

Serving a Just God

Job 42

February 27, 2022

This lesson concludes the current series, “Justice, Law, History,” in our lesson book. Last week we heard from one of Job’s friends, Bildad. Job was suffering. Yet after searching himself, he found no sin which would merit punishment by God. Job’s complaint is, “Why am I suffering? What did I do to deserve this?” He has been faithful to God and God’s commandments. That should bring blessings, not this! Bildad tells Job that he must confess to whatever sin it is, that he has committed. Then God will restore Job to favor. Job’s other friends pitch in too, and then another uninvited critic named Elihu. That goes on and on from Chapter 3 to Chapter 37. Throughout, Job protests his innocence, and pleas to be able to put forth his case before God. But, God is silent. Until Chapter 38.

The problem in Job 1-37 seems to be the issue of “Why do bad things happen to good people.” In the Israelite / Jewish religion, as understood in the Exile and beyond, the Israelites have a Covenant with the LORD, set forth in the Torah. We have been reading from the 5th book of the Torah, *Deuteronomy*, which lays out the Covenant in transactional terms. The Israelites are to obey God’s Law, and they will be blessed. If they transgress, they will be cursed. God’s Law is intended for the good of the Israelites. This makes sense. Job seems to have been an Edomite rather than Jewish, but he and his friends have the same understanding of righteousness and God’s laws. *Job* was ultimately accepted into the Hebrew Bible.

So, as we get to the end of Job’s discussion with his friends, Job is protesting his innocence and crying out for “justice,” or at least an explanation. Job’s last words are (from *Job* 31):

**29 “If I have rejoiced at the ruin of those who hated me,
or exulted when evil overtook them—**

**30 I have not let my mouth sin
by asking for their lives with a curse—**

**31 if those of my tent ever said,
‘O that we might be sated with his flesh!’—**

**32 the stranger has not lodged in the street;
I have opened my doors to the traveler—**

**33 if I have concealed my transgressions as others do,
by hiding my iniquity in my bosom,**

34 because I stood in great fear of the multitude,

and the contempt of families terrified me,
so that I kept silence, and did not go out of doors—
³⁵ O that I had one to hear me!
(Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!)
O that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
³⁶ Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
I would bind it on me like a crown;
³⁷ I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him.
³⁸ “If my land has cried out against me,
and its furrows have wept together;
³⁹ if I have eaten its yield without payment,
and caused the death of its owners;
⁴⁰ let thorns grow instead of wheat,
and foul weeds instead of barley.”

The words of Job are ended.

In Chapter 38, God answers Job. Here’s the first few verses of God’s reply:

38 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!**

First, and very important: God answers! But not in the manner Job was asking. Job wanted to question God, as if God were on trial, for what he had unjustly done to Job. His friends, and particularly Elihu, had warned Job that his questioning God’s justice was blasphemy. That is, not an ethical sin in the sense of violating a law, but questioning God’s goodness. When God appears in the whirlwind to Job, God asks Job to speak. But it is to be Job responding to God’s questions, not God responding to Job’s questions. God is in control of the agenda. First question: **“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”** Chapters 38 and 39 continue in this manner. Throughout those questions, no answer is given by Job. How can he answer such questions? He wasn’t there when God laid the foundation of the earth. He doesn’t have perspective on other questions about the Creation, the magnificence of nature, and the natural order.

These questions may come across as sarcasm on God's part when we read them in English. God is making a point, the point made in the very first words of the response, **"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"** As wise and knowledgeable as Job is, what is that compared to God's? After two chapters of this, in Chapter 40 God demands that Job answer:

40 And the LORD said to Job:

2 "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?

Anyone who argues with God must respond."

3 Then Job answered the LORD:

4 "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?

I lay my hand on my mouth.

5 I have spoken once, and I will not answer;

twice, but will proceed no further."

6 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

7 "Gird up your loins like a man;

I will question you, and you declare to me.

8 Will you even put me in the wrong?

Will you condemn me that you may be justified?

9 Have you an arm like God,

and can you thunder with a voice like his?

10 "Deck yourself with majesty and dignity;

clothe yourself with glory and splendor.

11 Pour out the overflowings of your anger,

and look on all who are proud, and abase them.

12 Look on all who are proud, and bring them low;

tread down the wicked where they stand.

13 Hide them all in the dust together;

bind their faces in the world below.

14 Then I will also acknowledge to you

that your own right hand can give you victory.

God's first discourse in Chapters 38-39 established that Job didn't have the knowledge and perspective on the Creation that God has. Job realizes this (40:4). He decided to remain silent. But he still sees himself as unanswered. God puts to him the critical question: **"8 Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?"** That is exactly what Job had been trying to do. Does Job have the power to do that? The second discourse answers

that, especially in verses 12-14. Job can't do what God does. He can't enforce his will on God. Ultimately Job answers in our scripture lesson for today, Job 42:

42 Then Job answered the Lord:

- ² “I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
³ ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
⁴ ‘Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.’
⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;
⁶ therefore I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes.”**

Job comes to an understanding. It is not the self-justifying understanding he had been seeking. He had been looking for a Job-centered explanation, and he has received a God-centered perspective. His confession is not to admit to having been unrighteous. Job's words “... **therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.**” are difficult to adequately translate. The Hebrew verb translated as “despise myself” is intransitive, and means something like, “I melt into nothingness.” Or, “I sink into the abyss of nought.” It is similar to Isaiah's “Woe is me, for I am undone!” (Isaiah 6:5), when he sees God in His throneroom.

But this same mighty God has answered Job, and visited him in his affliction. He cares for Job. Job now has an understanding he expresses this way, “**⁵ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.**” Job may not be able to understand all the things we would have liked. There is still no explanation of his suffering. Indeed, such things are “**things too wonderful for me, which I did not know,**” and, indeed, he cannot know. Here “wonderful” means, “fills me with wonder,” rather than “good without bound.” Job's suffering was not a happy experience. It is simply beyond what Job can understand. That suggests that the “explanation” given in the prologue, in Job 1 and 2, where God and Satan converse, is not really the reason for Job's suffering. Job could have understood that. It's a tale typical of a polytheistic context. That polytheistic view is the very context that the poet of Chapters 3-41 shoves aside. The poet asserts a monotheistic faith in a good God, one whose purposes and ways are beyond our comprehension. Ultimately Jesus came and helped us to a greater understanding.

The remainder of Chapter 42 is the “happy ending” required by the prologue’s introduction. Job, the righteous one, is again restored to a blessed and long life. The “friends” are humiliated. This serves to make *Job*, as a whole, more compatible with a more conventional Covenant-based transactional understanding.

¹⁰ And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. ¹¹ Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. ¹² The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. ¹³ He also had seven sons and three daughters. ¹⁴ He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. ¹⁵ In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. ¹⁶ After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children’s children, four generations. ¹⁷ And Job died, old and full of days.

But the fact is, a new understanding of Covenant is needed, and indeed is coming. As Jeremiah wrote, **31:³¹ The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.**

Prayer: Creator God, open our eyes to see you in new ways. Open our hearts to feel the amazing grace you have poured out and continue to pour out on your people. Open our minds to experience your love for us in ways never felt before. With eyes, hearts, and minds wide open, fill us with your love. Amen.