

Job
Job 38-40
Week 6

Opening Prayer

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

Gracious God, as we come together to place our lives in front of your Holy Word, we pray that you would give us wisdom and understanding. May we approach this sacred text with humility, curiosity, expectancy and love. Be among us and in our conversation through the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of the one to whom this whole story points, Jesus the Christ, amen.

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

Check-in question

Each week, give an opportunity for folks to either respond to the check-in question below or, if they'd rather, share something that came up for them as they were reading the other texts assigned for the Big Read this week.

God's response to Job in chapter 38 and 39 references the countless wonders of creation and asks (in a bit of a snarky tone) whether Job is familiar with all of the intricacies of the living world. **Describe a time you were most amazed by God's creation and power?**

Background

Many Bible scholars, if not most, think that Job is one of the oldest books of the Bible and describes the life of a man who lived sometime after the flood and before Abraham. And since God calls Abraham in Genesis 12, most chronological reading plans place Job between Genesis 11 and Genesis 12. Here are a few reasons why people think this way.¹

¹ Why Are We Reading Job after Genesis 11? <http://www.northernridge.org/blog/2018/1/4/why-are-we-reading-job-after-genesis-11>

We see that God speaks directly to Job here, for the first time in the book. It is amazing to realize that God has not spoken directly to Job for 37 chapters. Oh, there's been a lot of talk – on the part of Job and his three friends – but not any direct revelation from God.

If one were to summarize Job's questions in one word, it would be "WHY?" Job will not receive the answer to this question before the conclusion of the book. He will have to be content with the "WHO?" of his affliction, and not the WHY.

Job has forgotten his place in God's universe. Job foolishly stands in judgment of God and His management of this world. Job is seated in the prosecutor's chair (maybe even the judge's chair), and he has placed God in the defendant's chair. If one could sum up God's words to Job, they might be, "Job, why don't you leave the running of the universe to Me?"

Also, we should take note of the fact that God speaks to Job out of a whirlwind. This is the very opposite of the "still, small, voice" with which God spoke to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:12. Perhaps this was to remind Job of the greatness and power of God, much like God impressed the Israelites in the giving of the Law from Mt. Sinai:

18 All the people were seeing the thundering and the lightning, and heard the sound of the horn, and saw the mountain smoking– and when the people saw it they trembled with fear and kept their distance. 19 They said to Moses, "You speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak with us, lest we die" ([Exodus 20:18-19](#)).

Take note of the sarcasm and humor which lightens up this correction of Job a bit. Surely this is an example of sarcasm:

"In what direction does light reside, and darkness, where is its place, 20 that you may take them to their borders and perceive the pathways to their homes? 21 You know, for you were born before them; and the number of your days is great! (Job 38:19-21).²

Eventually, Job and his friends have nothing to say to each other anymore (Job 3-27), and Job takes up his final position before God in (Job 29-31). He laments the days of his past when his body was healthy and his life filled with family and friends. His present suffering is no longer endurable, and he demands that God provide an explanation. And so, after enduring the long-winded words of Elihu (Job 32-37), God himself speaks up and responds to Job in a series of speeches that form the climax of the book so far (Job 38-41).

God offers two responses. The first offers a "virtual tour" of the cosmos (Job 38-39).

God's First Point

The point seems to be this: Job claimed that God has fallen asleep at the wheel in running the universe, and because of this divine neglect he's had to endure unjust suffering. God's response is indirect, and it shows how his attention is actually on every single detail of the operations of

² Deffinbaugh, Bob. *Job 38-42*. <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-3-job-38-42>

the universe. In fact, God is privy to all kinds of perspectives and details that Job has never even imagined and never will.

Following the cosmic tour, God takes Job on a corresponding virtual tour of part of the world he actually does inhabit, the earth (Job 38:39-39:30).

He asks Job if he's ever provided food for lions, or seen an isolated mountain goat give birth? No? Well, perhaps Job understands the feeding patterns of wild donkeys that roam the hills, or ostriches and their strange ways of caring for their young. Maybe Job and God can have a stimulating conversation about Job's knowledge of war horses, and the aerodynamics of an eagle soaring on thermal air currents. As it turns out, Job doesn't know as much as he thought, even about the world he lives in and should be familiar with. At the end of God's invitations to dialogue, Job comes up short in his first response:

Then Job answered the Lord and said, "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add nothing more." Job 40:3-5

God has made his first point. Job's many accusations of divine neglect or incompetence have failed. As it turns out, God is intimately familiar with every molecule and creature in his world and knows more about them than Job can comprehend. This is an important moment in the story so far. Whatever reasons God has for having allowed Job's suffering, neglect is not a viable option. **Job never does find out why he suffered and neither does the reader.**

The goal of the book was never to offer us that information. Rather, the first divine speech makes clear that God does know everything that transpires in his world, and his perspective on the universe has a wider range than any human will ever have.

When Job critiqued God's knowledge and ability, it was based on the limited horizons of his life experience. His brain has only a finite capacity to understand cause and effect from his point of view. God's perspective is infinitely broader, which means he may allow or orchestrate events that from one perspective look morally suspicious, or just plain wrong. However, from a wider perspective, those same events look entirely different.

It's similar to a child observing their parent throw a chair at a window to shatter it. From a six-year-old's point of view, this is precisely the kind of behavior that would earn a time-out, grounding, or worse. But if the parent knows there's smoke coming from the adjacent room and that this window was the only way out, all of a sudden the broken window becomes a life-saving escape route. The parent has a wider range of available information that makes the same action (throwing a chair out the window) become the morally necessary thing to do.

This seems to be the point of God's first speech. There may be evil and suffering in God's good world that from one perspective may seem needless, tragic, and unjust. But from a wider vantage point, there may be a vast network of factors that make the same tragedy fit into a larger cause-effect pattern that brings about the saving of many lives. It's impossible for any human to know such things or have such a perspective. This means all of our claims to evaluate

God's rule over human history are always limited, and will therefore fall short. I don't have a wide enough vantage point to accuse God of incompetence, and I never will.

This isn't a particularly pleasant fact to realize, for Job or any of us. It's an inescapable reality of being human. We are finite, and our brains and sensory abilities are not designed to take in the information necessary to make evaluations of God's choices. **We're not God. We're human.**

God's Second Point

After Job confesses his arrogance, God responds again, this time inviting Job to take up the divine throne and run the universe for a day. Let Job enforce the strict "retribution principle" he thinks God ought to use in directing the cosmos:

"Clothe yourself with honor and majesty. Pour out your anger to overflowing, And look on everyone who is proud, and make him low. Look on everyone who is proud, and humble him, and tread down the wicked where they stand." (Job 40:1-12)

Job will find the task impossible. It would require a second-by-second micromanagement approach that would essentially result in no more human beings on the planet. Job doesn't know what he's asking for when he demands that God uses the strict principle of retribution to reward every good deed and punish every bad one. In theory it sounds right, but in execution, it would create a universe where no human would ever have a chance for trial and error or, more importantly, for growth and change.

The Overall Point

Hebrew Bible scholar John Walton puts it this way in his commentary on Job:

God's answer to Job does not explain why righteous people suffer, because the cosmos is not designed to prevent righteous people from suffering. Job questioned God's design, and God responded that Job had insufficient knowledge to do so. Job questioned God's justice, and God responded that Job needs to trust him, and that he should not arrogantly think that God can be domesticated to conform to Job's feeble perceptions of how the cosmos should run. God asks for trust, not understanding, and states the cosmos is founded on his wisdom, not his justice.

Human pain and suffering does not always happen as a clear consequence of anyone's sin. There may be a reason, but there may not be. God himself said that Job's suffering was not warranted for "any reason" (Job 2:3).

The conversation with the satan certainly did not provide a reason. That dialogue simply set the stage for the real question of the book: Does God operate the universe according to the principle of retribution?

The answer to this story is no. Sometimes terrible things happen for no reason discernible to any human. The point is that God's world is very good, but it's not perfect, or always safe. It has order and beauty, but it's also wild and sometimes dangerous, like the two fantastic creatures

he avows. So back to the big question of Job's or anyone's suffering: why is there suffering in the world? Whether from earthquakes, or wild animals, or from one another? God doesn't explain why. He says we live in an incredibly complex, amazing world that at this stage at least, is not designed to prevent suffering.

That's God's response. Job challenged God's justice, and God responded that Job doesn't have sufficient knowledge about our complex universe to make such a claim. Job demanded a full explanation from God, and what God asks Job for is trust in his wisdom and character.

So Job responds with humility and repentance. He apologizes for accusing God of injustice and acknowledges that he's overstepped his bounds.

All of a sudden, the book concludes with a short epilogue (Job 42).

First, God says that the friends were wrong; their ideas about God's justice were too simple, not true to the complexity of the world or God's wisdom. Then God says that Job has spoken rightly about him. This is surprising, but it can't apply to everything Job said. Even though Job drew hasty and wrong conclusions, God still approves of Job's wrestling. God approves of how Job approached him honestly with all his emotion, only wanting to talk to God himself.

God says that the right way to process through these issues is through the struggle of prayer.

The book concludes with Job having his health, family, and wealth restored, not as a reward for good behavior, but simply as a generous gift from God. And that's the end.

So, the book doesn't unlock the puzzle of why bad things happen to good people. Rather, it does invite us to trust God's wisdom when we encounter suffering rather than trying to figure out the "reasons" for it.

When we search for reasons, we tend to either simplify God like the friends or, like Job, accuse God based on limited evidence. **The book invites us to honestly bring our pain and grief to God and to trust that he cares, realizing that he knows exactly what he's doing.**³

Read Job 38 and 40:1-5

It's a lot of content, but try to get through as much of it as you can. The poetry is so beautiful as God describes his knowledge of and work within creation

*Make it a point over the course of this series to read from a few different translations. Encourage those who may be reading from a different translation to share any differences they see.

Initial Reactions

1. What from this story confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?

³ Mackie, Tim. *The Book of Job: God Gives Job a Virtual Tour of His Wise World*.
<https://bibleproject.com/blog/gods-gives-job-tour-wise-world/>.

2. What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday's sermon?

Going Deeper

4. In Job 38:41, God speaks to Job about His care for the ravens. "Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?" Jesus also speaks about this in Luke 12:24: "Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!"
 - a. How does Jesus' message here compare to God's message to Job?
 - b. Are you encouraged by these verses, or do you have trouble believing them?
 - c. Do you find it difficult to trust that God actually cares for you?
5. In Chapter 38, the Lord asks Job a series of questions that illustrate His care in creating and maintaining the universe. David writes in Psalm 8:3-4: When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?
 - a. How does Psalm 8 reinforce Job 38?
 - b. How would you answer David's question, "what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"

So What Questions

6. Job has an experience of Orientation (Job 1-2)-Disorientation (Job 3-37)-Reorientation (Job 38-42)with God. Have you had similar experiences where you believed something about God or Christianity and then your life experience / new learning of God forced you to reevaluate?

Closing

Check in if you haven't already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with prayer.