

IN THE MARGINS: Down and out

By Tony Martin

Editor

You've probably been there – down and out. Or maybe you've been down but not out. That's infinitely preferable. This is especially acute if you're a believer. Down, but not out? Well, how about just down? If that's the case, you're in good company. Let me see if I can give you some encouragement.

The question sort of hangs in the air: "How can those who follow God get so depressed?" Here are some case studies. They aren't easy to read. Even those with great faith have moments of outright despair.

First, Moses, from *Numbers 11:1*: "*If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me – if I have found favor in your eyes – and do not let me face my own ruin.*" That's not something I'd easily say to God.

Next – good ol' Elijah, who was in a bad place in *1 Kings 19:4*: "...while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. '*I have had enough, Lord,*' he said. '*Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.*'" Asking God to kill him. Right.

Jeremiah is another hero of the faith, and yet, in *Jeremiah 20:14*: "*Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!*" That ol' boy wished he'd never been born.

Finally, the all-time great case study. That's Job over in *Job 7:15-16*: "*...so that I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine. I despise my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone; my days have no meaning.*"

I've been spending some time here lately with Job. Maybe part of that is taking some sort of perverse comfort in knowing that I don't have it as bad as he did. Actually, I haven't had anything happen to me that was all that bad.

I've made the case before that the natural state of the Christian is suffering, to some extent; bad things, happen, sure, but nothing like what Job faced. It seems that Job had given up. Down and out?

Afraid so. It was so bad that he thought dying was his only hope for deliverance from pain and suffering. I think it'd be fair to describe Job as hopeless. I've often said that hopelessness is not an option. Realistically, though, I've just shared some examples of men who were legitimately hopeless. (I'd add, however, that God never deserted them.)

This begs a question: Does God purposefully and consistently test us? If you listen to Job, he'd say, "Yeah, He does." I'd make the case that Job is implying that God is merciless, which we know isn't true, although it may seem that way when we're down and out.

Understand this: Job was critically despondent. He has been through the loss of, well, most everything. When you're sitting around scraping at your sores with a piece of a broken pot, that's just rough. I can't say I've "been there, done that." Not even close.

It may be, though, that that's how you're feeling these days. Or you've felt that way and have no desire to ever be there again. Testing strengthens your character. It proves your faith is genuine. Who we are and what we truly believe is revealed.

Tested faith gives honor to God. Testing can testify to others just how important God is to us. Or you've felt that way and have no desire to ever be there again. I can't promise you'll never be there again. Life experiences have taught that to you

and me both.

I wasn't taught this in the early years of my faith journey. It became apparent to me through simply living. I wouldn't call that whining; it's okay to acknowledge that you're hurting, that you feel down and out.

I don't know if you've been where Job was, looking a death as preferable to life. I don't know that you've ever been suicidal, which is a horrific state, but more common than you'd think. Here's the upside, though: If you've been down and out, then when you're delivered from those depths of despair, you see things differently than those who haven't been in those pits. You have gifts to give others who are in the same place as you were. Because ... where you are now is not where you will always be. I promise.

I'm not sure why we are tested. I do know it happens, and, of course, we are tested for a reason or reasons. And what are those reasons? Here's a few: I know there's a lot more we could drill down to, but let's just stop with what God said to Satan about Job: "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him."

It may be (gasp!) that part of God's plan for your life is that you find yourself "down." Perhaps that happens because He is actually pleased with us. I'm stating more than I know here, but I would wager that God wants to reveal Himself to us and those watching us through such testing.

Down and out vs. down and not out. God can be the source of pain (there's something else I didn't learn in Sunday School), but He is also the source of blessings. Those who trust in God should never fear His ultimate plans for us.