

God's Answer

Scripture: Job 38:1-7

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Morning Service

People of God: Last week I should have assigned you to read chapters 38 to 41, in preparation for today's message. Am I allowed to do something like that? Well I suppose, I did challenge those in the evening service to read the entire Book of Revelation in one sitting, so assigning four chapters to read pales in comparison.

You see, one of challenges of preaching is that preachers tend to preach in small chunks of Scripture, when sometimes you need to consider a larger portion of material—like today, when I want to consider all four chapters. At least, within the worship service, we only have time to read a portion of those chapters, rather than all four. So maybe, sometime this week it would be good for you to read these four chapters on your own. In these four chapters, we have God's answer to Job.

Finally. Finally, Job gets an answer from God. He's being asking God a lot of questions: Why has God allowed these things to happen to me? Where is the justice of God? Why is God so silent to my suffering and questions? Where is God? Of course, the response of his friends made Job's pleadings to God, even more intense. Job wanted God to vindicate his name before his friends. Job wanted God to set things straight, but he received no action from God, not even a single word—until now.

Don't we want an answer from God, about all the suffering in the world? When the earthquake hit Haiti, when New Orleans was flooded over, when the Twin Towers came crashing down, I had special sermons that dealt with these tragedies and the questions they raised. How can God allow such things to happen? What is God doing to overcome the brokenness of our world? And in a way, every funeral addresses those same questions at a

personal level. What has God done to overcome the enemy of death? What message of hope do we offer to the grieving?

Job is blessed with an answer. God eventually does speak up. He is given, what few mortals have ever been given: a direct communication from God. In the pages of Scripture, I can find nothing that compares to this. Sure, Moses received a lot of instruction from the Lord and yes the prophets spoke on behalf of the Lord, but I can't think of anyone who received this type of personal address from the Lord God Almighty. Four chapters of divine speech, addressed to one individual. Here is God's answer.

Surely, God will now explain the reason for Job's suffering. He could at least reveal, what we already know from chapter one and two: that Job is part of a test between God and Satan, over whether Job was faithful to the Lord merely because the Lord had been good to Job. I'm sure that would have helped out Job.

Maybe the Lord could have gone even further and explained what he was up to in the long-term—about his plan to redeem the world through his Son, Jesus Christ. The promise of Genesis Three, of the one who would crush the serpent's head, was a bit vague. Perhaps God would spell it out a little more, as he would through the prophets.

But God does none of that. He provides no clue as to his long-term plans. He does not reveal, what we even know, from chapters one and two. Job is left in the dark about the test of faith.

God never answers Job's questions directly. Right from the start, we get the sense that Job is deep over his head:

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.

God doesn't seem to be in the mood to be summoned like a little kid to answer to daddy. Because it's the other way around. God is the Heavenly Father, while Job is the child. And Job can't simply demand an audience with God, as if God is at Job's beck and call. It doesn't work that way. That's what Job has to learn.

And yet at the same time, God does answer Job. It's not an answer we would have expected. God begins with a series of rhetorical questions about the creation, for which Job must plead ignorance:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched out a measuring stick across it?

On it goes, two full chapters of questions about the creation, emphasizing God's sovereignty, power, and loving care over the creation. What kind of an answer is that?

Then God gives two poems about the behemoth and the leviathan, perhaps the hippopotamus and the crocodile, or more ancient creatures, now extinct. On their own, they are actually quite humorous, as God pokes fun at these creatures. But, how in the world, are they an answer to Job's complaints?

It's like God answering the question of why Haiti seems to be so cursed and taking us on a tour on the countryside, and pointing out all the peaks and the valleys; and then, plunging into the ocean, finding a whale to describe, and saying: See, I made all this. How does that answer the misery of people of Haiti?

Or when you come back from a treatment for cancer and you wonder what God is up in your life; what if God in response, would take you for a walk in the backyard pointing out all the spring birds that have arrived for the season; as well as laughing at the squirrels who are trying to get into your birdfeeder, and who managed to break the glass, to get in behind. I made them all, he says. How is that an answer to your pain?

Some consider God's answer, puzzling at best; frustrating at worst. What a strange response to Job's cries and complaints. It's as if, Job ordered N.T. Wright's book, "Evil and the Justice of God" from Chapters, only to receive a calendar from National Geographic, with pictures of wildlife. It's not what Job expected.

Philip Yancy, in his book, *Disappointment with God*, reflects upon God's non-answer to Job. He asks himself: Why did God give no answers? He comes up with two possibilities.

First, "perhaps God keeps us ignorant because enlightenment might not help us." (p. 224) We often assume that if we knew the reason why we are suffering, we would be able to bear that suffering better. But would we? If Job learned, what we already know, that he was the test case in a contest between God and Satan, would that have made things more bearable? Is it possible that it would have made matters worse? It could have raised other questions: Is such a test fair? Why should I be singled out? Why did everything have to be stripped away from me?

If Job knew the reason why he was suffering, it would not have ended his suffering. His business would still be ruins; his children still dead; and his health still taken away. Knowing the precise reason why suffering is occurring does not take the suffering away. It isn't the solution to suffering.

There is another possibility why God does not directly answer Job's questions. Yancy says, "perhaps God keeps us ignorant because we are incapable of comprehending the answer." (p. 226) After all, who are we that we could try to comprehend God's overall plan for the universe? I am a mere creature, just one person among billions of people who are presenting living in this world—and all our lives are intertwined—not just with each other, but also with the past. In order for me to understand why this one event happened to me, I may have to understand the whole chains of events that led to it. And perhaps that is just too much information for me to understand.

Paul, in the NT, in Romans 11, gets to that point, when he tries to figure out questions about election and salvation. Those are just as perplexing questions as the question of suffering. He ends up, just leaving it in the hands of God, saying:

Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out.
Who had known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his
counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? (R
11:33-35)

In this conclusion, Paul echoes some of the words of Job 41. Some things are beyond our comprehension. Perhaps how our present suffering is leading to the final completion of God's kingdom is one of them.

These insights from Yancy are helpful and there is a lot of truth in them. But we should consider the answer that is given in these chapters. After all, this is God's response to Job's cries and complaints. And Job does learn something from it. After all, this is his response, when God finished speaking:

I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted...
My ears have heard you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I
despise myself and repent in dust and ashes. (42:2,5-6)

Job's response indicates that God's words were a satisfactory answer for him. More than that, God's answer leads to a complete change in Job's attitude.

So what is it that we learn from these four chapters, where God takes us on a whirlwind tour of his creation, from the outer reaches of space, to the depths of the ocean, to the creatures that he has made, focusing in particular on the hippo and the crocodile?

Well, it puts us in our place. We're not God. We are but mortal creatures. We're not the Creator, who put everything together so carefully and precisely that everything works out for there to be life on this world for us. Humanity has advanced a great deal in terms of scientific knowledge, since the days of Job. But the more we know, the more we should be amazed

at how wonderfully everything fits together. We need to stand in awe of our Creator.

And in reminding Job and us, of who He is and who we are, God is re-framing the question. Job asked a lot of “why” questions. But God re-directs the issue to “who”. It’s not God saying: “I am God and I am very powerful, so just shut up.” Instead, it is a reminder that He is God, the Creator God, who cares for his creation. And this calls us to put our trust in him. He is our Creator. He also cares for us. If he delights in the hippo, hidden among the reeds, how much more does he delight in us, his special creature?

Isn’t this the answer Jesus gives in Matthew 6, when he calls us not to worry? He reminds us to look to the birds of the air and how our heavenly Father cares for them. He calls us to look to the lilies of the field and how wonderfully dressed they are. If God cares for his creatures like that, how much more will he care for us, his special creation. And so, Jesus’ answer to the worries of life echoes the words we find in Job.

And in Jesus, we have God’s ultimate answer to the suffering of this world. In a way, God could not answer Job, as Job may have wanted, because God already had his plan of redemption in mind. But that plan needed time to work itself out. It couldn’t be fully announced ahead of time, though there are hints of it throughout the OT, including Job’s confession of chapter 19, which we considered last week.

And how God overcame suffering, evil and death through Jesus may also be as puzzling as God’s answer here. Scott Hoezee, in his comments on this chapter, says: “If we thought it was a bit bracing to be shown a hippo when we thought we were going to hear a theology lecture, the Bible’s vastly more surprising move is to show us a baby in a manger and then a lowly carpenter’s son when we thought we were going to see the armies of God marching from the horizon to slay the beasts of evil. If we thought it was a touch unusual to be brought to the zoo when we thought we’d be stopping by a seminary to learn deep matters of faith, it is vastly more earthshakingly shocking to see God deal with death by dying himself.”

In other words, the cross is just as puzzling and frustrating of an answer to the problem of suffering, evil, and death as God’s answer here. And yet, the cross is God’s final answer to the brokenness of the world and in the cross and through the empty tomb, healing, restoration, forgiveness, and new life will be accomplished.

Job doesn’t get the answer he expected from God. But it was enough of an answer for Job to change his tune and submit himself to the Lord.

We don’t know all the answers either. But we do know our Creator God, who cares for his creation. We know this Creator has become our

Redeemer through Jesus Christ. And in Christ, God is renewing the creation to make it good again. And that is God's final answer to the questions we have. Amen.