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- (a) Job's background (chapter 1:1–5)
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## **God speaks (chapters 38:1–42:6)**

(a) The challenge to Job (chapters 38:1–40:2)

(b) Job's response (chapter 40:3–5)

(c) God speaks again

(chapters 40:6–41:34)

(d) Job's response (chapter 42:1–6)

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(a) Verdict of the friends (chapter 42:7–9)

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# The brevity of life

## Read Job chapter 14

**T**he pessimism and doubt concerning God's ways which had plagued Job's mind at the close of the previous chapter still dominates his thinking in chapter 14, as he continues to reject the argument of his friends that his suffering is related to sin and retribution, and as he reflects on the brevity and fragility of man's life in this world. 'Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble' (Job 14:1). On the face of it, it seems a dark and dismal chapter, and so it is. But at one point Job's spirit soars above his 'rotting body' as he struggles to answer his own question, 'If a man dies, will he live again?' (Job 14:14).

### Life's brief span

Some time ago I recall watching a television programme on the subject 'Death Education'. Children in some American schools at the primary level were being taught to understand death and dying. The thinking behind it was that during the course of a year the average American child sees around 10,000 fictional deaths on television. The trouble is, however, that the child sees no relation between these fictional killings of gangsters and Indians and the real thing when it enters the home. When Grandad or some other member of the family had died, children have been known to ask, 'Who shot him?' The aim of the educators was to familiarise children with the reality of death so as to enable them to deal with it emotionally when it entered their own experience. That is no bad thing really, since death comes to all and we need to be able to handle it emotionally when it enters the family. But what is even more important is to understand the spiritual dimension of death and to see it against the background of the brevity of man's life in this world.

Job says: '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' (Job 14:1-2). Indeed, so brief is man's time in this world that Job finds it difficult to understand why God shows any interest in such an insignificant, impure and sinful creature. He asks: '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!’ (Job 14:3–4). Furthermore, unlike God himself who is eternal, man’s life has a fixed number of days. ‘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, till he has put in his time like a hired man’ (Job 14:5–6). As he looks at the trees of the forest Job feels that even they have more hope of longevity than man who, like a river that runs dry, has no hope of life beyond the grave:

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. As water disappears from the sea or a river bed becomes parched and dry, so man lies down and does not rise; till the heavens are no more, men will not awake or be roused from their sleep (Job 14:7–12).

The idea that our human existence is brief and fleeting is not peculiar to Job’s frame of mind at this low point in his spirits. The Bible throughout its pages is at great pains to remind us of it constantly. For the Psalmist, man’s life is ‘like a watch in the night ... like the new grass of the morning ... by evening it is dry and withered’ (Psalm 90:4–6). Isaiah says that man’s life is like ‘a shepherd’s tent ... pulled down’, a weaver’s thread ‘cut ... off from the loom’ (Isaiah 38:12). In the New Testament, James emphasises the ephemeral nature of life by picturing a group of businessmen engaged in forward planning and money-making, but without a thought of God in their minds. ‘Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes’ (James 4:13–14). He is warning us against the ultimate blasphemy of leaving God out of account in the planning and direction of our little life here below, as though *we* had charge of it and knew exactly how long it would last.

### **Strangers in the world**

If life is as brief and transient as the Bible teaches, then we need to remind

ourselves that this world is not the only one that matters. We are born into this world and we live and work in this world, but we do not belong to this world. Peter addresses believers of his day as ‘strangers in the world’ (1 Peter 1:1). He means that we are simply passing through this world for a brief time on our way to that eternal world to which we really belong in Christ. We are pilgrims on a journey—living in time, but heirs of eternity. If we forget this, we are in grave danger—the danger of sacrificing on the altar of the ‘god of this world’ our noblest values of truth, honesty, goodness and spiritual integrity. In his book *What is a Christian?* Leonard Griffiths says he was speaking at a funeral about that ‘other’ world to which believers belong. Later, a businessman who was present said to him, ‘The only world I believe in is this one.’ Griffiths replied, ‘If you did believe in another world, would it make any difference to you?’ His answer was, ‘Of course it would. If I believed, as you do, in another world and another life, better and more permanent than this one, I would change every major business policy I have before nightfall.’

As believers we do claim to believe in that ‘other’ eternal world, but does it make any real difference in our attitude to the things of this world here and now? Do we in wisdom hold loosely to the material things of this life, knowing how fragile and ephemeral they are? Some years ago an aircraft crashed in the Andes, and after seventy days in the intense cold sixteen young men belonging to a Uruguayan rugby team were rescued. One of them, Gustavo Zerbino, said that the experience had changed his scale of values. Money was once the most important thing in his life, but in the Andes he had burnt twenty-dollar and fifty-dollar bills to light a fire and keep warm. He said he was still concerned about the material things of life, but now he was concentrating more on the spiritual realities. Knowing we are ‘strangers in the world’ will help us to keep the material things of life in perspective. We can enjoy them, but not treat them as permanent. They belong to us only for a season, and a brief one at that, whereas the spiritual realities belong to eternity.

### **Making the most of time**

If life and time in this world are as transient and passing as Job believed them to be, we ought as Christians to make the most of them in a positive

and productive way, and not waste them on trivialities. The tendency when we are young is to think we have plenty of time and that the more serious things like prayer, worship, and our own personal relationship with Christ can be left on the back burner until a later date. But in fact the only time we have is now. As Christians we need to realise the urgency of the times in which we live and give ourselves more fully to whatever work for the gospel God has given us to do. We remember how our Lord said, 'As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no-one can work' (John 9:4).

For the Lord Jesus it was true that the night and darkness were soon to come, when his work on earth would be ended. But it is also true of us. We only have so much time in which to do God's work, and there is much to be done. There is a gospel to be preached, prayers to be prayed and a witness made, so that Christ's kingdom may be extended. There are still parts of the world that are unevangelised, and we all have family and friends still to be brought to Christ. In a day like ours we cannot afford a laid-back Christianity. The time is short, the work is urgent, and we must grasp the opportunity whilst we can.

### **The eternal hope**

It is difficult to know what degree of light and understanding Job had with regard to the hope of a future life after death. But in the following verses the darkness in his soul momentarily disappears, as he anticipates the possibility of a future resurrection life:

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! If a man dies, will he live again? 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. Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. My offences will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin (Job 14:13–17).

These are remarkable words. It is true that Job did not have the certainty of resurrection that we have in the fuller revelation of Christ, but the very dawning of such a hope and the yearning in his soul itself points to the truth

of an afterlife. The very fact that he asks the question ‘If a man dies, will he live again?’ implies an instinctive craving in the human heart for life beyond the grave. The belief in the immortality of the soul, or the survival of personality beyond death, is something men have held dear for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians believed in the survival of the spirit, which lived on as long as the survivors gave it sufficient nourishment. But Job’s thinking is a distinct advance upon that. He anticipates a relationship between his present life and the life that he will one day share with God at his resurrection. ‘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’ (Job 14:15). God made man for himself, and Job seems to be saying, ‘If I yearn for God, then surely God yearns for me, and even death will not destroy the fellowship I have with him.’

The doctrine of resurrection and an afterlife, although not fully developed in the Old Testament, is nevertheless clearly there. Later we shall see that Job makes a further statement concerning resurrection that is even more positive than what we have in this passage: ‘And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another’ (Job 19:26–27). Daniel too is equally positive that there is to be a resurrection both of the righteous and the wicked. ‘Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt’ (Daniel 12:2). And then there is that remarkable reference to Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac found in Hebrews: ‘By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice ... even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead’ (Hebrews 11:17–19).

All this is truly wonderful, but it still falls far short of the certainty of our hope in Christ, for Job quickly falls back into a mood of despondency. ‘But as a mountain erodes and crumbles and as a rock is moved from its place, as water wears away stones and torrents wash away the soil, so you destroy man’s hope ... He feels but the pain of his own body and mourns only for himself’ (Job 14:18–22). The vision of the glorious future had faded, and Job was left only with the pain of the present. And so it is with all those who do not have the certainty of resurrection life in Christ. Men may have from

time to time their ‘Intimations of Immortality’ as Wordsworth says, but all too soon the ‘vision splendid fades into the light of common day’. Only the Christian believer can answer Job’s question ‘If a man dies, will he live again?’ with the positive affirmation Christ himself gives us: ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die’ (John 11:25).

But even with that certain promise of a future resurrection coming from Christ himself, we believers are not free to criticise Job for falling back into a mood of despondency following his assertion of an afterlife. For we ourselves do not always live daily in the assurance of our resurrection faith, and pain and misery can quickly darken our hope just as it did with Job. There is a story that, during the height of the Reformation, Martin Luther on one occasion found his wife Katarina dressed in deep mourning and asked her who was dead, only to receive the reply, ‘God is’. He was deeply shocked and angry at her irreverence, until she explained that his recent mood of despondency and depression sent out that message to everyone. Is that the message we are sending out to the secular man when we hit hard times—that ours is a dead Saviour who can give us no greater hope than the ideologies and false gods of man’s own making? Job, in that far-off age, had greater reason than we have for the doubt that may have darkened his hope. For we know that Christ is alive, and the same power that brought him from the dead is operating in us as we live our lives in the face of the pressures and tensions of today’s world.