

August 31, 2008
Pentecost 16

"Are the Best Times Seem in the Past?"

JOB 29:1

Job continued his discourse: ² "How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, ³ when his lamp shone upon my head and by his light I walked through darkness! ⁴ Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's intimate friendship blessed my house, ⁵ when the Almighty was still with me and my children were around me, ⁶ when my path was drenched with cream and the rock poured out for me streams of olive oil. ⁷ "When I went to the gate of the city and took my seat in the public square, ⁸ the young men saw me and stepped aside and the old men rose to their feet; ⁹ the chief men refrained from speaking and covered their mouths with their hands; ¹⁰ the voices of the nobles were hushed, and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths. ¹¹ Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, ¹² because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. ¹³ The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing. ¹⁴ I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. ¹⁵ I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. ¹⁶ I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. ¹⁷ I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth. ¹⁸ "I thought, 'I will die in my own house, my days as numerous as the grains of sand. ¹⁹ My roots will reach to the water, and the dew will lie all night on my branches. ²⁰ My glory will remain fresh in me, the bow ever new in my hand.' ²¹ "Men listened to me expectantly, waiting in silence for my counsel. ²² After I had spoken, they spoke no more; my words fell gently on their ears. ²³ They waited for me as for showers and drank in my words as the spring rain. ²⁴ When I smiled at them, they scarcely believed it; the light of my face was precious to them. ²⁵ I chose the way for them and sat as their chief; I dwelt as a king among his troops; I was like one who comforts mourners.

Job cannot understand why the Lord his God allowed such a high level of pain and suffering to come into his life. In chapter 28 he describes how miners dig deep shafts into the earth to uncover precious metals like silver and gold, and precious gems. Miners may dig into the earth to uncover its hidden secrets, but he argues, that no one can enter into the mind of God to understand why he allows certain levels of pain and suffering to come to people. We would agree with Job's assessment of God's hidden wisdom. In fact Isaiah says that our God is a hidden God and Romans chapter 11 asks the question, "Who has known the mind of God and who has been his counselor?"

While it is hard to understand why God allows evil and suffering to come to people in general, it becomes much more difficult when we have to struggle with pain and suffering in our personal lives as Job did. In the words just read to you, Job is longing for the good old days of his past life. He longs for the days before he lost his wealth, his family, his health and the respect of people in his community. Very few people on this earth will ever see so much good taken away from them as Job did.

Have you ever missed something from the past so much that you almost gave up hope

of ever seeing things get better in the future? I recall an elderly pastor wistfully telling me he longed for the halcyon days of his ministry when he was younger and so many opportunities to bring the gospel to people were placed before him. Today we want to ask a tough question, "How do you thank God when the best times seem to be in the past?"

When prosperity changes

How do you not get discouraged when prosperity changes? If only you had sold your home three years ago, you would be much better off than now! Job longs for the good old days when God's lamp shone upon his head and everything was bright and beautiful. He longs for the days when the Lord was with him and his children were around him. He reflects on those days when his path was drenched with cream and olive oil flowed from the presses in rivers. Those were the halcyon days of Job's life when everything he touched seemed to turn to gold. Now he has nothing.

At first Job was able to react to his losses by saying, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away blessed be the name of the Lord." Even when he lost his health and Mrs. Job told him to curse God and die, Job responded by saying, "Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?" But then the daily battering from the losses began to take its toll on Job. He started complaining to his God and to his friends that the hand of God had struck him unfairly.

How well do you handle changes in your life? What if the best days of life seem to be in the past when there was more money in the bank, and better health and more family and friends to enjoy? The children of Israel certainly did not handle change very well, even though the Lord made it clear he was taking them to the Promised Land. You will recall how they complained against the Lord, and even longed for the leeks and onions in the land of Egypt. They loathed the manna the Lord gave them from heaven and called it a light food.

The mission statement of this congregation is "Holding Out the Word of Light." Let me read the section of Scripture where this occurs in Philippians 2. "Do everything without complaining or arguing so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God, without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life." Look at the changes Job experienced, and then look at the changes you have experienced. If Job's complaining about all the good times being in the past was wrong and sinful, how much more do we not fall short of God's glory because all the foolish whining and complaining we have done in the past with far less losses and changes.

Let me tell about another whiner and complainer. His name was Habakkuk, the prophet Habakkuk, who complained that the Lord was unfair because he allowed his people to be hauled off in captivity in Babylon. He also accused the Lord of being unfair for using a heathen king named Cyrus to bring his people home. How did the Lord answer him? The Lord told him, "The righteous will live by their faith." That's how Job survived. He survived because the Lord kept his faith alive. It was the Lord who enabled him to believe and confess, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

Faith believes and accepts that what we have in Jesus is always far greater and more valuable than any losses that come to us. It is the Holy Spirit who opened your eyes to see how empty your lives are without Jesus. We believe the words of Romans 3 that tells us, "There is none that does good." Faith accepts the goodness, the perfection, the forgiveness, the holiness, the pardon and the cleansing we have in Jesus. Faith accepts his all atoning sacrifice on the cross for us and his resurrection from the dead. That's our greatest treasure. His love never changes. His mercies are new to us every morning. Even a big time whiner and complainer like the prophet Habakkuk were humbled by the Lord who changed his life and led him to confess: "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are not sheep in the pen and not cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior."

When respect is lost

Job lost more than wealth and health and his dear children. He lost the respect of people. There was a time when he went to the gate of the city (v.10) and young men stepped aside and old man rose to their feet. There was a time when important leaders stopped talking because Job was in their presence. There was a time when everyone who heard the name of Job spoke well of him. Now they were saying, "I wonder what that dirt bag Job did to bring all this suffering on himself."

Job speaks in glowing terms of what it was like to live on the cusp of helping people at the highest level. People spoke well of Job because he rescued the poor who cried for help. Job helped the fatherless and the orphans. Job made the widow's heart sing. Job heard the stories of dying people who used the last words from their mouths to bless Job. Job was there with power and authority to bring justice to people who had been wronged. Job was there for the blind and lame. The needy people turned to Job. They did not have to hold out their hands and beg for food.

But now Job is nothing, that great man of the East who helped so many people. In chapter 30 he describes how worthless young men with no station in life mocked him and ridiculed him. He says, "They detest me and keep their distance; they do not hesitate to spit in my face." How do you handle such changes when the best times for using your resources and your love to help other people seem to be in the past?

There is so much joy in life that comes from helping other people. This joy is even greater for Christians who help other people out of joy for the love they have come to know in Jesus their Savior. Jesus said, "It is better to give than receive." Jesus is the vine, we are the branches. What a privilege it is to bear fruit by simply showing kindness and love to people as Job did.

2 Peter 1 speaks about the great privilege of showing kindness and love to people out of love for Christ. "For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love." There are times when you can show large amounts of kindness to people, and other times when you may be limited in how much you can help people because you

do not have the money, or the opportunity or even the strength because your health is not what it once was. Who are we to judge that something did ten years ago with more wealth, better health and a better frame of mind is better than something we do tomorrow which comes from a life that is beaten down and broken? With the psalmist David we say, "My times are in your hands, O Lord."

On the surface it seems like Job had so little to offer the Lord. Yet it was in the deepest, darkest dungeon of despair, that the Lord enabled Job to confess "I know that my Redeemer lives." What seemed like something small at the moment has been preserved on the pages of the Bible and comforts Christians of every age, especially when death comes. Jesus took five barley loaves and two small fish and fed 5,000 people. The Lord can take something you do for him in the weakest and lowest and emptiest moments of your life and still use it for his glory and his honor. "Whether we live, we live unto the Lord, and whether we die we die unto the Lord, whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lords."

When hope fades

Then there was the loss of hope. Here is the hope that filled Job's life. "I thought, 'I will die in my own house, my days are numerous as the sand. My days will reach to the water, and the dew will lie all night on my branches. My glory will remain fresh in me, the bow ever new in my hand.'" Now this hope is gone. He reflects on how people liked being around him because he was so filled with hope. He says he felt like a king among his troops. Current presidential candidates wouldn't even have a chance if Job entered the race at this late game. Now his hope is gone. As we heard last week, he sees himself as a tree that has been pulled up by the roots. Job has lost his integrity, his wholeness, his hallelujah. But the Lord has not lost touch with Job. He will restore his confidence and trust and set him on the high road where he confesses his faults. We should never say the best times are in the past. No, with psalmist we confess (Psalm 27), "I am still confident of this; I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Amen.