? Why do you withhold your blessing from me?

It might not even be in the light of some great suffering that, but maybe you're just having one of those days. You know, the sort of day you've hit snooze, probably one too many times. You burn the porridge to the bottom of the pan.

[20 : 36] You set out for work, expecting it to be sunny. And then five minutes later, the heavens open. You get to work, your boss is in a bad mood. It's lunchtime. You've forgotten your lunch.

You know the sort of day. And you just can't help but ask, why? But we don't want to play down Job's suffering here.

Because do you see the emphasis in verses 24 to 26? He's groaning for things that have come upon him. He says, The sighs that have become his daily food.

What he feared has come upon him. And what he dreaded has happened to him. These experiences are the reality of Job's life and they're brutal.

They cause him to groan and sigh and fear and dread. And they just seem to be happening to him. And he has no way of knowing why they're happening. And that makes him deeply uneasy.

[21 : 37] And so this is his question of God. Why? Why are you letting this happen? The poem then reaches its climax in verse 26. Have a look at that.

I have no peace. No quietness. I have no rest. But only turmoil. The conclusion of this poem is of utter hopelessness, isn't it?

As Job suffers, all he can see is his lack of peace, quietness and rest. All he can see is his turmoil, his suffering. And that's what it's like when we suffer, isn't it?

All we can see is the turmoil. It's impossible to find peace. It's very hard if we're suffering to sing it as well with my soul. And so we ask with Job, don't we?

Why, God? Why would you put me through this? Why would you let this happen to me? Wouldn't you give me rest? Your suffering might be external like it was for Job in chapter one.

[22 : 44] Maybe you've taken a financial hit this year. COVID might have meant that you struggled for work and struggled for money. Maybe you've lost loved ones recently. Maybe because of COVID or for whatever reason.

Or maybe your suffering is internal. It's personal to you. It's isolating that kind of suffering, isn't it? Because you know that no one else can face it and experience it with you. A physical illness.

Anxiety inducing. Constantly excruciating. Potentially life-threatening. Or a mental illness. Hard to stay on top of. Moods that you don't understand.

Thoughts that you don't want. Emotions that you can't control. And in whatever it is that you are facing, it is normal to ask, along with Job, why?

Why God? Why me? Why now? Why? As we close then, I want to ask what difference Jesus makes.

[23 : 49] I want to draw an application for us as a church, as Christians. One from each of Job's curse, his cry, and his question. And if you're here this morning, or if you're watching on YouTube and you're not a Christian, if you don't have faith in Jesus, you might have got to this point and thought, well, this all makes quite good sense, really.

I can see how it's normal to curse and cry and question in the midst of suffering. And I think that's quite right. But there's more to suffering as a Christian than what we've seen so far.

Because with faith, Job has hope. And with Jesus, we can too. We saw as Job cursed the day that he was born that he couldn't help but look backwards.

And I know that that's the natural temptation for us too, as we suffer. Are you stuck looking backwards? With Jesus, you can suffer today with hope.

Hope knowing that God is in control, that he has good purposes in our suffering. Hope knowing that Jesus by his spirit is right there with you.

[25 : 00] Hope knowing that your past does not define your present or your future with Jesus. And hope knowing that the world that we live in is full of light and life.

That we receive good gifts from God every day. Ecclesiastes chapter 2, the teacher there puts it like this. A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil.

So as we suffer, even in the provision of food and drink, there is joy and goodness to be had. And so are you stuck looking backwards?

With Jesus, you can suffer today with hope. We saw, as Job cried out for rest, that his desire was for something eternal.

And indeed, for the Christian, we cannot only desire that same eternal rest. But do you desire rest? Well, with Jesus, you can look to the future with hope.

[26 : 07] As we face the sort of suffering that makes us curse and cry and question, we can know that one day it will be over. Because Jesus not only died to rescue us from sin, he also smashed the grave to bits and rose again.

He defeated death. He walked that path from suffering to eternal rest. And because he did that, we know that we can too. Isn't that just incredible news?

Don't you want to share that with folks that don't know it? Pointing those around us to true rest, real hope. Do you desire rest?

With Jesus, you can look to the future with hope. Finally, we saw in Job's question, the desire to know why. Do you have questions?

Well, with Jesus, you can know that there is a hopeful purpose. We desperately want to know why we suffer, don't we? And ultimately, there is no complete answer to that question.

[27 : 14] But what we do know is that God is in control, complete control. And that our suffering has a purpose. 1 Peter chapter 3 verses 17 and 18 say this.

For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

See, Jesus faced horrific suffering in those his final hours. Perhaps the most horrific moment was on the cross as he cried out. Quoting from Psalm 22. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Do you see what Jesus' question is there? Why? Why, God? And yet we know. And Jesus knew that the Father had a glorious purpose for that suffering.

To place the sins of this world on his shoulders, destroying him. Why? To bring us to God. So that Jesus might be raised again to new life.

[28 : 24] And in doing so, promising us that we can have the same. Promising that we will face suffering too. But that if we trust him, then we will also be raised to new life.

Do you have questions? Well, with Jesus, you can know that there is a hopeful purpose. We know, don't we, that life is not a tragedy.

Where we're born and then we live the thrills and spills and happiness and then we die. A story that takes the shape of a frown. Some people want to paint it like that.

Some people want to live like that. But we know that that's not true. Because life begins with the wonder of new life. And it is a road that is then marked with suffering for all who live it.

But it is a story that, like a smiley face, can end in glorious, victorious peace and rest. As we join Job in his suffering.

[29 : 24] As we offer up our own curses, cries and questions. Will we cling to Jesus in faith as we do? Do you have hope?

Real hope? Hope in this story. The story that ends in glorious, victorious peace and rest. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, life is hard. Life isn't easy. And we humans cannot help but look back and curse the days that have seen us suffer.

Would you help us to do that with hope? Or we cannot help but cry out for rest, eternal rest in our suffering.

Would you help us to be a people who can do that with hope? Hope. Hope. Hope. Hope. Would you be a people who can do that with us? Would you be a people who can do that with us?

[30 : 30] Would you be a people who can do that with us? Why we suffer, Lord? Why us? Why now? Help us see the hopeful purpose in it all. Lord Jesus we cling to you today by faith would you hold us fast Holy Spirit would you be with us comfort us we pray in Jesus name Amen