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MYSTERY AND FAITH IN JOB 38:1–42:16

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Job and God (Job 38:1–42:6)

Finally God himself speaks, answering Job out of the storm (chaps. 38–41). “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me” (38:2–3). There follows question after question, each designed to remind Job of the kinds of things he cannot do, and that only God can. “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand” (38:4). “Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place . . . ?” (38:12). “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle?” (38:22–23). “Can you bind the beautiful

From D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 171–78.

Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs?" (38:31–32). "Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?" (38:39–41). God then goes on to describe some of the more spectacular features of the mountain goat, the wild donkey, the ox, the ostrich, the horse, the hawk, the eagle. "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" (40:2).

Job had wanted an interview with the Almighty. He had, as it were, sworn an affidavit demanding that the Almighty appear and put his indictment in writing (31:35). But God's defense wasn't quite what Job had in mind. At the first pause, Job answers, "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more" (40:4–5).

But God hasn't finished yet. "Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (40:7). Then come the most blistering questions: "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at every proud man and bring him low, look at every proud man and humble him, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you" (40:8–14).

It is important to recognize that God does not here charge Job with sins that have brought on his suffering. He does not respond to the "whys" of Job's suffering, nor does he challenge Job's defense of his own integrity. The reason he calls Job on the carpet is not because of Job's justification of himself, but because of Job's willingness to condemn God in order to justify himself. In other words, God does not here "answer" Job's questions about the problem of evil and suffering, *but he makes it unambiguously clear what answers are not acceptable in God's universe.*

The rest of chapter 40 and all of chapter 41 find God asking more rhetorical questions. Can Job capture and subdue the behemoth (40:15ff.) and the leviathan (41:1ff.)? These two beasts may be the hippopotamus and the crocodile, respectively, but they probably also represent primordial cosmic powers that sometimes break out against God. The argument, then, is that if Job is to charge God with injustice, he must do so from the secure stance of his own superior justice; and if he cannot subdue these beasts, let alone the cosmic forces they represent, he does not enjoy such a stance, and is therefore displaying extraordinary arrogance to call God's justice into question.

Job's response must be quoted in full (42:2–6), along with two or three explanatory asides: "I know that you can do all things," Job tells God, "no

plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' [38:2]. Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me' [38:3; 40:7]. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you [i.e., Job has come to have a far clearer understanding of God than he had before]. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

What shall we make of this exchange between God and Job?

Many doubtful interpretations have been put forward by various writers. Because God refers to so many natural phenomena, one writer argues that a major purpose of God's speech is to tell Job that the beauty of the world must become for him an anodyne to human suffering, a kind of aesthetic aspirin. When one basks in the world's beauty, one's problems become petty, "because they dissolve within the larger plan" of the harmony of the universe.¹ But to someone suffering intensely, the beauty of the world can just as easily become a brutal contrast that actually intensifies the suffering. Worse, it does not dissolve pain; rather, it is in danger of "dissolving" the sufferer in some kind of pantheistic sense of the fitness of things. This is surely a massive misunderstanding of God's response. Not once does God minimize the reality of Job's suffering.

Others, such as George Bernard Shaw, simply mock God's answer. Job wants an answer as to why he is suffering, and the best that God can do is brag about making snowflakes and crocodiles. A contemporary author like Elie Wiesel, writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust, holds that Job should have pressed God further. Doubtless Job needed to repent of his attitude, but he still should have pressed God for an answer: Why do the righteous suffer?

Both of these approaches misunderstand the book rather badly. They have this in common: they assume that everything that takes place in God's universe *ought* to be explained to us. They assume that God owes us an explanation, that there cannot possibly be any good reason for God not to tell us everything we want to know immediately. They assume that God Almighty should be more interested in giving us explanations than in being worshiped and trusted.

The burden of God's response to Job is twofold. The first emphasis we have already noted: Job has "darkened God's counsel" by trying to justify himself at the expense of condemning God; and Job is in no position to do that. "God's speeches show Job that his lowly station point was not the appropriate place from which to judge whether cosmic orders were sufficiently askew to justify the declaration 'let there be darkness.'"² The second emphasis

1. So Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job and Man: A Study of Job* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 133, 304.

2. Stuart Lasine, "Bird's-eye and Worm's-eye Views of Justice in the Book of Job," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42 (1988): 344.

is implicit: if there are so many things that Job does not understand, why should he so petulantly and persistently demand that he understand his own suffering? *There are some things you will not understand, for you are not God.*

That is why Job's answer is so appropriate. He does not say, "Ah, at last I understand!" but rather, "I repent." He does not repent of sins that have allegedly brought on the suffering; he repents of his arrogance in impugning God's justice, he repents of the attitude whereby he simply demands an answer, as if such were owed him. He repents of not having known God better. "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore . . . I repent" (42:5-6).

*To those who do not know God, to those who insist on being God, this outcome will never suffice. Those who do know God come in time to recognize that it is better to know God and to trust God than to claim the rights of God.

Job teaches us that, at least in this world, there will always remain some mysteries to suffering. He also teaches us to exercise faith—not blind, thoughtless submission to an impersonal status quo, but faith in the God who has graciously revealed himself to us.

Job's Happy Ending (Job 42:7-16)

These verses may be divided into two parts. The first, which we have already glanced at, reports God's wrath with Eliphaz and his two friends for not speaking of God what was right, as Job did (42:7-8). They are required to offer sacrifice to God, and Job, whom they have despised and abused, must pray for them, for God will accept his prayers for them (and, by implication, not their own!).

In the second part (vv. 10-17), after Job prays for his friends, the Lord makes him prosperous again. His siblings and acquaintances gather around him and provide gifts, presumably to help him start up again. He sires another family, seven more sons and three more daughters, and gains herds twice the size of what he had before. No women were more beautiful than his daughters, and Job left them an inheritance along with their brothers—further evidence of Job's compassionate and enlightened treatment of those traditionally squeezed to the periphery of life (cf. chap. 31). He lived to a ripe old age, seeing his children and their children to the fourth generation. Eventually he died, "old and full of years"—an epitaph reserved for the choicest or most favored of God's servants (Abraham [Gen. 25:8], Isaac [Gen. 35:29], David [1 Chron. 29:28], and Jehoiada the priest [2 Chron. 24:15]).

If some critics are displeased with God's answer to Job out of the storm, even more are incensed by this "happy ending." The story, they argue, should have ended with Job's repentance. Whether he was restored is irrelevant; in any case it is untrue to the experience of many, who suffer at length

without reprieve. To end the story this way makes the doctrine of retribution basically right after all. The conclusion is therefore anticlimactic at best, contradictory at worst.

This is, I think, a shallow reading of the text. Perhaps the following reflections will help unpack the purpose of this conclusion a little:

1. We must beware of our own biases. One of the reasons why many people are dissatisfied with this ending is because in the contemporary literary world ambiguity in moral questions is universally revered, while moral certainty is almost as universally despised. The modern mood enjoys novels and plays where the rights and wrongs get confused, where every decision is a mixture of right and wrong, truth and error, where heroes and antiheroes reverse their roles.

Why this infatuation with ambiguity? It is regarded as more mature. Clear-cut answers are written off as immature. The pluralism of our age delights in moral ambiguity—but only as long as it costs nothing. Devotion to contemporary moral ambiguity is extraordinarily self-centered. It demands freedom from God so that it can do whatever it wants. But when the suffering starts, the same self-centered focus on *my* world and *my* interests, rather ironically, wants God to provide answers of sparkling clarity.

2. Throughout his excruciating suffering, Job has demonstrated that he serves the Lord out of a pure heart. True, he has said some stupid things and has been rebuked; but at no point does he simply curse God and turn his back on him. Even his demand that God present himself before Job and give an answer is the cry of a believer seeking to find out what on earth God is doing. Even while sitting in the ashpit, Job trusts God enough to express extraordinary confidence in him, and for no ulterior motive.

In that sense, God has won his wager with the devil. Job may utter words that darken God's counsel, but he does not lose his integrity or abandon his God. Is it therefore surprising that there should be full reconciliation between God and Job? And if the wager has been won, is there any reason for Job's afflictions to continue?

3. No matter how happy the ending, nothing can remove the suffering itself. The losses Job faced would always be with him. A happy ending is better than a miserable one, but it does not transform the suffering he endured into something less than suffering. A survivor of the Holocaust has not suffered less because he ultimately settles into a comfortable life in Los Angeles.

4. The Book of Job has no interest in praising mystery without restraint. All biblical writers insist that to fear the Lord ultimately leads to abundant life. If this were not so, to fear the Lord would be stupid and masochistic. The book does not disown all forms of retribution; rather, it disowns simplistic, mathematically precise, and instant applications of the doctrine of retribution. It categorically rejects any formula that affirms that the righteous always prosper and the wicked are always destroyed. There may be other reasons for

suffering; rewards (of blessing or of destruction) may be long delayed; knowledge of God is its own reward.

Job still does not have all the answers; he still knows nothing about the wager between God and Satan. He must simply trust God that something far greater was at stake than his own personal happiness. But he has stopped hinting that God is unjust; he has come to know God better; and he enjoys the Lord's favor in rich abundance once again.

5. The blessings that Job experiences at the end are not cast as rewards that he has earned by his faithfulness under suffering. The epilogue simply describes the blessings as the Lord's free gift. The Lord is not nasty or capricious. He may for various reasons withdraw his favor, but his love endures forever.

In that sense, the epilogue is the Old Testament equivalent to the New Testament anticipation of a new heaven and a new earth. God is just, and will be seen to be just. This does *not* smuggle mathematical retribution in through the back door. . . .

6. Although I have repeatedly spoken of God entering into a wager with Satan, or winning his wager with Satan, I have done so to try to capture the scene in the first chapter. But there is a danger in such language: it may sound as if God is capricious. He plays with the lives of his creatures so that he can win a bet.

Clearly that is not true. The challenge to Satan is not a game; nor is the outcome, in God's mind, obscure. Nothing in the book tells us *why* God did this. The solemnity and majesty of God's response to Job not only mask God's purposes in mystery, but presuppose they are serious and deep, not ilighty or frivolous.

Nevertheless, the wager with Satan is in certain ways congruent with other biblical themes. God's concern for the salvation of men and women is part of a larger, cosmic struggle between God and Satan, in which the outcome is certain while the struggle is horrible. This is one way of placing the human dimensions of redemption and judgment in a much larger framework than what we usually perceive.

7. We are perhaps better situated now to understand precisely why God says that his servant Job spoke of him "what was right," while the three miserable comforters did not. True, Job is rebuked for darkening the Lord's counsel: he became guilty of an arrogance that dared to demand that God give an account of his actions. But Job has been genuinely groping for the truth, and has not allowed glib answers to deter him. He denies neither God's sovereignty nor (at least in most of his statements!) God's justice. Above all, so far as the wager between God and Satan is concerned, Job passes with flying colors: he never turns his back on God.

Contrast the three friends. Although they are trying to defend God, their reductionistic theology ends up offering Job a temptation: to confess sins that weren't there, in order to try to retrieve his prosperity. If Job had succumbed,

it would have meant that Job cared more for prosperity than for his integrity or for the Lord himself; and the Lord would have lost his wager. Their counsel, if followed, would have actually led Job *away* from the Lord; Job would have been reduced to being yet one more person interested in seeking God for merely personal gain.

This is, at the end of the day, the ultimate test of our knowledge of God. Is it robust enough that, when faced with excruciating adversity, it may prompt us to lash out with hard questions, but will never permit us to turn away from God?

But perhaps it is better to put the matter the other way round: the God who put Job through this wringer is also the God of whom it is said that, with respect to his own people, "he will not let [them] be tempted beyond what [they] can bear. But when [they] are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that [they] can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13). God could not trust me with as much suffering as Job endured; I could not take it. But we must not think that there was any doubt in God's mind as to whether he would win his wager with Satan over Job!

When we suffer, there will sometimes be mystery. Will there also be faith?