

Job: When God Speaks in Our Anguish

Job 38–39

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Asaph, the Jerusalem choir-director, found himself in a similar position to Job. Wickedness was rewarded and godliness punished; or, so it seemed to Asaph. Life did not make a great deal of sense. "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me," (Psa 73:16) he confessed. Trying to make sense of God's ways in this world gave him a headache!

Job is aching, too. He has been questioning God; yes, questioning God! And it has got him nowhere. His friends have condemned him. Even Elihu, whose contribution seemed to promise an answer, has now fallen silent.

Perhaps, it's the silence that hurts most. Why hasn't God said something? Thirty-seven chapters have gone by and God has said nothing! Yes, he has spoken to Satan in the opening prologue; but, Job knew nothing about that. As far as Job is concerned, God doesn't seem to care about his plight. It is one of those things the Psalmist loved to think about: that God cares (Psa 8:4; 95:7; 144:3). But, Job has lost sight of this. Pain has cast shadows over the landscape such that its details can no longer be discerned.

Chapter 38 brings us, at last, to what looks like the answer we have been looking for. God is about to speak to Job. The silence is broken. The resolution of Job's queries about life and tragedy are about to be explained. "Then the LORD answered Job..." (38:1). God hasn't made any sense to Job so far, but all that is about to change. The lights are about to come on and answers are going to be given.

If Job will be patient for just a minute or two longer...

But, wait! What is this? "Then the LORD answered Job *out of the storm...*" A storm?

You might expect God to come to Job after this agonizing silence, as a shepherd might to a poor, lost lamb. You might expect Him to pick Job up in His arms and whisper words of love and reassurance in his ear.

You might expect God to behave as a father might on seeing one of his children fallen, and crying... The child's face all crumpled up with pain and frustration, longing for the warmth of a familiar embrace.

You might expect God to pick up Job as a nursing mother might, saying "There, there, there... everything is going to be alright."

But, a storm? Twice we are told that God speaks to Job out of a storm cloud (238:1; 40:6). Why?

God appears this way at Mount Sinai, for example. "Mount Sinai was covered with smoke... the smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently..." (Exod. 19:18; cf. Heb. 12:18-21). Something similar happens in the opening chapter of Ezekiel, when God manifests himself in a "windstorm... an immense cloud with flashing lightning..." (Ezek. 1:4). Is this some theatrical "fireworks" display intended to introduce an element of drama? No! It is the Bible's way of telling what God is really like! There is something about Him that intimidates! Yes, *intimidates!* That this is not all there is to God, is equally important to stress; God loves His children with a love that is indescribably strong and passionate. But, He is also holy. And for now, this is what He wants Job to understand.

In the first of God's speeches to Job (38:1 – 39:30), God appears to be saying two things of equal, and inseparable importance. One has to do with God Himself; the other, concerns Job.

I. God is greater than we have so far conceived Him to be

There was a cry at the heart of the Reformation, particularly in Luther's assessment of the contribution of the humanist, Erasmus: *Your God is too small*. Downsizing God has been a fashionable trend in theology throughout this past century, both in liberal and evangelical assessments of who God is. The most recent controversy of our times has to do with God's knowledge of the future, some suggesting that the future is "open" rather than determined. God-shrinkers abound!

"Brace yourself like a man," God says (38:3). The word translated "brace" may well come from a Hebrew word for wrestling. Job has been asking for a fight! Now, he is about to get one. It is not a fight about physical strength, of course, but a fight about wisdom. The stage is set: God will ask the questions, and Job will answer (38:3). Already, we get the impression that this is not a fight about between equals. The stage seems to be loaded from the start!

What is the first question?

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" (38:4).

It is a devastating question that has Job reeling in response. "That's not fair!" we almost hear Job saying. Ask me something that I can answer!

But, God hasn't finished! He has only just begun! There are more questions:

"Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?" (38:5)

And *more* questions!

"Have you ever given orders to the morning,
or shown the dawn its place, that it might take the earth by the edges
and shake the wicked out of it?" (38:12-13).

And *more* questions!

"Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?" (38:18).

And *more* questions!

"Can you bind the beautiful 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?
Do you know the laws of the heavens?
Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?" (38:31-33)

And *more* questions!

"Do you give the horse his strength
or clothe his neck with a flowing mane?" (39:19)

And *more* questions!

"Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom
and spread his wings toward the south?
Does the eagle soar at your command
and build his nest on high?" (38:26-27)

In these two chapters (38 and 39), there are almost fifty questions put to Job, none of which he can answer! Only God is able to answer these questions. They are questions about the earth, the sea, constellations, the weather, light and darkness, animals and birds.

The point? To underline what Scripture will testify of God: that God is great (Deut. 7:21; Neh. 4:14; Pss. 48:1; 86:10; 95:3; 145:3; Dan. 9:4). He is greater than we can grasp. Look at what He knows in comparison with what we know, and you get the point, it seems to be saying. He understands things so much better than we ever can. God dwells in unapproachable light (Psa 97:2; 1 Tim. 6:16). He is so far above us that we cannot possibly understand Him or His ways. Don't be surprised that providence is beyond your grasp, that you cannot unravel it: God Himself is beyond your grasp. What we understand of God, we understand because He has, to use Calvin's phrase, accommodated Himself to our capacity. He has used "baby-talk" to make Himself known. He has used metaphor and simile to give "substance" to His form, so that we speak of Him anthropomorphically as having eyes, and ears, and hands, knowing all along that He has none of these things (e.g. Exod. 33:11; 1 Sam. 5:11; Neh. 1:6; Isa. 53:1).

William Henry Green has captured the point well:

It might upon the first superficial view of the case appear as though the discourse of the LORD had no particular relevance to the circumstances in which it was uttered. And the question might arise what these appeals to the magnificence of the works of God in nature have to do with the solution of the enigma to which this book is devoted. How do they contribute to the explanation of the mystery that is involved in the sufferings of good men?

The fact is, this discourse is not directed to an elucidation of that mystery at all. It is not the design of God to offer a vindication of his dealings with men in general, or a justification of his providence towards Job. He has no intention of placing Himself at the bar of his creatures and elevating them into judges of his conduct. He is not amenable to them and He does not recognize their right to be censors of Him and of His ways.

That is it exactly! God is not about to answer Job's questions! Job must appreciate that God is so great, so beyond his grasp, that he cannot possibly fathom the divine mind. To expect otherwise is to shrink God down to our size. And God will not have us do that! *Let God be God!* was the watch-cry of the Reformation.

II. Man is smaller than we make him out to be.

There is a parallel issue that we must consider. Not only is God enlarging his own greatness in Job's eyes. He is simultaneously shrinking Job's estimation of himself. If Job's God is too small, Job's estimation of himself is too great. He has allowed himself to think that he deserves an answer from God. It is a matter of his rights. God is obligated to explain himself to him. He has set himself as judge

and entered a verdict. God's providence is not fair!

There is a mystery to the divine being. Herman Bavinck begins his book, *The Doctrine of God*, with the sentence: "Mystery is the vital element of dogmatics."(2) There has to be an appreciation of what the medieval church rendered: *finitum non capax infiniti* s the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. God is incomprehensible to us. Not that he cannot be understand at all; but, that he cannot be understood fully. There is a holiness to God that renders his knowing above and beyond our finite capacity. This is not so much a problem of sin, though sin has seriously affected our ability to understand anything that is spiritual. The problem is one of finitude: we are *too small* to understand the ways of God.

In the presence of high mountain glaciers, where ice and snow reside year-round, God asks:

"Have you entered the storehouses of the snow
or seen the storehouses of the hail...?" (38:22)

No, he had not. There are places in this earth that few can ever ascend to.

"Can you raise your voice to the clouds...
Who has the wisdom to count the clouds?
Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens?" (38:34,37)

No man can order the clouds to move an inch to the left or to the right. They operate by powers that are beyond our ability to control. Until Job realizes how *small* he is, in the face of creation, let alone in God's presence, he is not at the point where God wants him to be.

What the book of Job does here to humble Job's pride, the Bible does elsewhere in order to encourage the people of God! Reminding us of God's power can, on the one hand, prick the balloon of pride; on the other hand, it can energize flagging faith

When Isaiah wanted to encourage flagging faith in the face of oppression and exile, he utters these words:

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in...
To whom will you compare Me?
Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.
Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?

He who brings out the starry host one by one,
and calls them each by name. (Isa. 40:22, 25-26)

His point? Think about how great the world really is! And yet, everything in it dwarfs in comparison to the greatness of God. The world is His footstool, and He sits secure above it. Think of the stars! Nothing can make you feel your smallness more than gazing at the stars. In our Galaxy alone there is thought to be something in the region of 100,000 million stars. And there are some estimated 100, 000 million galaxies. Distances boggle the mind when the light from the clearest star (Polaris, or North Star) takes 350 years to get here traveling at 186,000 miles per second! The light from that star began its journey to us just after the Westminster Assembly sat in Westminster, London in the 1640's!

We really are small! And unless we grasp it, our usefulness is seriously curtailed.

The point will reach its culmination later on, when Job lays his hand over his mouth (40:4). Job has been quietened. Like a wild horse, he has been broken. Pain has made him servant-like.

We have no usefulness until we reach that point of quiescence. Until our souls are still, God holds us at bay. It is a hard lesson s the hardest lesson of all!

Writing of her time in the Republic of Congo [Zaire] when she had been abducted and raped, Helen Roseveare, came to realize this truth in the most painful of ways:

On that dreadful night [29 October 1964], beaten and bruised, terrified and tormented, unutterably alone, I had felt at last that even God had failed me. Surely He could have stepped in earlier, surely things need not have gone that far. I had reached what seemed to me the ultimate depth of despairing nothingness. Yet even as my heart had cried out against God for His failure and my mental anguish taunted me to doubt His very existence, another reasoning had made itself felt.

"You asked Me, when you were first converted, for the privilege of being a missionary. This is it: don't you want it?"

Events had moved so fast: everything seemed to happen at once. Pain and cruelty and humiliation had continued in an ever-growing crescendo, yet with it, a strange peace and deep consciousness that God was in charge and knew what He was doing. Odd thoughts and phrases and impulses broke through, and later on were woven together to show the inner meaning of the events of that night, but it had not been orderly, in a way one could set down on paper or explain in a lecture.

"These are not your sufferings: they are Mine. All I ask of you is the loan of your body."(3)

Nothing can make the point clearer than that. Jesus wants us to be His servants, and that may mean being bruised and beaten in the process. We may not know why; all we may know is that God has asked us to take it.

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