



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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Job, Part 3: “God Shows Up—*Surprise!*” **Job 31:35-40; 38:1-40:5; 42:7-17**

It’s good to be with you again. Next week is Seminary Sunday, and we have a treat—Andrew Hoeksema, a student at San Francisco Theological Seminary—will bring us our morning Bible message. I hope you’ll join me, and contribute to the special offering we will take in support of student scholarships.

But today, we are in the final week of our series that examines the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament). This has been heavy stuff! In the first week, we looked at chapters one and two, and watched as “The Accuser” (the Satan) charged that this righteous man Job was only being so good because God had blessed him so much. Take away these blessings, Satan charged, and Job will curse You to Your face. God has every confidence in job, so he permits “The Satan” to destroy all Job loved, including his children and all his possessions. Job doesn’t crack. The Satan challenges God to take away Job’s physical health; that will break him and he’ll turn against You. God even permits The Satan to afflict Job with boils all over his body. Now his misery is not only emotional, it’s physical. Even his own wife tells Job to curse God and let God kill you; at least your suffering will end. But Job holds firm—

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,

and naked I will depart.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;

may the name of the Lord be praised.” (Job 1:21 NIV)

Last week we tuned in as three of Job’s friends, and then another, came to comfort him as he sat in torn clothes and ashes, signs of his grief. (This was the large middle of the book of Job.) They were so shocked at his appearance and all that he had suffered that they just sat with him, for seven days and seven nights. Just being there—that was their best gift. But then the spoiled it, perhaps because their distress at Job’s situation had gotten too much for them, and they thought they could give him advice for fixing what must have been a broken relationship with God.

Their advice was cold comfort for a man who had lived his whole life with justice and generosity, toward his fellow citizens and toward God. Chapter after chapter, this dialogue between Job and his friends goes on. Soon they are complaining that Job is undermining traditional religion, because he is saying that God is not doing what we expect—rewarding virtue, and punishing sin. Now it’s not just Job’s misery that is bothering them; Job is now lying about God, as they see it. This fourth friend adds, Job is so stuck on himself and his own suffering that he is missing the lesson that God is trying to teach him through this suffering. All these attempts to justify God’s actions toward Job fall short, and become more and more irritating to Job, who is suffering already. Is God fair and just, or is life just a roll of the dice after all, with the wicked prospering over the weak? Job asks. Job starts calling on God in

several of his later speeches, wishing he could get God to come to court and testify under oath to make sense of this senseless suffering he has put upon Job.

Of course, Job is not the only one to have asked questions about unjust suffering, and the absence of the omniscient and omnipotent God. Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) made his living off poking fun at pompous Christians. Raised in some Presbyterian church, forced to go to Sunday School, he found the Bible to be incredible—literally, un-believable—and lost no opportunity to demonstrate what he identified as absurdities in Scripture. But then, his child died; he was swindled (in his view) by business partners. Twain became more and more bitter, and threw this against the God he professed not to believe in. In his pain, his questions, challenges, and finally stony cynicism froze him into deeper grief. Maybe you have questions and challenges, too. Maybe you are frozen into cynicism, because of unresolved pain. So listen for the real word of God!

Open your Bibles to the book of Job, which is just before Psalms. For the sake of time, I'm going to read snippets of the story from chapter 31, 38, 39, 40, and 42, so that we can inhale as much as possible today, as we finish our series. Listen for the Word of God, as Job wraps up his complaint against God, and God responds. **[Job 31:35-40; 38:1-40:5; 42:7-17]**

It's clear that God has been watching, has been involved in all that has gone before. He is responding to Job's repeated futile fantasy of getting God onto the witness stand to answer for this unjust suffering he has endured. Here, God shows up and gives his answer.

But it's not an answer at all, is it? God speaks from the storm. God causes all who hear Him to feel small, for none of them—even Job—can respond to God's challenges. Their understanding is too small—especially that of Job's three conventionally pious friends. God points to one aspect of creation after another. *Where were you, little man, when I was doing all this? Were you advising me on how to create the earth?*

One of the points that God is making is that by His will and His action, absolute chaos—the seas, the storms, death itself—is held in check. If God were incompetent, or “asleep at the switch”, chaos would be let loose to the destruction of the whole order of creation. In chapter 41 when God brings up the monsters called Behemoth and Leviathan—different suggestions have been made about the kind of animals to which these names refer—God is giving examples of animals who seem very alien and threatening. These beasts are so big and fierce, they are almost on the border of chaos. These animals are more examples of how God holds back chaos.

In chapter 42, Job speaks. He is awed anew by God. “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,” he says, “things too wonderful for me to know. You [O Lord] said, ‘Listen now, and **I** will speak; I will question **you**, and you shall answer **me**.’ [O God,] my ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Then God turns to Job's conventionally religious friends, and says they are in deep trouble for speaking false religious pap, compared to Job's honest cries and integrity of heart. Unless Job makes sacrifices and prays for your souls, God says, you will die. Job sacrifices a “perfect number seven” bulls and seven rams, and God accepts Job's petition for his friends. Then God restores Job's fortunes, double what he had before, in every category, including children. He gave Job long life, and the fulfillment of seeing four generations of his family together. The end.

Only if you have read Job yourself can you sense how these last chapters seem terribly out of place, as if they had been taken from some other story and slapped in here. After all the laborious arguments of Job's friends for God as the source of justice, there comes this heavenly laser-light show and surround sound conversation with God. And God patches everything up. Did Job's suffering mean nothing? Did his first children have no value?

God does not really answer Job's demand for justice, for justification of what truly seems like meaninglessness let loose upon Job and his family and his community. God Himself agrees that Job is blameless; Job has been right to defend his virtue. Yes, Job gets new kids and material prosperity. But does Job get his answer about justice? Don't we have to answer, "no"?

This ending seems a bit like the late scene in The Wizard of Oz, where the travelers reach the great castle in The Emerald City, and discover the thundering voice, the smoke and mirrors displays that keep people in awe are created by a little man behind a curtain who is operating some machinery to create the displays that keep people in awe. It's quite a disappointment. Mark Twain would have loved that portrait of God, used by so many churches to keep people conventionally good.

But let's look deeper. GOD seems to think this is an answer. THE answer. How do we make sense of this? Here are some ideas.

Could it be that we make a mistake, as Job did, about how God operates? How is it that we come to expect certain things of God?

We will likely say that our perceptions of God come from Scripture, from God's Word. But our perceptions of God are always filtered through our own life experience and culture (from childhood through the present, including what others have told us), and are perceived through the limits of our intellectual development and moral development.

You may be more familiar with intellectual development, after the work of Jean Piaget as he observed infants and children. But moral development? What's that?

Moral development is the growth of our ability to reason and act in more adequate and appropriate ways with increasingly complex situations. Lawrence Kohlberg of Harvard University was the pioneer of this kind of research. He found that people—in several cultures he studied—grow in stages from simple to more complex abilities of moral reasoning. Stages One and Two are called, Preconventional. In Stage One, the little child learns that if I do something my parents label as "good", I get rewarded. If I do something that my parents label as "bad", I get punished, and little kids assume the whole world is like their family rules. In Stage Two, a child or adult will accept a delay in reward and punishment. They are good because there it's in their own self-interest. "I'll not rob banks, because I don't want to go to prison." Both Stage One and Stage Two are thought of in reference to oneself.

Stages Three and Four are called, Conventional. In Stage Three, the child and adolescent identifies with a particular person or a character, and that person provides the model for what a "good boy" or "good girl" is. In Stage Four, the adolescent or adult has identified with a group, and looks to that group as the focus of what is right and wrong. This is the "Law and Order" stage, where we support the social order for its own sake, as well as for our self-interest. "My Country, right or wrong," is an expression of Stage Four moral reasoning.

Stages Five and Six are called, Postconventional. Stage Five people extract principles that are right or wrong, and use those to support or question or even oppose parts of the environment that do not meet those standards. Civil laws may even be violated in the name of these principles, and the Postconventional people are willing to take the consequences. Stage Six people are very rare. Their principles transcend even national contracts and constitutions, such as the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, or The Geneva Convention.

These six stages show up in Christian faith, as well. And one can find Scripture verses to support each stage. Stage One: “Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Jesus, in Matthew 10:28 RSV)

Stage Two: “So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men I also will deny before my father who is in heaven.” (Jesus, in Matt 10:32-33, RSV)

Stage Three: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21, RSV)

Stage Four: “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or, what fellowship has light with darkness?” (Paul, in 2 Cor. 6:14, RSV)

Stage Five: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” Isaiah, and Jesus, in Luke 4:18, RSV)

Stage Six: “So faith, hope, love abide. But the greatest of these is love.” (Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13:13)

Kohlberg, James Fowler and other researchers show that people are not always in one single stage; on some things, we may operate at Stage Four; with other issues, we may operate at Stage Three, or Stage Two. When we are under stress, we usually operate from an earlier stage. And one more thing: all these stages can be “moral”; Moral Development theory makes no judgments about this; higher is not inevitably “better”.

Now, I gave you this ridiculously quick tour of Moral Development theory to make a comparison with the way people understand God. In the book of Job, Stages Two and Four are represented in the words of Job's friends. Psalms, Proverbs, or other books that are part of the “wisdom literature” in our Bibles also express these ideas again and again. “Do right, and you will be rewarded.” (Stage Two) Our religious teaches this.” (Stage Four)

Job's experience cannot be contained in Stage Two, or even Stage Four. He gropes throughout the book for something more, for some way to understand this patent injustice against him. It's a crisis of faith—and thus, morality. Job calls on God for help, to understand this. Anyone would find Job's situation intolerable. How we understand it, how we make sense of life when our world turns upside-down, is Job's question, and ours. Is our idea of God big enough? *Can it ever be big enough?* The answer, as Job found out, is no. But if we can't understand or control God, what are we to do? Just “believe”, as some would say, by some sheer act of will?

Here's the way I see it. God is after a personal relationship with each and all of us. God designed us with that capacity. But we have ignored that capacity and kept that treasure hidden so long, many of us don't even remember, or believe, this capacity for relationship with God is even there. Yet the Bible demonstrates, time and time again, that this is the most important fact of life and faith, and we ignore it at our own peril, and the peril of those we love, and even the peril of the planet.

In the beginning (as Genesis puts it), God creates Adam and Eve to walk with Him in the cool of the day; it's an easy intimacy. But that ease with God gets destroyed when our First Parents decide they will live by their own decisions, rather than connect with God. That sin-nature is also part of our "treasure", but we act on that "treasure" nearly every waking moment. Yet even in the face of our First Parents' sin, God still cares for them, looks after their welfare.

Then, God starts his "demonstration nation" with Abram; in Genesis 12, God shows up and talks with Abe. God "cuts a covenant" with Abe in Genesis 15. God walks between cloven carcasses of ceremonial animals. By this act, God is saying, "May the same fate these animals suffered be mine, if I do not keep this agreement." This is an incredible act; God is putting His life on the line there, of His own free will, binding himself to humankind.

And isn't that also what we see in Jesus? God wants relationship so much that He died in order to pay the price of our sin, to remove that fatal distance our sin had inserted between us. God paid the price, in full, on Calvary.

So we learn that God is even more interested in personal relationship than He is in justice, and He paid the price, over and over. So God does answer Job, but God uses a category does not fit Job's category. Job is righteous, a very good man, but the righteousness serves something else—it opens up a greater capacity for a personal relationship with God, and will be fed by that relationship. Instead of Job being a righteous person on his own, his life can become a partnership with God. The story does not quite say that, but I sense this is the point of God's speech—an invitation to intimacy with the One who is Creator of the Universe. At least, even through his suffering, Job had the right impulse—he keeps coming to God, addressing God. He doesn't really think God will answer, or show up, but he gropes toward this out of desperation. And this is the most righteous thing of all. For righteousness, in God's eyes, is not about "doing the right things"; righteousness is about right-relationship with God, and good deeds flow from that.

This connection with God is a connection of love. And lovers quarrel from time to time, in a way that does not damage the relationship.

Again, turn to God's Word. Abram questions God, politely challenging God's covenant promise of posterity and property, when no evidence of fulfillment has occurred. Moses, and several prophets, do not mutely accept their assignments; they beg off, they argue that someone else will be better for the job. In these weeks, we've walked with Job as he challenges God's competence at justice, and today we see God does not throw Job down for his intense queries. God IS, however, judging the mechanical, impersonal concepts with which Job's friends and many cultures operate. Jesus himself resists God's call to the Cross, in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking if there can't be some other way than this death by torture to fulfill his mission.

The book of Job challenges us to examine how we see, how we think about God. Will we let God be God, or will we continue to try to keep God in our little box, so we can live without having to personally connect with Him, which requires that we submit our lives to Him?

One of the things I skated over this morning was the capacity we all have to connect with God, ourselves. Are you enjoying God in this way? Do you experience God? Do you see your life serving the One whom you know and trust, giving your life significance and impact beyond your own good deeds and achievements? Or are you still sitting on that capacity, unaware—or in denial—that that is why you are alive? Do you really think connecting with God is something only a few people of bygone days did, or do you believe this is something God wants with you and with me, today? And even if we wanted to, how does one develop such a personal relationship with God?

I'm going to give you a couple of ideas for this, and this is your take-home from our study of Job today. First, believe. That may sound trite, but I want to be sure we're on the same page. If you don't believe God wants a love relationship with you, then you won't see it, you won't detect God at work around you. Most people—even for most Christians—really don't believe God is seeking them. They pray, they lecture God on their needs and the needs of others, they ask God for strength, courage, or other blessings. But it's like sending postcards to an anonymous benefactor they never meet. Do you believe? Or, to start, are you willing to be willing to believe? God will honor that. You don't need "super faith" to connect with God; God really wants this with you!

Second, persist. The Bible is full of persistent people, and Bible time is often much longer than we understand. We get someone's full life in a few pages, a life of many years. As a result, we don't get it that some of the events of a person's life take years, because that event is on the same page as an earlier incident. Persistence is required.

Want examples? Think of Jacob. He was a persistent guy, working a total of 14 years for the bride of his dreams. Jacob was also a crafty, self-centered fellow. God had greater plans for him. In Genesis 32, Jacob is about to meet his brother, after having swindled him out of his inheritance that should have been Esau's, as first-born son. Jacob sends his family and servants ahead, with all their gear. "So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.²⁶ Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." I will not let you go unless you bless me. Do not let God go, until He blesses you with this connection that changes everything. Persist!

And of course, we have Job, as well as Jacob. In these weeks, we've seen Job persist with God, keep calling on God, keep demanding that God show up. God—at last—honors Job's request. The fact that God gives a surprise, busting up Job's categories for him, is a validation that this IS God. For when God shows up, there are often big surprises!

Third, "tune in" to God. "Turn your radio on," as the gospel song sings. Quiet your heart, so you can hear the "still, small voice" of God, without interference from your own thoughts, feelings, or the surrounding buzz of our world. Jesus talked about going into your closet—in Palestinian houses of the time, the closet was the only room in the house with a door, for the houses were small, one-room mud structures. Go where you can get some privacy. Ask God to speak to you. Start, perhaps, with a couple of verses of a Psalm, or a Jesus story. Ask God, "What do You want me to get from this, Lord?" Then tune in to your imagination, your

emotions, your memories, your intuitions—your whole inner life, looking and listening for God. God may also answer in circumstances.

I remember the prayer vigil for Burma a week ago last Thursday evening. I had been praying for this, as had others. When the idea first came up, I didn't know what I was supposed to do, but God seemed to make it clear to me that I was to be there. Grace Michel spoke—Gracie is now employed in a Burma advocacy group, and has learned a lot. But for Grace, connection with Burma is not just a natural effort because her mother was born there. For Grace, it's a call of God; it flows from her connection with Master Jesus, whom we serve. And Grace spoke of that, in the presence of Buddhists and unchurched people by the clock tower in downtown Auburn—right out in public. At that moment, the clock chimed with that big bell sound. It seemed to me that God was underlining what Gracie had just said, like when God speaks from the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration, “[Jesus] is my beloved son. Listen to him.” And in several other moments during that peaceful demonstration for Burma, God showed up—odd little timing things, that you wouldn't notice, unless you were looking, as I was, for what God was doing there.

Test the spirits, First John tells us, to be sure it's a genuine voice of God. Is this message you are getting from God consistent with God's character as shown in His Word? Is this voice kind, encouraging, empowering, and gently correcting? These are hallmarks of the true voice of God.

Build your encounter with God into a relationship, a series of encounters, connections, intimate sharing, deep joy. This is the deepest joy in life, when you sit in the presence of God and come to walk with God more each day, as you believe, persist and tune in.

Well, we're done with Job. But is this book done with us? We find ourselves addressed by God. Is our concept of God big enough? Are we resting in our concepts of God and the record of God in the past, instead of connecting with God now? God has given us in Jesus the privilege of access to the very Throne of Grace. Are we afraid that God wants to ruin our lives, ordering us to do things we don't want to do? What kind of God is that?

No, far from it. God is dangerous, to be sure. God is wild; He doesn't fit into our box, that's clear. But God's call is to adventure, risk, fulfillment, His glory. And if we love Him, we couldn't want anything more—or anything less.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on October 21, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]