

## **When All Seems Hopeless**

**Printed Text:** Job 14:1, 2, 11-17; 32:6, 8; 34:12; 37:14, 22.

**Background Scripture:** Job 14; 32:1-8; 34:10-15; 37:14-24.

**Devotional Reading:** Job 36:24-33.

### **Job 14:1, 2, 11-17**

*“Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble. <sup>2</sup> They spring up like flowers and wither away; like fleeting shadows, they do not endure.*

*<sup>11</sup> As the water of a lake dries up or a riverbed becomes parched and dry, <sup>12</sup> so he lies down and does not rise; till the heavens are no more, people will not awake or be roused from their sleep.*

*<sup>13</sup> “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! <sup>14</sup> If someone dies, will they live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come. <sup>15</sup> You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made. <sup>16</sup> Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. <sup>17</sup> My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin.*

### **Job 32:6, 8**

*<sup>6</sup> So Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite said: “I am young in years, and you are old; that is why I was fearful, not daring to tell you what I know.*

*<sup>8</sup> But it is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding.*

### **Job 34:12**

*<sup>12</sup> It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice.*

### **Job 37:14, 22**

*<sup>14</sup> “Listen to this, Job; stop and consider God’s wonders.*

*<sup>22</sup> Out of the north he comes in golden splendor; God comes in awesome majesty.*

## **Introduction**

Some Christians promote the idea that we should entertain only sunny and optimistic ideas about life. While it is true that Christians have much reason for hope and joy, it is a mistake to dismiss reflection on life's pain and difficulties. The Bible certainly does not. The books of Lamentations and Ecclesiastes do not shy away from dwelling on the frustrating futilities that are part of living in a fallen world. The book of Job confronts these realities as well.

The idea that we should always be sunny and upbeat does a disservice to those who are going through hard times. We must not add to their burden by requiring them to muster a cheery front when in reality their life seems to be crumbling.

Only after we have confronted the hard realities of life can we fully appreciate how completely dependent we are on God. As Job hit rock bottom, he argued with God. But, as we shall see, he clearly recognized that the Lord was his only hope.

The book of Job helps us answer the question "When all seems hopeless, where should I turn?" Of course, we all know the easy, intellectual answer: we turn to God. Job helps us understand how a person may wrestle with this truth when the time of trial comes.

## **Lesson Background**

Last week we looked at Job's initial response to tragedy. This week we examine Job's musings on life and death. To Job, this is not idle chit-chat. He is discussing these issues in depth with his friends, with grief still in his heart and scabs still on his body.

Throughout this book Job goes back and forth in his thinking. This polar swing is normal for grieving people. Chapter 14 seems to return to the despair of Job expressed earlier in the book. Our lesson picks up at the end of the first cycle of dialogues with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Some evaluate Job's responses to these three men as being almost totally negative and fatalistic. Others see in his words hints of hope.

It is important for us to take the ride with Job. What he says in this section is not to be taken as the last word. He is not sharing final conclusions or convictions. He is engaged in a give-and-take where he answers some questions but raises others. We must engage in the discussion with Job and his friends.

## **Job's Reflections on Life (Job 14:1-2, 11-17)**

Our lesson text begins in the middle of Job's response to Zophar, the last of his three misguided friends to engage him in argument. Rather than comfort Job, these "friends" implied he was guilty of wrongdoing and treated him condescendingly. With their simplistic answers and insensitivity, they provide a textbook example of how not to treat a sufferer.

In these two verses, Job tells us that life is not only short, but also hard. He uses two illustrations to demonstrate this point. The first example is that of a flower. Flowers are beautiful when they bloom in the spring, but before you know it, they have withered and the gardener cuts them back. As people age in life, they realize that life has went by very quickly. Even at age 24 (soon to be 25 in a few weeks), I have realized how fast life has passed on. We should strive to live everyday unto the Lord.

Job also uses the example of a shadow. A shadow only appears when there is light, and then it is gone. It is an effective illustration because it also reminds us of how insubstantial life is. We cannot grab hold of it or control it.

Some might think Job was just being morbid in his observations, perhaps being unduly affected by what he had suffered. What he said, however, is echoed elsewhere in Scripture (cf. Jas. 4:14). Realizing the brevity of life is a key part of living wisely (cf. Psa. 90:10-12).

### ***1. What two illustrations did Job use to emphasize the fleeting nature of life? (v. 1-2)***

Having lost his children in a sudden and shocking manner, Job was confronted with the fact that he would never see them again on this earth. The finality of death is painfully apparent to him. God has set limits on man's lifespan (v. 5), and although a felled tree may seem to spring to life again, a man does not reappear once he is gone (vs. 7-10).

The images from the natural world give Job's argument poetic power. In the Near East, it is not unusual for a body of water or a river to go dry. What once was a lively source of refreshment is suddenly barren and empty. In the same way, someone can be lively and full of energy one day and suddenly be still and lifeless as death claims him.

When we sleep, we lie down, but we get up. This is not the case with death. We can imagine Job's sadness as he noted that as long as the earth lasts, no one who has died will ever rise again. (We know that God later worked resurrection miracles, and Jesus would rise from the grave, but Job correctly observed the normal course of this world of someone living in this world.

## ***2. What images did Job employ to drive home the finality of death? (v. 11- 12)***

Grief, especially the grief that Job went through, has a way of leading to complex and conflicting thoughts. Job seemed to desire death and protection at the same time. He felt that God was angry at him; but he also wanted his deliverance as well.

When it comes to life, we love it, but we hate to suffer. This is part of the reason why Job had complex thoughts concerning life. In his finitude, a person may believe in God but have no clue as to what God is doing in his life.

Job was obviously a very perplexed man, but he showed his heart by continuing to call out to God, and he understood that God was his only source of hope.

When God puts people through tough times, He is the only one who can bring them out. God has a purpose for everything that happens in a Christian's life, and He should be trusted until the end. It is only natural to express grief during troubled times, but as we see later in this lesson, these thoughts of grief should not go against God.

## ***3. How can we account for the complexity of Job's thoughts concerning life and death?***

Job's situation had led him to think about the ultimate issues of life and death. He was thinking out loud about the possibility of resurrection. Job knew that man did not normally return to life, so if he died, he wanted the assurance that there would be a "set time" (Job 14:13) when he would be restored and experience his "change" (v. 14).

In keeping with this interpretation of these verses, Elmer Smick pointed out that the word translated "change" (or renewal) is the same as that used in verse 7 in reference to the tree sprouting to new life (Gaebelein, ed., The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Zondervan). So Job may have been thinking about life after death.

There is a desire in man to live forever. Each person, however, will experience death at one time or another. Christians have the hope of life after death (or living with the Creator Himself). Those who do not have Christ as his or her Lord and Savior will suffer eternity without God and

burn in hell. Thankfully, those who are saved will have their bodies resurrected at the rapture (1 Th. 4:16-17).

#### ***4. What might Job have been thinking about the possibility of resurrection from death?***

Another important truth that Job understood is that God cares about His handiwork. He is not remote and unfeeling. How important it was for Job to remember this in his time of sadness! He envisioned God taking the initiative in restoring the relationship between them.

God has taken the trouble to create all of us. That means we have value. It would have made no sense for God to create us in His image if He did not value His creation. Job was certain that God loved him, and we can be sure that God loves us too. Times may get hard sometimes, but God is with those who love and trust in Him.

#### ***5. How did Job remember that he had value to God? (v. 15)***

As someone who had a relationship with God, Job had some understanding about what God was like. Every true believer knows that no relationship with God is possible without His forgiveness. None of us is without sin (cf. 3:10, 23).

Remember that Job was trying to figure out why he was going through such hard times. In the Old Testament times, wealth signified God's blessings. The more wealth you had, the more you were considered "blessed" by God. Of course, there are corrupt wealthy people who did not believe in God. Job's friends believed that he sinned, and he was being punished by God because of his sin. Job did not think this was the case, but he had to have had that thought in the back of his mind. After all, he wasn't perfect.

Job understood that God was not ready to pounce on someone just because of sin. Rather, God wants people to recognize their sin so that it could be covered and forgotten. God watches us carefully not with a desire to exact punishment, but out of love.

#### ***6. What understanding do you think Job had about redemption? (v. 16-17)***

##### **Elihu's Reminders of God (Job 32:6, 8; 34:12; 37:14, 22)**

Like much else in the book of Job, the message of Elihu is difficult to assess. After the long argument between Job and his friends (chaps. 3-31), Elihu was not happy with either party (32:2-3). While some have found fault with what they considered Elihu's errors and harshness, it seems that he did help prepare the way for God's responses to Job's arguments more effectively than the friends did, and he had important things to say about God's character and justice.

#### ***7. What role does Elihu play in the book of Job? (32:6)***

The introduction of a younger man into the book of Job emphasizes how the subjects being discussed are of universal significance, involving all ages. Elihu pointed out that as important as age and experience are, the ultimate source of wisdom is God. The "spirit" referred to in 32:8 is either the spirit implanted in a person by God and illuminated by Him or the Spirit of God Himself. In either case, it is the "inspiration of the Almighty" that is, the very breath of God that gives people understanding (cf. Gen. 41:36-39).

God's Spirit will work wherever He wills, and He dispenses wisdom as He sees fit (cf. John 3:6). His blessing of wisdom is not limited to just older people. There are more and more young people who are receiving and accepting the wisdom of God. God's wisdom is for those who are willing to receive it. Elihu's words, therefore, are worth careful consideration. Today, the Bible and the Holy Spirit are the tools needed to gain wisdom from God.

#### ***8. What is the significance of having a younger man enter the debate? (32:8)***

Elihu reminds Job that God will not do anything that is not right. If this is not the case, then there is no possibility of having any understanding or hope in times of hardship. If God could do wrong, then the world would be in chaos. The only things to live for in this situation are power and self-indulgence.

The world is a wicked place. The news seems to always show the very worst of humanity. Many things happen in this world that we cannot understand, but we can trust in God's goodness. He will never do anything that is not right, and He will one day set things straight.

How often do Christians try to figure out the things of God? Elihu reminded Job not to try and figure things out for himself but turn to God. We're not always going to understand why certain circumstances happen to us. Job did not know about the challenge that Satan had given God concerning himself. Maybe his response would've been different had he known why he was going through those tough times. God doesn't always tell us what's going on because He wants us to trust Him. He does not have to explain himself, but we are to still trust Him.

#### ***9. Why is it important to hold on to the truth of God's justice? (32:12)***

Elihu closed his argument by citing an illustration of God's glory. Just as we cannot look upon the brightness of the sun on a cloudless day (Job 37:21), so God's glory is overwhelming when He reveals Himself.

The word translated "fair weather" (v. 22) mean "gold." On a clear day, the sky has a golden glow. The word "north" is used because it denotes the place of God's abode. When God comes, He comes in a golden majesty that transcends the glory of the sun. It is "terrible" in the same sense of being awe-inspiring. There is comfort in glimpsing this glory--a humbling comfort.

#### ***10. How did Elihu close his argument about God's greatness? (32:14, 22)***

### **Conclusion**

What should our attitude be as we ride out the storms of life? Should we cozy up to death as just a natural part of living? Everyone dies, after all. Even the most respectable people do. On the other hand, should we cower in fear over this universal experience?

When an official of the Episcopal Church spoke at a certain historic church, he noted that some thought he desired to be buried in that church's graveyard. "That's nonsense," he responded as he expressed his desire not to be buried anywhere! None of us particularly wants to face death. Even if we are at peace with God and totally prepared, it is still a new experience, and there is

always some anxiety associated with mystery. Death is God's penalty for sin (Genesis 2:17), and it is not to be embraced as a "friend."

We also must admit that it is not so easy to think of eternity when our feet are still planted firmly on the surface of the earth. We can scarcely do better than to have the attitude of the apostle Paul: "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: nevertheless, to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" (Philippians 1:23, 24).

We should not waste any of our moments fearing the time of death. Every moment spent on fear robs us of a moment to dwell on our hope in Christ. The brevity of our life should motivate us to devote it to something worthwhile and important. Indeed, the fact that death is coming ought to drive us to Jesus Christ. He is the one who forgives, renews, and has gone to prepare a place for us. In the meantime, let us remember the words of James S. Stewart, the Scottish preacher and university professor: "Let us live as people preparing to die so that we might die as people preparing to live."

### **Prayer**

Father, we learned from the Apostle Paul that death is our enemy, a defeated one. Help us to remember this perspective as we continue to live our daily lives. Lord, help us to not treat death as a friend or fear death as an enemy. Thanks to your Son, death is not dead-end for us, but rather a doorway to our place in your presence. Help us to remember that our hope comes from you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Thought to Remember**

"One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die." -- John Donne (1572-1631)