

Do You Know the Answers?

Job 38:1-11

¹ Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: ² "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

⁴ "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. ⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? ⁶ On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷ when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

⁸ "Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?— ⁹ when I made the clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, ¹⁰ and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, ¹¹ and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped'?"

Why do bad things happen to good people? This old question has fueled vigorous discussion among Job and his friends. Meanwhile, suspense has been building as Job keeps asking God to answer his complaint (9:32; 13:3, 15, 22, 23; 31:35).

In today's scripture we begin the climax to the book of Job: God's dramatic answer to Job out of the whirlwind. While most of us are familiar with the figure of Job and have heard the phrase "the patience of Job" and something about him has seeped into popular consciousness, most of us are not familiar with the details of the story as it appears in Scripture. To understand the climax, we need to know the contours of the whole narrative. To grasp God's answer, we first need to know Job's question.

Job's question emerges from a particular framework for understanding the world, a theory that was shared by ancient Israel and many of the surrounding cultures and one that still sounds familiar to us today. According to this framework, those who live a good life and are obedient to God's commands will be

rewarded with good fortune—health, wealth, and other blessings. Those who sin and disobey God's commandments will meet misfortune—illness, poverty, and other woes. This legalistic moral framework, focused on right and wrong, was considered the essence of justice. People get what they deserve. They reap what they sow. When tragedies strike, as they inevitably do, consolation is found in the belief that the outcome is just, that the victims must deserve the "punishment" in some way.

Job had lived and breathed the moral framework of his culture, this particular understanding of the world, his whole life. Then his own tragedy strikes. Chaos comes knocking at his door. Thanks to a heavenly deal between God and Satan, Job loses everything. His flocks are stolen, his servants murdered, his children killed, his health ruined. And yet Job is innocent. As Job sits among the ashes with nothing but a potsherd to scratch his skin, all the evidence suggests that Job's framework for understanding the world is inadequate. Job knows that he has not sinned or disobeyed God—and still he suffers.

Job cannot see beyond his narrow worldview. All he can perceive in his situation is injustice. He still thinks of the world in legal terms of right and wrong, even though this legal theory has failed him. Job's framework has proven inadequate, but it is the only thing left standing between him and the chaos of the world. Job is desperate for justice, not chaos, to prevail. So, when this legal framework fails him, Job seeks a legal solution—a trial. In desperation, Job challenges God to a legal hearing, convinced that if only he has a chance to plead his case in court, then surely, he will be vindicated. Surely justice will prevail and the chaos will be tamed. Job demands to know why he must suffer despite his innocence: "Let the Almighty answer me!" ([31:35](#)).

Job's question, of course, is also our own. We ask: why am I suffering with heart disease? Diabetes? Cancer? If our questions are not about ourselves, it is

about our children or grandchildren...or spouse...our siblings. How did this pandemic make it so hard to operate my business...will I ever recover financially or will I have to close? I trained up my children in a religious community, but they don't seem to hold my values now that they are older. How can this be? Doesn't scripture say train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it? I have done everything I was supposed to do...and yet my companion, that I thought I would grow old with, has been lost to illness and death! This scripture reminds us of the chaos of our own lives, we can name our own doubts and fears that we normally whisper only in the dark on sleepless nights. Job invites us to examine our own frameworks for organizing the unimaginable, to see with clear eyes the constructs we use to hold chaos at bay. Like Job, we are loath to admit when our frameworks fail us, and we are unprepared for God's answer.

For Job God does indeed answer. Out of the whirlwind, God replies, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" (38:4-7). God's response spans the whole universe. In a fierce and beautiful poetic litany, God describes the works of creation, from the birth of the seas to the movement of the constellations, from the patterns of wind and rain to the customs of wild creatures. God's expansive answer from the whirlwind tells Job, "Your categories were far too small. You think in terms of the courtroom. I think in terms of the cosmos. Your human theories cannot possibly capture the complexity of the universe, nor can they contain the chaos. For chaos is part of creation as surely as crocodiles roam the Nile." **Leanne Pearce Reed**

The temptation of many of us is to give others answers. But faith, by its very nature, is not the product of right answers. The deepest places of our knowledge of God are often those places that we cannot explain: experiences of tranquility in the presence of fear, comfort known deeply near death, the enigma of undeserved suffering visited on the life of a child—these and many other moments experienced regularly by people of faith.

These are the kinds of moments people of faith cherish, puzzle over, and pay attention to. These are the mysteries that we church cannot often explain. Most of the time people do not want an explanation. They want an experience of the presence of God, more unpredictable than they had originally hoped, more mysterious than they had first imagined, perhaps more real than the gods we all construct to our own specifications. These moments of mystery are the answers to the questions about God most of us do not know how to ask: comfort, challenge, joy, and hope, all wrapped up into moments that do come. Perhaps our job has less to do with explaining the root of that mystery and more to do with making space for that kind of mystery to be known and shared. **Andrew Foster Connors**

In all of this beautiful, lyric response, God's rebuttal never actually answers Job's question. God never explains why Job has suffered as he has. Barbara Brown Taylor observes, "Job's question was about justice. God's answer is about omnipotence, and as far as I know, that is the only answer human beings have ever gotten about why things happen the way they do. God only knows. And none of us is God."

Instead, at God's insistence, Job must confront that which he fears most. He faces the chaos of the world and the immensity of the cosmos. And his blinders fall off. "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear," Job says to God, "but now my eye sees you" ([42:5](#)). With God's answer from the whirlwind, Job's narrow moral framework gives way to a cosmic vision of the Divine. In this divine encounter,

Job acknowledges the inescapable presence of the chaotic in existence. And yet he comes to recognize that despite the existence of chaos, the world rests on a secure foundation. Despite his pain and loss, God's creation will support and sustain. Job's question is never answered. He is comforted not by an explanation, but by a vision—he has seen the Divine and lived.

This was difficult for Job and is difficult for us as we long instead for explanation. Two members of our congregation went on vacation recently and brought me back a souvenir that had these words of comfort and assurance: How cool is it that the same God that created oceans and mountains and galaxies looked at you and thought the world needed one of you too.” Job did not know the answers and my professors did not give me the answers in seminary. What we can depend on is God being with us during our valleys and giving us His goodness and mercy to accompany us through our hard time. For ultimately the content of God's answer to Job does not matter nearly as much as this: God answers. That is the miracle. The chaos is still there, but so is God. And that is enough. **Leanne Pearce Reed**

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