

August 17, 2008
Pentecost 14

“Cheated by Life but Blessed by Death”

JOB 14:1

Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. ² He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure. ³ Do you fix your eye on such a one? Will you bring him before you for judgment? ⁴ Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one! ⁵ Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed. ⁶ So look away from him and let him alone, till he has put in his time like a hired man. ⁷ "At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. ⁸ Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil, ⁹ yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant. ¹⁰ But man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more. ¹¹ As water disappears from the sea or a riverbed becomes parched and dry, ¹² so man lies down and does not rise; till the heavens are no more, men will not awake or be roused from their sleep. ¹³ "If only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me till your anger has passed! If only you would set me a time and then remember me! ¹⁴ If a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come. ¹⁵ You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made. ¹⁶ Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. ¹⁷ My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin. ¹⁸ "But as a mountain erodes and crumbles and as a rock is moved from its place, ¹⁹ as water wears away stones and torrents wash away the soil, so you destroy man's hope. ²⁰ You overpower him once for all, and he is gone; you change his countenance and send him away. ²¹ If his sons are honored, he does not know it; if they are brought low, he does not see it. ²² He feels but the pain of his own body and mourns only for himself."

She was swimming with friends at the end of summer on the New Jersey shore, seventeen, athletic, pretty, and ready for her last year of high school. She swam out to the raft, warmed her body in the sun, and then dove into the water, a deep dive. She heard a snap and hours later she awoke in a hospital room unable to move her arms and legs. Her name was Joni, named after her dad. Almost 40 years later Joni Eareckson Tada is known all over the Christian world for her music, her artwork created with a pen in her mouth, her books, and her lectures that give a powerful witness to the fact that no pit is so deep that Jesus is not deeper.

In her autobiography with the simple title "Joni" she describes in vivid detail the anger she felt towards God in those first months of living a whole new life without the use of her arms and legs. She felt cheated by life and looked forward to being blessed by death. She would spend hours fantasizing about riding her horse or swimming in the ocean or playing tennis. She longed for death to come to a body that could no longer dance with friends. It was a Christian friend who started reading the Bible with her that opened her heart to see her Savior's love that never changes.

In this 14th chapter of Job, we see Job beaten down by his friends whom he described as

miserable comforters. He pours out his feelings about being cheated out of life. He longs for death to come to him so his life can change. Have you ever felt cheated by life or thought to yourself that the Lord has given you a bad deal? Have you ever longed for this world to end and yearned for the place that Jesus has prepared for you, a new heaven and new earth? Let's listen to Job as he speaks to us this morning about being cheated by life but blessed by death.

Job felt cheated by life

Job felt like a flower that was crushed and withered, dried in the hot sun, and totally worthless. "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure. Do you fix your eye on such a one? Will you bring him before you for judgment? Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one!" You have heard these words read at a funeral, or at the graveside of someone's whose body is about to be lowered into the ground. See this flower I have in my hand and compare it to this flower I picked yesterday that withered in the hot sun. Job once had a life where he could really bloom and shine for his Lord, but now he feels so worthless because he is no longer able to do the great things he had done for people. It was Job who once said after he lost everything, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." None of these good thoughts are coming from Job at this point in his life. It seems totally unfair that the Lord would fix his eyes on Job and expect anything worthwhile to come out of his life. Job asks, "Who can bring anything pure from what is impure?" How foolish it would be for me to take a dried up flower and put it into a vase on our kitchen table and expect beauty from it.

Job compares his life to a hired servant who finds no joy in his work. "Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed. So look away from him and let him alone, until he has put in his time as a hired man." Have you ever met someone who is totally bored by their job? I recall my first job in a factory where one of the workmen would sing at the top of his lungs about 2:00 PM in the afternoon. It was his way of relieving stress from a job that was totally boring. Job cannot imagine the Lord could be interested in a person like him who just wants to put in his time and then go home to heaven.

Job wishes he could be a stump of a tree that sends out a new shoot instead of a stump that just rots and decays. "At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant. But man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more." On our recent camping trip, Susan and I camped under large second growth redwood trees in the Navaro State Park. The trees had been cut down around 1890, but then new shoots came from the old stumps. These new shoots are now large redwood trees reaching high into the sky. I have known of fruit trees that were cut off, and a new shoot emerges which produces a fruit as good, or even better than the original grafted tree. In the same redwood grove we noticed some redwood stumps that never put forth new shoots. They had become playground areas for the children. Job feels so cheated by life that he has no hope that anything will ever change for him. If Job only knew the great plans the Lord had for him. As the Lord tells us in Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Job even compares his life to a stream that dries up in the desert. He wishes the Lord would just hide him and conceal him in the grave. Listen to the words of a man who feels so cheated by life. "If only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me until your anger has passed."

I will never forget the words of a man of the Jewish faith who was dying of cancer at the age of 65. He had just retired from his good paying job. With a good savings account, good pension, and money from the rental on his homes, he was all set to travel with his wife. Then came the cancer and it was terminal. He said with anger in his voice, "God has done me dirt!"

I don't think anyone here has ever reached such a low point in our lives that we have said, "God has done me dirt!" But when there are cut backs, or set backs, or financial problems or health problems, we may wonder why the Lord is putting us in a position where we cannot do what we once did. Oh, look at the mom, so active in church, eager in Bible study, cheering her kids in soccer, a good wife to her husband, now lying sick in the hospital. How hard it is under such circumstances to not feel cheated by life. But then we read the Scriptures and realize the Lord is always in control. Psalm 139 says, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before they came to be." The world may despise the withered flower and even wonder if there is a God who cares about people. Then we hear the Lord say to us, "Fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine." With Isaiah and Christians of every age we can say, "Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand." (Isaiah 64:8)

When you read the book of Job it is sometimes hard to keep track of who is talking. Is this God talking here, or one of Job's friends, or is Job talking at this time? Even the words of Job will suddenly switch from despair to hope. Notice how this happens in what Job says next.

Job knew he would be blessed by death

In the midst of these ugly words about being cheated by life, Job bursts forth with words of confidence that the Lord will bless him richly after he dies. He asks the important question, "If a man dies will he live again?" What happens to us when we die? Is there hope for a better life in the future? A few years ago we saw a WELS Connection video about a girl from Russia who started attending church at one of our missions. All her life she was worried about what would happen to her after she died. One day she asked her mom and her mother told her, "You will be eaten by worms." This poor girl lived with the fear of dying and being eaten by worms. Then she started learning the Bible and she came to know that Jesus will raise us up from the dead on the last day and take us to the very special place he has prepared for us. She was no longer afraid of what would happen to her when she died. The loving arms of our Shepherd which carry us through life will also carry us through the doors of death and take us to a place where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. "Goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Job looked forward to what he called his renewal. "All the days of my hard service I will wait

for my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made." In one of her books Joni Eareckson spoke of her hope of renewal. She writes, "But now I realize that I will be healed. I realize that I have not been cheated out of being a complete person- I have just been going through a forty year delay- and God is with me even through that. I know the meaning of that now. It is the time after my death here, when I will be on my feet dancing." When this courageous woman looks at here withered feet, she knows the day will come when her feet will one day dance again.

Can you be sure of your renewal? Can you be sure of standing before the Lord and being welcomed into the glorious place Jesus has prepared for you? What about the days of discouragement, grumbling and complaining, not being nice to people, losing sight of God's love for us, even thinking as Job did that the best days of life have passed us by? Such sins certainly disqualify us for eternal life, and cause us to deserve eternal death and punishment. What joy is ours when we think of what Jesus has done for us. Listen to Job, "Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin." God can count or track every step you take, but he does not keep track because the ugly steps from the past have been wiped clean from the slate by Jesus. Job says, "My offenses will be sealed up in a bag, you will cover over my sin." A plastic bag such as this cannot conceal my sin, and a good coat of plaster cannot cover my sin, but Jesus seals up sin forever and washes it clean, so it cannot be held against us. That is why our hope of renewal is real and genuine. Don't look at the last verses of this chapter this morning. Job starts complaining again. Reminds me of someone I know all too well. The Lord will rescue him again and again and even allow him to confidentially confess the battle cry of every Christian, "I know that my Redeemer lives." With Paul we can say, "Whether we live we live unto the Lord and whether we die we are the Lord's whether we live or die we are the Lord's." Amen.