

GOD’S ANSWER TO “WHY ME?”

Job 38:1–42:6

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The Book of Job does not attempt to give a complete answer to the question of why we have trials or pain—why we suffer adversity or debilitating and terminal diseases. The Book of Job more narrowly hones in on the question of a man who has lived an honorable and righteous life and is suffering and wants to know why. We know that Scripture in its totality contains some additional responses other than what is reflected in Job to answer the question of why suffering comes to us. Any presentation or sermon on suffering is not complete if it is confined within the Book of Job.

I. Reasons for suffering.

A. Sometimes suffering is a punishment. For example, when the Children of Israel failed to have faith to go into the Promised Land, they were told they must wander for thirty-eight years in the wilderness. Their suffering was directly related to their sin. The Scriptures are replete with instances where there has been punishment because sin has occurred.

B. Another dimension is sometimes suffering has a corrective intention to it. Paul shows this in 1 Corinthians 5:5 regarding the man in the Corinthian church who is living with his father’s wife. He says as a matter of church discipline, “Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (NIV). There should be some kind of physical visitation of consequence in his life to bring him back to a position of well-being with God and well-being with the rest of the Body.

C. A third thing we can say as to why trials and pain and suffering occur is that they are simply preludes to what God is going to do to reverse them. In John 9, a man born blind is brought to

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Jesus. He is faced with the question of who sinned—the man or his parents. The prevailing thought was that the blindness was either a punishment or a correction. Some people will look at suffering as belonging to these two categories. Jesus says not at all. Neither this man nor his parents sinned. The reason was so that the glory of God might be revealed. Then He gave the man his sight. The blindness was a prelude of the great sight the Lord was going to visit him with.

D. Sometimes suffering and pain and adversity come to our lives, especially in the sense of spiritual agony, when there is intercession or risking for the sake of another. Jesus knew what that kind of pain and suffering was when He was in the Garden of Gethsemane. He experienced suffering on a level that no other human has experienced. His agony was so great that He sweat great drops of blood. There is an agony that comes from intercession.

E. A fifth thing that may be happening in suffering is that sometimes God allows our sufferings to work in us as an example to other people. This is the case in the apostle Paul's life. What happens with him by way of adversity becomes a means of strengthening the whole church. Toward the end of his ministry—when it would have been easier to have retired on his minister's fund somewhere—Paul experienced five years of unjust imprisonment. Yet at that time in Paul's life, God was working to bring a model or example to display before the whole church that would soon undergo the tremendous ravages of Nero. Always before, up until the Christian era, people equated suffering with being punished. Yet God's people in the New Testament went through suffering, and it was not at all related to disobedience. In Paul's life, suffering was being worked out as an example. In those times of adversity—from his pen and from his heart—comes a letter like the Philippian letter, which tells us that in our adversities we can go ahead and rejoice anyway. God is in control.

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F. Job really gives us the sixth answer to the question of suffering, and it’s not related to any of the first five. That answer is we don’t know. That covers a multitude of sins. That was Job’s whole point: “I don’t have the foggiest idea why this has come upon me. I can’t see any purpose to it. I don’t know what God is up to. I certainly don’t deserve it.”

There’s a law of balance that says what you reap should be consistent with what you sow. It shouldn’t be out of proportion. But in Job’s case, it’s totally out of proportion. Today there are people like Job’s friends who try to make a strong case that Job did something wrong. But God himself declares him righteous.

Job protests that he does not deserve this punishment. All through the Book of Job he’s been asking God to speak up and tell him why. His friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—have been telling him, “You’ve sinned. Repent and God will restore.” Elihu, the fourth character, says the other three failed to prove the argument. “There’s profit in serving God,” he says. “If you’re not profiting, something’s wrong in your life.” Then he goes on to make a strong case that God is sovereign and couldn’t possibly be doing anything wrong. Therefore, if something wrong is happening, again it is Job’s fault.

The Book of Job has reached a standoff. Job never dignifies Elihu’s four speeches with a response. He is still insisting on his righteousness. The friends are still insisting that something is wrong. Now, into this dramatic literary drama, comes the voice of God in chapters 38–41.

II. In these four chapters, God speaks to Job.

There are two parts to God’s message. One is an introduction to what He is saying, which is found in Job 38:1–3. Then the rest of the speech, Job 38:4 through chapter 41, deal with a series of questions that God puts to Job.

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A. At various times all through the book, Job has blurted out, "O that He would come down, that He would talk with me, that there would be an umpire between us." Now God begins to speak.

"The Lord answered Job out of the storm" (Job 38:1, NIV). The great underlying message coming from the Book of Job is that God speaks to His people. He's not a silent God.

We err if we think God only speaks to us audibly. When Christ comes in us, we cannot always distinguish between our thoughts and Christ's thoughts. If Christ is in me and I in Christ, how do I know whether it's a thought that originated with me or originated with Christ? There is unique blending of the personality of the Holy Spirit bringing Christ within us and our own personality. The voice of God comes to most of us in an inaudible way. The voice of God will inevitably fill us with assurance and hope. He may on occasion give us a word of correction, but the voice of the Lord never leaves us condemned. Through His Word, through the Holy Spirit, through worship together, through private worship, through meditating upon His ways and His laws, He speaks to us.

We do not live in relationship with God without communication. That's why it's important for a Christian at any age to get into the Word of God and into prayer. Unless we have that sense of regularly speaking to God and regularly listening to God, we'll shrivel up and die in the spiritual dimension. The Book of Job is telling us that God speaks to His people, and He invites Job to dialogue.

God does not go into a tirade at Job for asking questions. Some people think that asking questions is somehow doubting God, and it's improper to ask God anything. God specifically says as kind of a soft reminder, "Who is this that darkens My counsel with words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2, NIV). That's God's gentle rebuke to Job. But He gives no big put-down, just a gentle burr. He's going to counter the arguments that Job has raised.

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God's response to Job shows that He has been listening all along. That's true with us too. When in prayer or when we're going through difficulty, we may wonder, "God, are You up there? Are You listening? Do You understand what's going on?" We may walk away from a situation feeling like God hasn't spoken.

I'm amazed how many times I've come away from a service feeling like I had cotton in my mouth as I spoke. I wasn't sure God was listening; I wasn't sure anybody was listening.

Inevitably when I feel that way—that nobody's listening and nothing is happening—at the conclusion of the service people come up saying, "God really spoke to me today." I simply wasn't conscious of it. But because I wasn't conscious of it didn't keep it from happening. That's the same way with God. When we feel like He's not listening, God is listening.

B. The Lord then makes certain responses to Job, all in the form of questions. There are basically eleven main questions that God puts to Job over the course of chapters 38–41.

The first question is "Where were you when I created everything?" (Job 38:4–7). God is beginning to open Job's mind to the idea that maybe Job doesn't have a corner on everything. Job needs to be opened to the possibility of God's answer, which may come in a way that Job never could have imagined. So God is immediately challenging Job with his mortality. "Job," He says, "let's talk creation. How did I do it? Were You there?" What we know of creation today is much more scientifically advanced than Job knew, and still nobody's figured it out.

The second main question God puts to Job is "Who limits the oceans?" (Job 38:8–11). Job perhaps had close access to the Mediterranean. The whole series of questions wouldn't make sense unless somebody had seen an ocean. God is saying, "Look at this vast body of water. Why is the ocean at the level it is? Why doesn't it flood everything? Why does it always keep its limits and have high tides and low tides? Did you have anything to do with this created order?"

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The third question God puts to Job follows in verses 12–15. “Who orders the sunrise? Who orders the dawn? Have you been there? Have you given orders to the morning or shown the dawn its place? Job, are you in the east when the sun gets up in the morning and do you follow it across the horizon all during the day? I know all these things. What do you know about the rising of the sun?”

Then in verses 16–18 is the fourth question. “Do you know anything about the deep? Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea? Have you been down to death? Do you know what goes on in the place of death? How big is your knowledge there? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of earth? What do you know?”

Then the fifth series of questions follow in verses 19–30. “Who ascends to the heights? If you haven’t been to the depths, have you been to the heights? What is the way to the abode of lights? Where does darkness reside? Do you know the paths of their dwellings? Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail?” The point God is making is “You don’t know much of what goes on in the heavens, do you?”

Then in Job 38:31–33, the Lord asks a sixth question: “Who orders the heavens?” To Job, the sky didn’t have the dimensions that it has for us. We know now how deep space is. In those days space was more like a roof, and nobody knew how high or deep it was.

In verses 34–38 the Lord asks the seventh question: “Who sends the rains? From your position on earth can you command the rain?”

After those first seven questions, which deal with the created order, Job realizes he is up against a formidable opponent. God then begins bringing things more down to earth so Job, as kind of a wandering Bedouin, can get a hold on what the argument is.

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The Lord's eighth question is a rather long one. It goes from chapter 38:39 through chapter 39. His question is basically "Who knows the ways of the animals?" Then He goes on to list seven different animals, and He asks Job if he understands the ways of these beasts.

Through these verses God is saying, "There are parts of My creation that don't make any sense to you. Maybe they make sense to Me. Maybe your pain doesn't make sense to you, but maybe it makes sense to me." Then, in Job 40:1, He asks: "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" (NIV). In other words, He is saying, "Tell me what you know!"

Job is getting the idea that he doesn't really know a lot. He says, "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more" (Job 40:4–5, NIV). Job offers a true response; he is always honest with his emotions. He is saying, "God, everything I can say I've already said. I don't know anymore. But neither am I going back down on anything I said. I don't understand. I know You've asked me all these questions that present Your sovereignty is greater than mine, and I realize I'm mortal. But I still stand by what I said before. I spoke once, I spoke twice. I'd better not speak again." He doesn't take back anything he said. He just isn't saying anymore. That's wise.

Next we get into the second round. God isn't through asking questions.

His ninth question to Job is "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:8, NIV). That's critical. It marks an advance of God's argument to Job. Here God is saying that we err as people on any argument on suffering if we attribute evil to Him.

What the Lord is speaking about here is a phrase I've heard people say: "If He were a good God, He wouldn't allow that to happen." That attitude is close to practicing idolatry. That's defining God by our own concept. If God acts consistent with our image, then He's God. If He doesn't,

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He's not. That's the essence of idolatry—making God after the image of our own likeness, whether metal or mental.

The Lord is saying to Job, "If you say that I have not done this to you righteously, then you're saying you know more about God than I know about good. So if you know so much about good, you're placing yourself in a position superior to Me." In essence He is saying, "You would do less about evil than I'm doing. So who are you to lecture Me on what is good? Your effort to defeat evil is far less than Mine. You don't even try to defeat the evil in yourself."

The last two questions the Lord puts to Job are hilarious in the sense that they're absolutely unexpected and unanticipated in any argument on suffering. What is God doing as He closes His argument? Look at Job 40:15–24. He asks, "Have you looked at the behemoth?" The behemoth is sort of represented in the hippopotamus. Then in all of chapter 41, God sings the celebration of the leviathan, which some think is rooted in the idea of the crocodile. In these two chapters God is saying, "Have you considered the beasts of the beasts?"

We don't know for sure if the animals referred to by God in chapters 40 and 41 are meant to be the hippopotamus and crocodile or whether God is doing something very shrewd in using poetic license with Job. Job, as I said earlier, is a drama, and part of the hermeneutics of Job is set in drama. Therefore, there's some liberty in dealing with things that you wouldn't have in straight-line history. Is God taking some creatures that are very big in people's minds and saying there are people who believe in these beasts? Yet who made them? Who has control over them?

It's important to realize that God is authentically dealing with Job's psychological fears—the fear of things that are the worse than we can imagine happening to us. He's flinging the behemoth and the leviathan in Job's face with all their frightening possibilities. He's saying to Job, "Can you do anything about them?"

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In these two chapters God is saying that we live in a very unpredictable world where there are real dangers and imagined dangers. Sometimes the imagined dangers are more terrifying and debilitating in our life than the real ones. We can choose to live with fear and rage toward them, or we can accept life in a world of real danger or fancied danger. We can accept the fact that God is in control, even when our imagination is telling us He’s not. God is saying, “Job, the worst has happened to you. And even if your imagination thinks I’m not in control, can you confess that I am? Can you trust Me, even when you don’t understand Me?”

That’s exactly what Job will come to do in Job 42:1–6. God has finally reduced it to the most basic level. He’s saying, “Job, here are the worst possible things and the worst fears you can have. When it’s all said and done, can you still believe I’m in control of them?”

Job replies to the Lord, “I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted...Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know” (Job 42:2–3, NIV). He is now taking the attitude of mortal humility. “You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:4–6, NIV). Sorry, God. There was a moment I began to let go and think You weren’t in control.

Job never repents for sin in his life. He repents of an attitude that for a while is reflected in some of his speeches—that God is not treating him fairly and God is not in control. We can all appreciate that about Job, because all of us who have lived any degree of time know that we have feelings like that on occasion.

III. I want to give an addendum to God’s answer to Job—two things that may not normally be seen in the Book of Job.

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One is that God limits His answer to Job according to the revelation or the light that Job has. God does not come to Job and say, "Someday you're going to understand this because I'm going to send My Son and He's going to show everybody a way out of this. But until I do that, try to hang on." Our tendency is to say to a person when they're going through disaster, "Someday you'll understand." God could well have done that with Job, but He didn't. He confined His revelation to Job to the knowledge Job had. My point is if Job could be satisfied with the knowledge of God that he had then, how much more can we be satisfied with the knowledge of God that we have now? We have the knowledge that has come to us through Christ.

Another addendum: God never tells Job the real reason why he suffered. That is so striking. Job is never told, "I was listening to the reports from earth and the Satan, the adversary, came and said, 'If you take the hedge you have around Job, he'll curse you.' Job, I believe in you. I said, 'Job will pass any test.' And how proud I am of you! You passed the test. Then the Satan came back and said, 'Touch his skin and he'll curse You.' I let him have at you. All this pain had nothing to do with your sin. Satan and I had a deal going as to whether you'd be faithful. Now that the whole deal is over, I guess now I ought to tell you that."

God doesn't ever do that with Job. He never even whispers of the deal. Why doesn't God just tell Job? Why all the complicated questions that are asked of Job? Why not the straight truth?

But if Job knew, would it make any difference? If you knew why things happened in your life, would it really make any difference? We think it would make a lot of difference, but the point of the Book of Job is no, not necessarily. So often we want to ask why. God is not concerned with us knowing that. He's more concerned with us responding with "What do I do now?" We can spend all our life asking why and get the answer and still be useless. God is concerned about moving on and becoming unstuck.

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Wesley Baker, who writes on the Book of Job, says, “Imagine a blackboard on which you put a little chalk dot. The dot is the circle of influence and experience for you and for me and for Job. Everything we have ever seen or learned about or observed in life can be put inside that little dot. It’s the summation of our knowledge and experience. All the information that we use to base our judgments upon and our values upon is in the dot. Then let’s draw a larger circle around the dot, say 6 inches in diameter. And let’s call this the circle of faith. Beyond what we can know and reach by our senses—what’s inside the little dot—we must have faith. It’s our nature as children of God to have faith. And God is creating that 6-inch circle around us to stretch us out of our world of senses to believe in Him. Then draw a circle even larger, seventy-five times bigger than the biggest blackboard. Everything within it is real reality, not just the little pinpoint of our senses and what our experience and education are telling us. Not just the circle of our faith, but everything in reality—all the knowledge that Job 38–41 is saying, God has.”

Baker says, “Job suffers. The world closes in on him. He’s hurt and he looks around this world to find a reason. But his world is that little dot, and he can’t find a reason. There seems to be no sense in what’s happening to him. Therefore, his heart is rebellious and he’s resentful. His three friends look around their little dots, and their dots are even smaller than Job’s because they really in the end know less than he. Then God enters the picture. First He draws that circle of faith, saying, ‘You have to draw your information from this.’ Then he draws the huge circle—reality—and He says to Job, ‘Job, you are drawing certain conclusions about life, negative conclusions that come out of your suffering. Therefore, you say that the whole system is evil because it hurts. But the hurting is not the only element of reality. Nor is it the chief element. Nor is it even among the chief elements. Other things are true and wondrous and glorious and redemptive. He

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who suffers makes his own lot worse by letting the pain have greater proportions than the glory of God.””

That’s what Job has done. His pain, as he experiences it, ultimately becomes bigger for him than God. What God has done through these chapters of questions is to say, “OK, Job. Back off. Let’s see that you have a small pinpoint of knowledge. Let’s get your circle of faith out and let’s help you go even beyond that to understand real reality—so you can get things back in perspective. Don’t define your world by your problems. Don’t define your world by your pain. Define your world by My vastness, by My greatness, and by My glory. It’s in that grand universe of My glory that you exist and move and live and have your being. It’s not all pain. That’s part of it, but it’s not the whole thing. Job, get it back in perspective. My glory is greater than your pain. Let me glory and move into your life. Understand that.”

Again, as we look at suffering from a New Testament perspective, we have so much more knowledge than Job had. In fact, next week I’m going to go one step beyond the Book of Job and give us counsel from the New Testament about handling suffering that Job didn’t know. But if you didn’t know anything beyond Job, that would still be enough. God knows. God’s glory is great. I cannot limit Him to the size of my problem. I must redraw my understanding of Him and take stock in His greatness.

Closing Prayer

Lord, for people who are going through difficult times, these words might seem like the counsel of one of Job’s friends. They’re saying, “My pain is so big. How can I sense and feel Your glory?” We confess that we have difficulty in doing this. We confess that we hurt, that there’s so much we don’t understand. Some of what happens to us in life we feel is unjust. But, Lord, we thank You that You talk to us. It’s better to go through times of suffering knowing You than not

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knowing You, traveling through them with You than without You, drawing upon Your strength than going without it. We're grateful that You'll go on speaking to us and drawing us into Your world till ultimately You will take us out of this existence and bring us eternally into Your presence. Lord, as we're looking at things in our lives that may be facing us this week in terms of decisions, help us not to limit those decisions by the size of our reason. Instead, help us be able to have that moment to back off and say within us, "What is Your power and glory able to do in this that I could never do?" Let us go forth with Your glory and Your greatness. We thank You and we praise You. Amen.