

## The Wisdom of Suffering

Job 38:1–40:2

Expectations can be a humbling thing. When you're really looking forward to something, you long for it, you can almost taste it—and then you get it, and it's nothing like what you thought it would be. Sometimes it's annoying, like when you order a whole scoop of ice cream and realize you probably should have sampled it first. Sometimes it's significant, like when you start a new job and realize this isn't at all what you thought you'd be doing. But sometimes the distance between what you expected and what really is is life-altering. And that's what Job experienced when he finally God what he was longing for—an audience with God.

As we saw last week in ch. 13, Job's greatest desire in his trial is not to answer the accusations of his friends, but to have an audience with God. Chapter 13:3: "But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God." And again in v. 18: "Behold, I have prepared my case; I know that I shall be in the right." And so v. 22: "call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me." What Job wants more than anything else is to finally have a conversation with God, and figure out what in the world is going on.

If you're just joining us, we've been working our way through the book of Job at kind of an overview level. The story started when Satan appeared before God in heaven and accused Job of only worshiping God because of what he got out of it (1:9). Job's reputation was that he was blameless and upright, a man who fears God and turns away from evil (1:1, 8). Satan challenged God with a question: Does Job fear God for no reason? *Is the only reason we worship God because of what we get out of it?* Satan tells God that if he removes his protection and his provision from Job, the Job will curse him to his face. He only worships you because of what he gets out of it. God accepts Satan's challenge, and strikes Job, taking away family and fortune, even his health. And Job remains faithful to God. He grieved deeply; but he answers the question: God is worthy of our worship whether we receive blessing or disaster from his hand (1:21; 2:10).

But Satan is not the only one to accuse Job in this book. Last week we looked at an example of the dialogue between Job has with his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, which takes up most of the book and raises another question: *Can the righteous suffer?* His friends answer that question with a resounding No. Their assumption is that the way the world works, the way God works, is that the righteous are rewarded, and the wicked suffer (e.g. 4:7-8). So if you're suffering, like Job, you must be wicked. What did you do to bring this disaster on yourself? For Job to maintain his innocence is to suggest that *God* has done something wrong, and they will have none of that.

But Job even shares their basic assumption—that the way God's justice works is that the wicked are punished and the righteous are blessed. Which is why he's so confused. He knows that he is

innocent—that he didn’t do anything specific to bring this disaster on himself. He knows that the righteous *can* suffer. He also knows that God is the one who has done this to him; who else could? No one can sneak behind God’s back to thwart his plan. Even Satan had to have God’s permission before striking Job. But Job doesn’t have a category for how the righteous can suffer and God can be responsible without that somehow implicating God in doing wrong. From his understanding of how the world works, this doesn’t seem right. Which raises a new question—*is God righteous when the righteous suffer?*<sup>1</sup>

But to answer it, he has to get his one desire—an audience with God. And so far, God doesn’t seem to be talking. “Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat!” he says in 23:3. Where *is* God when the world falls apart? “I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me” (23:3-5; cf. 31:35-40). But from his opening lament in ch. 3, through all of the dialogue and debate with his friends, to his closing argument in ch. 31, God has remained silent.

We meet a new character in chs. 32-37, a young man named Elihu, who attempts to defend God’s justice against both Job and his friends. And we begin to get some clarity with him; he says some wise things. But even his wisdom falls short of being able to account for Job’s situation.

It’s not until God finally speaks in ch. 38 that things will truly come into focus. When Job finally gets what he’s been looking and longing for—an audience with God. A chance to receive a clear indictment, the list of charges that he is prepared to argue against (31:35-37).<sup>2</sup> Most of all, a chance to understand *why?* This is what Job expects.

What we expect is for God to let Job in on the secret. To explain that this whole thing was really a test, and you passed—good job! Atta boy! Or at least to clarify his theology about suffering—what we do read elsewhere in the Bible about why the righteous suffer. Because we live in a fallen world (Rom. 8:20-25; Eph. 4:17-19), or maybe because God is disciplining us to hate sin and love righteousness (Heb. 12:3-17). Maybe to share in Christ’s affliction, to know him more and reflect his love (e.g. Phil. 3:7-11; 1 Pet. 3:8-22). Almost always because suffering changes us; it strips away all the false gods in our lives and makes us more and more like Christ (e.g. Rom. 8:17-18; 2 Cor. 4:16-18).

But we will find none of those explanations in God’s answer here. No account of the opening encounter with Satan. Nor will Job find the answers he’s been looking for. In fact, instead of answers, God turns the tables on Job and begins asking him the questions. Whereas Job thought getting an audience with God would mean he would finally get some answers about God’s behavior, instead he’s called to account for his many words. Not exactly what he expected.

### **The Summons (38:1-3)**

He receives his summons in ch. 38:1-3.

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<sup>1</sup> See Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *The Beginning and End of Wisdom: Preaching Christ from the First and Last Chapters of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 110-113.

<sup>2</sup> See Francis I. Anderson, *Job* (TOTC 14; Downers Grove: IVP, 1976), 289.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: <sup>2</sup> "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? <sup>3</sup> Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me.

This doesn't sound good.

Notice first the posture of God's speech: he speaks out of the *whirlwind*. It's a strange description, but it signals a kind of *majesty* and *danger* in God's response. Growing up in the Midwest we were always wary of tornadoes. The kind of damage they could inflict was catastrophic. And yet there's this irresistible attraction to somehow see them in action. Storm chasers and amateur storm chasers. You're supposed to be taking shelter but you want to sit on the porch and behold the power and grandeur. There's a majesty and a danger. And so here, there is a violent storm brewing around God as he speaks. This might not be good.

Next comes the rebuke. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (38:2). No—it's not good. God is not pleased with Job.

Which is kind of shocking, and kind of not. At the beginning of the book God praised Job for his integrity and reverence. And Job has actually been completely in the right to maintain his innocence, despite the attempts of his friends to get him to confess to some sin he didn't commit. Yet, while Job has been honest about his pain and truthful in defending his innocence, *he has not always been wise* in how he has put everything together. As John Walton notes in his commentary, "Although Job's conduct is above reproach, his understanding is flawed."<sup>3</sup> Job has certain ideas about how the world works, and because God is not playing by those rules, he believes God owes him an explanation. As a result he *darkens* or obscures God's counsel—his divine plan—with his ignorant words. As God will say in his second speech to Job, in ch. 40:8: "Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?" "Job regards his own righteousness more highly than he regards God's."<sup>4</sup> That's not a good idea.

Finally comes the summons, v. 3: "Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me." In other words, man up, because it's about to get real. You think I owe you an explanation? How about you explain a few things to me first? And what follows are seventeen grueling lines of questioning, all aimed at making one major point to Job and to us: you may think you have the world figured out, and therefore have the right to question God when it doesn't go according to your expectations. But God is the only one wise enough to order his world, including your suffering. You need to remember that he is God and you are not. And so instead of questioning his judgment, you need to trust his wisdom.

### **The Interrogation (38:4–39:30)**

Throughout the first ten lines of questioning, stretching through 38:38, God interrogates Job about the inner workings of the cosmos, the creation. He starts with an elementary topic in v.4:

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. <sup>5</sup> Who determined its measurements - surely you know! Or who stretched the

<sup>3</sup> John Walton, *Job* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 398.

<sup>4</sup> Walton, 351.

line upon it? <sup>6</sup> On what were its bases [its footings] sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, <sup>7</sup> when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”—you know who they are, right, my heavenly entourage? Oh you don’t?—I’m sorry. (38:4-7)

If you think I owe you an explanation for how I run the world, then you tell me, how is it run?

Now if God’s answer to Job makes you feel a little uncomfortable and awkward, that’s because it should. What follows is not easy to swallow or particularly pretty. In fact some have accused God of far worse here. Of a snobbish insensitivity toward Job, like a professor who refuses to answer your question because it’s just too stupid. Or a condescending showmanship, like Kevin Durant showing up at an elementary school and dunking on a bunch of first graders.

But a better analogy, I think, is of a loving father answering a child who thinks he has everything figured out, and that he ought to be running the show instead of dad. Job is the five-year-old who thinks he’s fifteen, or the twelve-year-old who thinks he’s 25. He demands an answer for how mom and dad run their house, but the answer is too heavy for him right now. Like when your child argues with your decision not to let them spend the night at a certain friend’s house. You have your reasons—reasons you can’t trust the parents or trust the child. But you can’t always explain those reasons to him; he simply needs to trust you. So it is that what Job needs right now is to remember that *he’s not the parent*.

And so God reminds him—in a way he’ll never forget.

Now as we follow the next several lines of questioning, you’ll notice that God is using the categories of the ancient world to describe his role in ordering the cosmos. We see the earth pictured as having foundations, footings, and a cornerstone (38:4-6); the sea being confined with doors and bars (38:10); snow and hail kept in storehouses (38:22); rain in water skins (38:37). Remember that God is not trying to teach geography or meteorology here; he’s using the categories people in Job’s day understood in order to make his point—that he is the one who created and controls and holds all of this together.<sup>5</sup>

So in vv. 8-11 he questions Job about who keeps the sea where it’s supposed to be. Setting the limits for its reach—“Thus far you shall come, and no farther” (38:11). Was that you, Job? No? Just checking...

Then in vv. 12-15, he asks him whether he has ever commanded the morning, told the sun when to rise and to set. He pictures the sun coming up and scattering the wicked, who like to do their deeds in dark places, like shaking the crumbs out of a picnic blanket. Do you have any experience in that department?

How about the extremities of the earth (vv. 16-18)? Could you give me a tour of the deep recesses of the ocean, or the dark caverns in the heart of the earth?

Or how about a tour of where light and darkness are stored (vv. 19-21)? How do those work? You were there when I said, “Let there be light,” weren’t you? That’s right—I forgot.

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<sup>5</sup> See Walton, 399-400.

Let's talk about the storehouses of rain and snow (vv. 22-24), where I keep my supply of precipitation. Or my delivery system for getting it to where I want it to go—"a channel for the torrents of rain and a way for the thunderbolt" (vv.25-27). Let's talk about the source of all that precipitation, where it comes from (in vv. 28-30), or how to command it and make it rain whenever you want (vv. 34-38). Or let's talk about the stars above, the constellations—the Pleiades, Orion, the Big Dipper (the Bear) (vv. 31-33). Can you put those together and then take them apart, like Legos in the sky?

And lest you're tempted to read this and say, 'Job may not have been able to answer those questions, but we know how weather works today.' Okay, tell me when the next tornado is going to strike, and where, and how bad. Better yet, we've had a terrible drought this summer—go make some rain. Even better, go create a new planet and design your own weather system for it. If you think I owe you an explanation for how I run the world, why don't you tell me how to run it first.

And as the questions go on you feel worse and worse for Job. It's like sitting in the audience of an oral exam or sales pitch, where the person simply isn't prepared for the questions. And with each new line of questioning you sink lower and lower in your chair because it's just painful to watch.

But God is not done. We have a bit lower to sink.

In 38:39 through ch. 39, God switches the subject from the cosmic order to its constituency—the animals who live upon the earth.

Alright Job, can you feed the predators and scavengers, the lion and the raven? Do you supply animals for the kill? (38:39-41).

How about when they're born? "Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the does?" (39:1). Do you set the boundaries for the wild donkey (39:5-8)? "Is the wild ox willing to serve you?" (39:9). Did you make the ostrich both arrogant and foolish at the same time, proudly waving her plumage while leaving her eggs to be crushed underfoot (39:13-18)?

"Do you give the horse his might? Do you clothe his neck with a mane? Do you make him leap like the locust? His majestic snorting is terrifying" (39:19-20). "Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars and spreads his wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes his nest on high?" (39:26-27). You can answer at any time.

### **The Closing Statement (40:1-2)**

God makes his closing statement in what is the first of two speeches in ch. 40:1-2: "And the LORD said to Job: 'Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.'" If you think I owe you an explanation, then answer these questions. If you can't answer them, why do you think you have enough information to evaluate the way I run the world, let alone demand that I answer you?

It's not the answer you expect. But it is the answer that Job needed, and sometimes the one we need as well. There is for all of us a temptation, when we don't understand the ways of God, to expect that he owes us an explanation. To imply that he is somehow in the wrong in the way that he has treated us. As he puts it here, to darken his counsel and contend with the Almighty. As we saw in ch. 3, God wants to be honest about our sorrows and pain and frustrations. But he doesn't want us to forget that he's the parent, and we're not.

### **Reflections on the Wisdom of God in Suffering**

We'll look at Job's response to God's speech next week as we conclude our series on Job. But what do *we* do with it this morning? There are at least three things we should take away, especially as we face trouble and suffering in our lives.

First, remember that *God is God and we are not*. He's the parent, and we don't have all the information. As John Piper has said, "God is always doing 10,000 things in your life, and you may be aware of three of them."<sup>6</sup> I may think I have the world figured out, and therefore have the right to question God when it doesn't go according to my expectations. But God is the only one wise enough to order his world, including my suffering. As Isaiah 55 says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8-9). Or Romans 11: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?'" (Rom. 11:33-35).

John Walton writes,

In truth, we will never be in a position to evaluate God's justice. In order to appraise the justice of a decision, we must have all the facts, for justice can be derailed if we do not have all the information. Because we never have all the information about our lives, we cannot judge God when he brings experiences to us or make claims and demands. We cannot reach an affirmation about God's justice through our own limited insight or experiences. We affirm his justice by faith directed toward his wisdom. As we [have seen], God's speech at the end does not offer a defense of his *justice*, but of his *wisdom* and *power*.<sup>7</sup>

God is the only one wise enough to order his world, including my suffering.

That brings us to the second point: we need to *trust God's providence*. He is working out his plan, whether it makes sense to us or not. Instead of questioning his judgment, we need to trust his wisdom.

Romans 8:28 may sometimes come off as a trite platitude or tired cliché, but make no mistake: it is gospel truth.

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<sup>6</sup> John Piper, "Every Moment in 2013 God Will Be Doing 10,000 Things in Your Life," *Desiring God Blog*, Jan. 1, 2013. Available at: <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/every-moment-in-2013-god-will-be-doing-10-000-things-in-your-life>.

<sup>7</sup> Walton, 22-23, italics his.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.<sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.<sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Rom 8:28-30)

Those 10,000 things that God is always doing in your life, the three of which you are aware, are all working together to bring about the glory of God and the good of his children.

There is a plan too big for us to see and too hard for us to carry, the details of which we would often protest if we could see. But that plan is moving somewhere, and suffering is one of the ways it gets there. So good and glorious is the result that Paul says this in Romans 8:18: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

And if you're not convinced that suffering can ever amount to any good, or you get discouraged in that journey, then the third thing I want you to walk away with today is this: remember the cross.

From a human vantage the cross makes no sense. How is Jesus going to establish his kingdom by getting himself killed? Revolutions don't succeed that way. That's why his disciples, despite the fact that Jesus told them several times what was coming, could never quite wrap their heads around it. They were shocked when it happened. And it's still shocking to think about it today? The greatest suffering in all human history (a suffering that puts Job's to shame), the greatest act of evil in all human history—that man would kill God in the flesh; and yet it was according to plan. Providence. Peter says in Acts 2:23, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the *definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed* by the hands of lawless men.” Not only was it according to plan, but through the greatest suffering and greatest evil comes the greatest good in all eternity—the salvation of souls to the glory of God. “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36).

Here is a providence so mysterious none of us could have ever searched it out or seen it coming, if God had not told us. And yet the wisdom of God is greater than the wisdom of man.

So if we can trust God with our eternal security through Christ and his death for us on the cross, can we trust him to carry us through whatever trouble we now face?

We don't always have all the information. So instead of questioning his judgment, let us trust his wisdom. God is the only one wise enough to order his world, including my suffering. And he will work all things out for our good and his glory in the end.