

Job 40

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[0 : 00] Well, today we come to the last five chapters in the book of Job, and finally God speaks. And this is the longest talk by God anywhere in the Bible, and it's full of surprises.

And it could not come soon enough for Job. For 37 long chapters, he has been in agony, suffering physically and emotionally and relationally and spiritually, and he doesn't know why he's suffering so painfully.

His friends have only made it worse. His faith in God seems to have made it worse, as well as all his prayers have gone unanswered. And the submitting prayers at the beginning have turned to demanding answers from God.

But why are you treating me like this? I'm like a target that you shoot arrows into. You mock my calamity. There is no justice in this world.

There's no purpose in what you're doing. Why don't you appear before me so I can lay my case before you? In the last couple of years, we've grown used to a spate of high-profile Christian leaders and musicians who abandon their faith, usually via Twitter, saying something like, our faith has stopped working for me.

[1 : 21] Some have become ex-evangelicals, a word I learned this week. Others deconstruct their faith, designing a God who is more in line with our ideas of compassion and love.

Because they've come to believe that the God of the Bible is not doing a very good job. I've just mentioned one. John Steingard, who was the lead singer of the Christian rock band, Hawk Nelson, tweeted, he no longer believes in God, and he's got a question for God.

And I quote from his tweet, Why do evil and suffering occur throughout the world if God is truly all-loving and all-powerful? And until God provides John with an answer, he's not going to believe in him.

Well, God finally answers Job, and there are two very big surprises before we look at the text. The first is this, God does not answer any of Job's questions.

He ignores the thoughtless arguments of his friends. He does not rebuke Job for any sin, because the real God, the God of the Bible, loves honesty and truthfulness.

[2 : 35] He's not insecure and brittle when we don't understand. He doesn't want grovelling flattery from us. He knows what we're feeling, and he wants us to do what Job does, and that is to bring it to him unfiltered, uncovered.

Otherwise, we're just pretending. Again and again and again, the Psalms do this. And even Jesus, in the New Testament, we read in the book of Hebrews, In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

In other words, part of Jesus' reverence was praying with loud cries and tears. So there's no rebuke from God, but God does not answer Job's questions.

Instead, what we have are a series of questions, multiplying questions from God. God questions Job. Yesterday, I counted about 60 in these four chapters, because God's questions are far more important than our questions for him.

And the reason God asks questions is because he's after friendship. You see, if God explained every piece of suffering to us, if God explained everything to us, we just couldn't cope.

[4 : 05] I mean, can you imagine God saying to you, the reason you stubbed your toe this morning is because I wanted you to miss that train to get on the next train so that you would occupy a seat next to a person, because when you stood up, the person who sat down was a twin who'd been separated at birth, who hadn't seen their brother for 30 years.

They noticed they had the same watches, and they began a conversation, and suddenly discovered there were these three, four families that had been alienated through something that had happened 80 years ago.

And by the end of the day, there were 368 family reunions going on, and one of those, and et cetera. I mean, it would just be crazy, wouldn't it? And when we take our babies for vaccination shots, you can't explain everything.

And even if you do explain, the baby is not going to understand. The point is, God is far more in control than we could imagine. And God gives a slew of questions, and there are millions of questions.

We had never even thought of. That's the first surprise. The second surprise is this. It's not a lecture from God to Job.

[5 : 15] It's a dialogue between God and Job. It's not one long telling off by God saying, sit up straight and fly right. It's a conversation where God speaks twice, and Job speaks twice.

God speaks once, and Job responds, and then God speaks again, and Job responds. And the reason for that, it's not about who's right. It's about friendship, and it's about connecting heaven and earth.

God's not out to crush Job or to overpower him. So that at the end of the first speech by God, in chapter 40, verses 3 to 5, Job's response to God's first speech is silence.

He says, I'm very small. I lay my hand on my mouth. I'm not going to say anything more. But God continues to speak because that is not what God wants.

He doesn't want surly, silent submission. If God wanted to silence Job with his power, he could quite easily do a great cosmic illustration that would blow his mind.

[6 : 26] But that's not God's aim. You read through these chapters, there's no demeaning, and there's no belittling, and there's no demoralizing by God. It's more like God dignifies Job and remoralizes him.

So that at the end of the second speech, Job's response is completely different. It's not silence. It's wonder and awe and joy and delight in his relationship with God.

And he says, I've now seen God for myself, and I've tasted the sweetness of the Lord, and it's been completely transforming. What's very important, he says that before he stops suffering.

Because what God wants for us is to know him in this transforming way. It's not just suffering that will do that for us, but it's hearing God's word and trusting God in a profound way during the suffering.

And in both speeches, when God comes to Job, he comes out of a whirlwind. He speaks out of a whirlwind, which is perfect, because it looks out of control, just like suffering, but it is the sign of God's presence, a physical sign that heaven and earth have come together in a particular way.

[7 : 42] Just like God appeared to his people at Mount Sinai in cloud and fire and smoke and sound, or when God appeared to Ezekiel by Mount Cheba in a stormy wind and cloud and flashing brightness.

The whirlwind is an act of God's kindness and compassion, protecting Job from being consumed in his presence, drawing Job out to himself.

So there are two dialogues, and I want to look at both of them individually. And the first one, which is chapter 38 to chapter 40, verse 5, I've called Heaven and Nature Sing.

And I hope you see this, that God's questions are full of humour and humility. They're almost lighthearted.

There's a sense of whimsy and wonder as he draws Job back to himself to see his purposes, to show Job that God is a God worth trusting, not for the good things he gives us, but for who he is in himself.

[8 : 49] So look at 38, verse 4. It'll be helpful if you have your Bible. They're going to flip around a bit in these chapters. In 38, verse 4, God says, Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me if you have understanding. It's not really a serious question from God to Job. Or look at verse 7.

Where were you when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or again, in verse 21, when God asks Job about the way to the home of light and darkness, he says, You know, Job, because you were born then and the number of your days is great.

If I could say it reverently in this way, God is speaking lightheartedly, almost playfully, certainly ironically, gently reaching out to Job to draw him in.

And this note of kindness continues in a series of pictures of intimacy and family bonds. In 38, 8 to 11, God pictures the waters of chaos and threat like a little baby that needs to be wrapped tightly in a blanket.

[10:05] Yes, there's power, but there's tenderness in what God is doing. Or in 38, 28 to 30, God describes the rain and the ice and the frost and the deeps as a little family having children, which just shows this is not about God trying to show the power difference.

It's dear and domestic and intimate. And for most of chapter 38, God's focus is on nature and the stars and the seas and the soil.

And then just before 39, he turns to animals. And he speaks all about the little babies and the ones in their wildness, lions and ravens and mountain goats and eagles.

And God says, I hear their call and I satisfy their hunger. And it's quite obvious why this is so important to a person in suffering.

If God can satisfy the hunger of baby lions we've never seen, do you think God says, I might have forgotten about you, Job? Do you think I might be letting you suffer for no reason at all?

[11:13] Do you think I hear the cry of baby eagles as they're tearing into food, but not yours? Do you think I'm too busy satisfying the hunger of young creatures and have no time to satisfy the deepest desires of your heart?

That's why the perfect illustration for this is the ostrich. Have a look at chapter 39. Let me read a couple of verses. 39, 13 and onward. The wings of the ostrich wave proudly.

Question. But are they the pinions and plumage of love? For she leaves her eggs to the earth and lets them be warmed on the ground, forgetting that a foot may crush them and that the wild beasts may trample them.

She deals cruelly with her young as if they're not hers, though her labour be in vain, yet she has no fear because God has made her forget wisdom and given her no share in understanding.

And when she rouses herself to flee, she laughs at the horse and the rider. God is saying, look at the ostrich. Such an ugly bird, but boy, can she run fast.

[12:26] And the way of the ostrich makes absolutely no sense to us. Can't fly, biggest egg of any land animal. She abandons them. They don't hatch. And when they do hatch, she treats them badly.

Why? We don't know. But God does. God has a purpose with the ostrich. There seems to be no wisdom, no human wisdom to the ostrich, but it's God who's made her forget the so-called human wisdom.

And this, you see, is the real issue in suffering. It's not so much that we lack power. It's that we lack wisdom and understanding.

When you ask the question why, we just don't have the wisdom and understanding to receive the answer. But this God tells us that he has a purpose in our suffering, even when we do not see it, in the same way that he has a purpose with ostriches.

And so at the end of God's first dialogue, in chapter 40, verses 3 to 5, Job responds, it's not a bad start. He's still suffering.

[13:37] But he begins to realize his questions are not so important. And he declares in chapter 40, verse 4, It's a perfectly understandable response.

He says, basically, I'm a lightweight. I'm unqualified to play God. Somehow I became larger in my own eyes and God became smaller. He has the right to do what he wants.

But what's so wonderful is that's where God is not willing to leave God there. God is not willing to leave any of us here. God does not want to leave us with a sense of smallness or in silence.

He is a lover and he desires us to love him in return. And so he moves to the second part of the dialogue because he wants to become the joy of Job's heart and the joy of our hearts, that we would love him and know him because he is a God who is good.

So I call the first dialogue Heaven and Nature Sing. And I've called the second one Heaven and Nature Sting. From verse 6 in 40 to 42, verse 6.

[15:00] I call it sting because now we come to deal with evil. It's one thing for God to be the great creator. But what about the innocent suffering in the world? And this section is specially written for those of us, if you're someone who feels yourself saying, if I were God, I would...

and fill the line in, you know, I'd stop cancer or stop suffering or punish injustice or make everything fair, as though you and I are more compassionate than God.

Now this section is for you if you've never really grappled with suffering, or if you are suffering and bewildered and cannot understand why God is doing what he's doing. Look at chapter 40, verses 10 to 11.

God goes right at injustice, moral evil, human pride and wickedness, and says to Job, can you understand it? Can you control it or rule it or deal with it, even in your own life?

And then, from verse 15 onwards, God describes and gives portraits of two very strange animals, Behemoth in chapter 40 and Leviathan in chapter 41.

[16:12] Now both of these creatures are completely outside human control. Both of them have the highest physical powers, but they also have spiritual powers.

There's a supernatural touch to them. They're both supernatural and in our world. So, in chapter 41, verses 18 to 21, Leviathan is pictured like a fire-breathing dragon with otherworldly power.

Some commentators think that Behemoth is the hippo and Leviathan the crocodile, but that can't be right, otherwise it would just take us back into the first conversation.

In the context of pride and wickedness, of superhuman strength, in the context of suffering, both of these animals have cosmic meaning. And I want to be honest, I have no idea what Behemoth is.

Although Dan Gifford tells me that you can find Behemoth in Canadian Wonderland in Toronto, and I think it's a large roller coaster. But we do know more about Leviathan.

[17:22] He is the chaos monster. Sometimes he's like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, closely identified with Satan. In Isaiah 27, in the first verse, he's called the flying serpent, he has the power of the air, he's called the coiling serpent, twisting truth and morals on the ground, and he's called the monster or the dragon in the deeps, permeating creation with threat and suffering and evil, trying to overthrow God's purpose, which is why whenever we suffer, there are cosmic dimensions.

One of the unique things of the God of the Bible is that he never gives us a neat, tidy, intellectually satisfying system to explain suffering and evil.

And I think it's so helpful for us to be able to say, we just don't know. Every other religion in the world does give an explanation, but the Bible, the God of the Bible, does not give us an explanation. Instead, he gives us himself. Because it's in suffering where all that we cling to slips away and we become ready to receive God in fresh ways, we realise that we're not in control.

We're gradually brought to a place of being open to who God is and what is important, that he is in control. And it's in this that God gives himself to us, never more than in the person of Jesus Christ, who carries our griefs and our sorrows and gives himself to us in our suffering that we might taste and see his loving kindness is better than life itself.

[19:12] And in the Leviathan section, it's interesting, there's less humour, but it's still very gentle. Look at the beginning in chapter 41, verse 1. Can you draw Leviathan out with a fish hook or press down his tongue with a cord?

Will he make many pleas to you? Will he speak to you soft words? Will he make a covenant with you to take him for your servant forever?

Will you play with him as with a bird or will you put him on a leash for your girls? I mean, here is the embodiment of evil, as though you've completely house-trained this creature.

And Leviathan says, promise me you won't hurt me and I'll be ever so good. You know, please, please, please, put me on a leash and your little girls can take me out for a stroll. There's far more to evil and suffering than this physical pain.

Like Leviathan, you see, we can't control it. You can't bargain with it. You can't get used to it. We can't defeat it. We can't domesticate it.

[20:20] It's wild. It's uncontrolled. And that's why our fears become wild and uncontrolled. But God is saying that these fears are false fears.

Because even when you feel abandoned by God and the power of evil and suffering seems to be unrestrained, God says, look at Leviathan and you will see a leash and on the end of that leash is me.

God is in control. And God takes the leash and he says to Leviathan, this far and no further, which is exactly what happened in chapters 1 and 2, you remember.

And Satan came to the court of heaven, slandered God and Job saying, Job and he loves you because of the goodies that you give him and God, you're a fool for believing it.

And God allows Satan to afflict Job, but he sets limits and boundaries. He can go this far and no further. And that is true for every single one of us, for every second of our lives.

[21 : 24] And I know it feels that suffering and evil are sometimes overwhelming and out of control, but it's God who sets the boundaries. Our creator, our redeemer, the darkness is his, the deep waters are his, there is nothing out of his control.

The floods may come, the fires may come, they are not out of his control. It is he who says, this far and no further. The storm may even take our lives, but it is not outside God's control.

There is no place we can go. There is nothing that can happen to us that takes us beyond the power, grace, kindness, steadfast mercy of God. Job's response in chapter 42 is quite beautiful.

Let me remind you again. In Job answered the Lord, chapter 42, I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? He quotes God. Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wondrous for me, which I did not know.

[22 : 44] Then he quotes God again. Here and I will speak, I will question you and you make it known to me. I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.

This is the language of worship. Job is staggered at who God is, at his compassion, at his infinite care.

And remember, please, Job is still in pain. He's still suffering. God has not released him from that yet. That happens next. And as he quotes snippets of what God had said, he just can't get over the word of God.

And I think the key to this confession is Job saying, no single purpose of yours can be blocked. Suffering and evil are not just limited and bounded by God, but they are used by God for his great purposes.

What takes place on earth is under the control of heaven, even when we do not feel like it, even when we are at our worst, even when we are suffering. And yes, the monsters are wondrous and terrifying, but both Behemoth and Leviathan serve God.

[24 : 11] And even when I do not understand, I am able to believe. And even when what Leviathan is doing seems to contradict God's purposes, like Jesus' execution on the cross, nothing can overturn his purposes.

In the New Testament, in the book of James, chapter 5, we read these words. Behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

There is no equation that rules the universe, do good and get good, do bad and get bad. True blessing comes as a gift from God to those who love God for who he is.

And we have seen the purpose of God, haven't we? It ends with the Son of God on the cross. It's the picture of mercy and power, pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities.

Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. By his wounds, we are healed. And if Leviathan teaches Job that he can trust God with his life and with his unanswered questions, the cross shows us the mercy and compassion of God that we will never be abandoned because he has been abandoned.

[25 : 46] And that means we can trust him and fear him and turn away from evil and we can leave all our unanswered questions at his feet. Os Ganes, who's a Christian writer, wrote a little book on doubt.

And in it he says, faith may not know why, but it knows why it trusts God who knows why. And when Job says in verse 6, therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes, it's not the usual word for repent because Job has not really sinned.

But what's going on there is this, that from the beginning of the book, Job had believed that God was his good creator. He could tickle the right boxes. But now somehow in hearing the word of God, the penny has really dropped.

You know, it's possible to believe that honey is sweet, but never have really tasted it. And what Job is doing is what every righteous person does, filled with a sense of God's worthiness and compassion and relation to him.

He says, now, Lord, I see, I trust you. You are working your purposes out, even if I don't feel like it. Now let's turn to...