

Job 38 – 40 Selections

¹ And now, finally, GOD answered Job from the eye of a violent storm. He said:

²⁻¹¹ "Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words?

Why do you talk without knowing what you're talking about?

Pull yourself together, Job!

Up on your feet! Stand tall!

I have some questions for you,

and I want some straight answers.

Where were you when I created the earth?

Tell me, since you know so much!

Who decided on its size? Certainly you'll know that!

Who came up with the blueprints and measurements?

How was its foundation poured,

and who set the cornerstone,

While the morning stars sang in chorus

and all the angels shouted praise?

And **who** took charge of the ocean

when it gushed forth like a baby from the womb?

That was me! I wrapped it in soft clouds,

and tucked it in safely at night.

Then I made a playpen for it,

a strong playpen so it couldn't run loose,

And said, 'Stay here, this is your place.

Your wild tantrums are confined to this place.'

¹²⁻¹⁵ "And have **you** ever ordered Morning, 'Get up!'
told Dawn, 'Get to work!'

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ "Have you ever gotten to the true bottom of things,
explored the labyrinthine caves of deep ocean?

Do you know the first thing about death?

Do you have one clue regarding death's dark mysteries?

Speak up if you have even the beginning of an answer.

¹⁹⁻²¹ "Do you know where Light comes from
and where Darkness lives

²²⁻³⁰ "Have you ever traveled to where snow is made,
seen the vault where hail is stockpiled,

Can you find your way to where lightning is launched,
or to the place from which the wind blows?

Who do you suppose carves canyons

for the downpours of rain, and charts

the route of thunderstorms

That bring water to unvisited fields,

deserts no one ever lays eyes on,

And who do you think is the father of rain and dew,
the mother of ice and frost?
You don't for a minute imagine
these marvels of weather just happen, do you?

Do you know the first thing about the sky's constellations
and how they affect things on Earth?

³⁴⁻³⁵ "Can you get the attention of the clouds,
and commission a shower of rain?
Can you take charge of the lightning bolts
and have them report to you for orders?"

¹⁻² GOD then confronted Job directly: "Now what do you have to say for yourself?
Are you going to haul me, the Mighty One, into court and press charges?"

³⁻⁵ Job answered:

"I'm speechless, in awe—words fail me.
I should never have opened my mouth!
I've talked too much, way too much.
I'm ready to shut up and listen."

Job and the Imponderable

We have come to the official end of the summer season with the arrival of Labor Day weekend. What better Old Testament character could we use to conclude this summer series of OT characters than Job.

Pronouncing Job's name correctly is among the least of the errors that folks make when considering this character. Take, for instance, those who banty about talking about "the patience of Job". What they are revealing is that they really haven't read the book. Job is among the most impatient and provocative characters in the OT. Those who think otherwise have probably only read the Reader's Digest version of the book.

If you turn in the Bible to the Book of Job (found just before Psalms), you should note fairly quickly that this is a story within a story. The middle 39 chapters are sandwiched between a version of an older folk tale that is found in chapters 1,2 and 42. You may remember how Job is presented as the subject of a wager between God and Satan. *Job is a wealthy man living in a land called Uz with his large family and extensive flocks. He is "blameless" and "upright," always careful to avoid doing evil (1:1). One day, Satan ("the Adversary") appears before God in heaven. God boasts to Satan about Job's goodness, but Satan argues that Job is only good because God has blessed him abundantly. Satan challenges God that, if given permission to punish the man, Job will turn and curse God. God allows Satan to torment Job to test this bold claim, but he forbids Satan to take Job's life in the process.*

Satan thinks he can turn Job against God by inflicting all sorts of pain and suffering upon him. God bets that he can't. So Job is put through misery *In the course of one day, Job receives four messages, each bearing separate news that his livestock, servants, and ten children have all died due to marauding invaders or natural catastrophes. Job tears his clothes and shaves his head in mourning, but he still blesses God in his prayers. Satan appears in heaven again, and God grants him another chance to test*

Job. This time, Job is afflicted with horrible skin sores. His wife encourages him to curse God and to give up and die, but Job refuses, struggling to accept his circumstances.

The writers of these middle 39 chapters raise that imponderable question that haunts every faith and every understanding of God. Why do bad things happen? Particularly, why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there suffering in the world? Why, if God is all powerful, good and just – why does God let it happen? Is this all some sort of cosmic game that God plays?

The conclusion that the writers of those middle chapters of Job reach is two fold:

- 1) There are some imponderable questions in life for which people can not provide a satisfactory answer.
- 2) We need to ask better questions: not the imponderable question of “why” but rather the ponderable questions of “who, what and where”.

The writers of the middle chapters of Job are writers of what is called in the Old Testament – wisdom literature.

There are two Main Forms of . . . Wisdom Literature in the Bible. The first type is comprised of short, pithy sayings which state rules for personal happiness and welfare. The Book of Proverbs is the primary example of these.

The second type takes the form of contemplative or speculative wisdom: monologues, dialogues, or essays which delve into basic problems of human existence such as the meaning of life and the problem of suffering. (Reneau Peurifoy, 1999) The books of Ecclesiastes and Job are examples of this type of literature.

It is commonly believed that the writers of wisdom literature were among the last of the OT Biblical writers, who faced with the realities of the ancient world, where the power centers seemed to reside in places other than Israel –and remembering what Ricky Ricardo would say to Lucy: God had some explaining to do.

Why, if the ancestors of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were to be the chosen people – why were they suffering under the domination powers of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and soon Rome? Why were they under the thumb instead of waving it? Why weren't they enjoying the success and power that other nations and other people were enjoying. why?

In those middle chapters of Job, the wisdom writers have four characters attempt to answer the question of why Job is suffering:

Eliphaz, in the first dialog says to Job that you are suffering because you're not really the good guy everyone thinks you are. You have secret and perhaps not so secret sins that God must punish. Admit your guilt and see what happens.

Bildad and Zophar, two other “friends of Job” continue that line of thinking and urge Job to be a “better man”. Bildad, who apparently didn't do very well in his empathy class says that Job's children probably did something to bring about their own deaths and Zophar concludes that Job is actually getting better than he deserves. With friends like that?

The fourth character, Elihu appears toward the end of the book with an alternative explanation - that this is all part of God's will – God's plan. That God is simply seeking to get Job's attention because God communicates with people through physical pain. He says that this physical suffering provides Job with an opportunity to realize God's love and forgiveness when he is well again.

As you might expect none of these responses make much sense or provide much comfort to Job. The wisdom writers demonstrate through the characters in the story that there will never be a very good answer to the “why” questions.

The answers to the why questions may be factually accurate but practically useless. Why does a family die at the hands of a drunk driver? Well, the physics of tons of metal smashing into soft tissue and organs result in catastrophe for the soft tissue. Well, the effects of alcohol impair the brain’s judgment and response. Well, the decisions that people make for good or bad will affect the lives of other people. Accurate answers – but so what?

Or the answers to the “why” questions are going to fall back on sanctimonious responses that only reveal the ignorance or perhaps more kindly, the helplessness that people feel when faced with the loss of what to say.

“God never gives us more than we can bear.” “It must be God’s will.” “God must have wanted her in heaven.” These are the kind of statements that fall into this category. I have no doubt that people who talk like this probably mean well, just as Job’s friends did, and that they are desperately trying to say something...but sometimes it is simply better to say nothing or in the words of Job: I should never have opened my mouth!

I’ve talked too much, way too much.

I’m ready to shut up and listen.”

Or the answers to the “why” questions are attempts to promote the faulty theology of prosperity and blessing. That somehow faith in God is the good luck charm that will protect people. (Ask Jesus about that one!) That a sign of being in God’s favor is a blessing, a healing, a windfall profit. And that the opposite of that is you must have done something wrong if your life has problems. You just have to pray a little harder and have a little more faith then God is bound to respond.

I’m here to tell you, along with Job – those answers are answers that are destructive, harmful, misleading and wrong! And it is when Job then lashes out at his friend’s answers and at God – well, that’s when God makes an appearance . . . and begins to ask the questions. The right questions.

Listen humans – **who** do you think you are with your ignorant, empty words? **What** do you really understand about the complexities of creation? **Where** were you when the world was born?

God doesn’t answer the “why”, but lays out the “who” the “what” and the “wheres”. And that’s the message and the mystery of Job.

In all likelihood, the last of our Old Testament characters was not an actual person at all, but was a symbol – a creation of the wisdom writers that exemplified the human condition. Like all those Law and Order stories – familiar story lines – ripped from the headlines – but disclaiming that any real person is being portrayed. The story of Job is not simply the story of one man, but the story of all humanity and the relationship that we have with that which we call God. It is a story about questions, not about answers. It is a story that leads us away from the imponderable “whys” to the more productive, helpful and the imminently “ponderable” questions of “who, what and where.”

Who are we? What are we suppose to be doing? Where are we suppose to be?

I would suggest that we are - first of all – the people of God. We have been chosen – you have been chosen for the role of a lifetime – you have been baptized into life with God. You belong to God. That’s who you are. This is what defines you as a person – a child of God with all the rights and responsibilities that go with it. Just be aware that there will be more responsibilities than rights. God doesn’t run a democracy.

What are we suppose to be doing? We have been given some fairly concrete and specific suggestions. Love God and love your neighbor for one.

Work for justice,

show compassion,

walk humbly, for another.

Live joyfully,

be patient with others,

demonstrate kindness and mercy,

be forgiving and generous,

treat others as you would want to be treated.

That should take up most of the rest of the afternoon – and beyond.

Where are we suppose to be? Wherever you see a need – that's where we're called to be. Don't wait around to be asked or assigned – find the need and fill it! If you don't see one – you're not looking very hard.

Will that keep us busy?

Well even more than that – it will keep us faithful to our calling. We were built for service – not sales – not advertising – not management – not research on the imponderables – but to live out the ponderables and the purpose for which we were created. To be the people God calls us to be.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, here we are, soon to gather at a table, ready to be equipped for service and refreshed by recalling, once again your presence within us. We offer our thanks, our gratitude and ourselves. Amen.

