

JOB

God Speaks

Part 3: Chapters 38-40

“Who is this that obscures divine plans with words of ignorance? ... I will question you and you tell me the answers! Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.” (38: 2-4)

In her introduction to God’s speech, Diane Bergant writes:

The last words in Job’s final declaration of innocence pose a challenge to God: “Let the Almighty answer me!” (31:35). These words of Job, the plaintiff, constitute the subpoena for God, the defendant, to appear in court. Will God comply? Will God answer and thus give evidence of being aware of what has been happening in Job’s life? Or is God as disinterested as Job fears? And what if God does answer? Will there be words of understanding and comfort, or words of anger and condemnation? The fact that Job ends his plea in this way indicates that he has not given up hope that justice will prevail.

God does respond. *But does God answer? Job has been struggling with questions of justice. He does not demand the return of his family and possessions, but he does seek an explanation of why he lost them in the first place. For the most part, the men who came to counsel him also discussed matters of justice. However, God never even comes close to responding to Job’s concerns. Some people claim that this proves that God is disinterested in Job’s plight. However, the very fact that God responds at all disproves the allegation of divine disinterest. God does have something to say to Job. But what is it?*

In the Old Testament, the presence of God is made manifest in various ways. At Sinai, God came to Moses in a dense cloud amidst thunder and lightning (Exodus 19:16). On Horeb, Elijah experienced God in a tiny whispering sound (1 Kings 19:12). God speaks to Job out of a storm wind. God does not accuse Job of any sin, as Job’s visitors had insisted. Rather, God tells Job that Job does not understand something that Job has been saying all along. In other words, Job has been crying out: Why? Why? And God responds: You just don’t understand.

God does not provide answers. Instead, like a good teacher, God asks questions. Pointing to the marvels of the natural world, God challenges Job: Were you there when I fashioned the universe? Do you know how it was made? Can you exercise control over any

of its wondrous features? Such questions do not really seek information. They are rhetorical questions meant to emphasize both God’s indisputable creative power and Job’s finite human ability. They are questions that force Job to admit that he lacks the competence to fashion, the authority to control, and the capacity to understand the world in which he lives.

Some people think that God is humiliating Job with this kind of questioning. Is this true? Are the questions too much for Job? Do they crush him? We will have to wait for Job’s response to see if this is the case. One thing is sure, God is shown here to be the all-powerful creator, the one who controls all of the cosmic waters as well as the celestial bodies. (Journey Into Scripture-Job-Lesson Five)

A Theophany Experience

Some people today experience what they call an “ah-ha” moment. By this they mean that they have been enlightened, and now they understand something. These are wonderful occurrences, and they can often move us to a deeper level of living. However, some experiences are so profound that all we can do is stop where we are and what we are doing and stand in a kind of ecstasy (the word means “to stand outside of oneself”). These are “WOW” moments. They are more than intellectual enlightenment.

An experience of God, known as a theophany (from the Greek *theo-* “God,” and *phaino-* “to appear”) is such an experience. Because of the majesty of God, people might respond to a theophany with awe or fear. In these circumstances, the first words they often hear are: “Fear not!” (God to Abram, Genesis 15:1; the angel to Mary, Luke 1:30; Jesus to his disciples, Matthew 14:27). Knowing that the experience of God itself may be more than Job can endure, he is told to prepare himself as if for battle. (The Hebrew word for “man” used here really means “strong man” or “warrior, [38:3, 40:7].) In a theophany, one experiences the awesomeness of God and the limitations of human nature in the face of it.”
(Diane Bergant)

In its introduction to God's speeches, *The Colledgeville Commentary* states:

The God of the prologue who has, as Elihu observed (35:13), been hearing and taking notice now speaks, and it is a surprise for all involved. The friends had said in effect, that it was unnecessary for God to speak—Job's condition could be adequately explained by their theory. They were wrong. Job had called either for a list of charges against him or for a verdict; he gets neither. God enters the argument as another debater.

God's replies are given in two speeches (38:1-40:2; 40:6-41:26), to which Job gives brief replies (40:3-5; 42:1-6). None of Job's questions are answered. In fact, God's remarks are little more than a series of counter questions. Like a teacher springing a surprise quiz, God is trying to involve Job in the process of learning and to lead him out (the literal meaning of "educate") of his own small context into the larger world. If the speeches contain no answer to Job, do they perhaps contain an answer for Job? (p. 695)

God's first speech (38:1 to 40:2). The above two quotes summarize pretty well the gist of God's first speech. Basically, God says to Job: "You want to know and understand my ways, but your small finite mind cannot even begin to comprehend them." In this first speech, God interrogates Job about the marvels of creation which manifest divine power and wisdom. Does Job understand or can he do any of them?

Pause: What do you feel when you read all or part of God's response to Job? How do you think you would feel if God spoke to you as he spoke to Job?

Chapters 38:39 to 39:32 focuses on God's work in the animal world.

Job's first response to God (40:3-5). Job says: "Behold, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I put my hand over my mouth. Though I have spoken once, I will not do so again; though twice, I will do so no more."

It is as if God pauses to catch his breath and to allow Job to speak. Job feels overwhelmed by the mystery and greatness of God. He realizes that when he tries to fathom God's ways, he is way in over his head. To symbolize his smallness before God's greatness, Job covers his mouth saying: "I am of little account; I put

my hand over my mouth" (40:4). Having said that, we can assume that Job is absolutely thrilled that God finally breaks his silence and decides to speak to him.

Pause: When, if ever, have you had a sense of the great mystery God is and how we cannot comprehend his ways?

God's second speech (40:6 to 41:26). In his second speech, God challenges Job to stand up like a warrior and respond to his questions. The set of questions in the second speech centers around two ferocious beasts, Behemoth and Leviathan, monstrous water animals, a hippopotamus and a crocodile. If Job cannot control these powerful animals ("Can you put a rope in his nose?" [40:26]), how does he think he can understand the ways of God, who is "King over all proud beasts" (41:26).

Job's second response to God (42:2-6)

*"I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours
can be hindered.
I have dealt with great things
that I do not understand;
things too wonderful for me,
which I cannot know.
I had heard of you by word of mouth,
but now my eye has seen you.
Therefore I disown what I have said,
and repent in dust and ashes."*

Diane Bergant writes: "Job's second response is truly remarkable. There we can see that his dilemma has been resolved. He acclaims God's sovereign power, a power he never really questioned. However, previously he viewed that power as oppressive. God's questioning has led him to see God's power as both creative and providential. He acknowledges his own inability to understand God's ways, an acknowledgement that he consistently made throughout his struggle. However, previously he resumed that he should have been able to understand. Job may not have been humiliated by God's questioning, but he certainly has become a humble man. Previously well versed in his religious tradition's view of retribution, his extraordinary experience of God has moved him beyond insisting on justice to trusting in divine providence" (ibid, Lesson Five).

Did Job repent and admit he had indeed sinned? Throughout the three sets of speeches (chs 3-31),

Job's friends believe that Job's suffering is due to sin and if he repents, his health and wealth will be restored. Job, however, has always asserted that he has not sinned and that God should reveal himself and explain why he is letting his faithful servant suffer. So if Job repents, as verse 6 above says, does it mean that he finally agrees with his three friends that he has indeed sinned? The answer is no. Throughout the book, Job never stops believing that he is blameless before God. In verse 6, Job repents of his rash speech toward God, which is not a sin. It is not a sin to get mad at God and question his ways especially when we are suffering greatly. God knows that such questioning can lead us to hear God's voice in ways we may not have heard him prior to our suffering and prior to our questioning.

Epilogue (42:7-17)

The epilogue makes three points or moves through three stages.

- Job's friends for all their long speeches have not correctly represented God concerning Job's situation. In fact, God scolds them, saying to Eliphaz: *"I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken rightly concerning me, as has my servant Job"* (v.7).

Peter Ellis writes: *"Job's friends have been rebuked because they have attempted to foist on God their own justification of Job's suffering and indeed of all suffering. They have limited God's providence to the narrow confines of their own theology. They have not allowed Him the liberty to have His own mysterious reasons for inflicting suffering even where there is no sin to provoke it"* (p.512).

In addition to being reprimanded by God, Job's friends are ordered by God to go to Job and ask him to make intercessions on their behalf so as to escape more severe punishment. Job is happy to pray for his friends.

- Even though Job repents for speaking with such audacity to God, demanding an explanation why he is punishing an innocent man, Job, on the whole, has spoken well of God (v.7). Job's near-blasphemous candor is preferred to the piety of those who misspeak about God.
- Job is rewarded with great prosperity for his faithfulness. We also notice that family members

and other acquaintances, who had totally abandoned him in his hour of need, come running back to him after God has vindicated him and restored his wealth.

Concluding Word

At the end of its commentary on Job, *The Collegeville Commentary* has a long piece on the meaning of the book. The following is an excerpt.

Love is a mystery; so is death. So is suffering. Problems are solved; mysteries are lived, and lived most fully in relationship with others....

In the prologue God speaks of Job as a proud parent might. Then the test begins. God is not a disinterested spectator, but God's honor and God's person are at stake as well as Job's. It is not God on one side and Job on the other (as Job thinks), but God-with-Job on the one side, and the Satan, Job's wife, and the friends on the other. Perhaps it would be true to the dynamism of the story to picture God looking down on the debate, anxiously hanging on every word, cheering Job on, wincing at the friends, and more often than not holding back until Job has had his say. Finally, unable to prolong the restraint after holding it in for thirty-four chapters (chs. 3-37), God bursts out like a whirlwind, enters the debate, ostensibly chiding Job's audaciousness, but behind it all a proud parent once again. The test has been passed in glorious fashion. God and Job ("my servant," 1:8; 2:3; 42:7, 8), wiser for the journey, are seen again to be what they always were – friends. (p.698)

Resources

- Collegeville Bible Commentary
- The Men and Message of the Old Testament
- Journey into the Bible Series– Liguori Publication
- Daily Bible Study Series - Job