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The Lord Answered Job Job 38-41

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Job has cried out to the Lord. He's demanded a hearing. And in the face of God's silence he's thrown down the gauntlet. He's listed a host of sins and has called down curses on himself should he be guilty of any of them. If God doesn't strike him down, he may still be sitting on the ash heap scraping his sores with a potsherd, but at least he can claim that his righteousness has been vindicated. And so I think it's safe to say that Job was probably surprised when the Lord did speak.

Chapter 38 begins with the words, "Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said..." God coming in a whirlwind is never a good thing. It means that God is angry. It's how he came to Adam and Eve after they'd disobeyed him. It was how he came to Ezekiel to express his anger with Israel. And now he comes to Job and his friends in a whirlwind. And note, it's specifically the Lord who comes. In Job the narrator refers to the Lord—to Yahweh—the God of Israel, but Job and his friends refer to him with the more generic *Elohim* or *El Shaddai*—God or God Almighty. It makes sense. Job and his friends aren't Jews and so they don't refer to God by the name he revealed to Israel. That may be part of their problem. They lack the full revelation that the Lord had given to his people. It may be that part of Elihu's function—the fourth friend who suddenly appears at the end of the dialogues—is meant to bring us closer to the God of Israel. Elihu wasn't an Israelite, but he's so close. He's the descendant of Abraham's nephew. Elihu brought us closer to the truth about God than Job or the other friends had got, but still fell short. So close, but not quite there. And now the Lord, the God of Israel arrives in a whirlwind and speaks. And

it's not just the whirlwind that communicates his anger:

**“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Dress for action like a man;
I will question you, and you make it known to me. (Job 38:2-3)**

Job has been arrogant and presumptuous—and not just Job, the other have too as they've made wrong pronouncements about God and accused righteous Job of sin. Finally, the Lord answers, but what will quickly become obvious is that he hasn't come to teach wisdom; he's come to rebuke. It's also important to remember that God isn't angry with Job because of unrighteousness. The Lord himself has defended Job's righteousness. That's not the issue. The problem is Job's misunderstanding and misrepresentation of God. The Adversary's case was focused on Job's motivations for being righteous. Job has won that case for the Lord, but in the aftermath Job has complained and accused and shown that he does not understand God or his ways and the Lord has now come to set Job—and his friends—straight.

So how does the Lord respond to the errors and foolishness and presumption of these friends? Well, his address comes in two speeches with a few lines from Job between them. Chapters 38 and 39 contain the Lord's first speech and the Lord's focus here is on his governance of the cosmos—specifically on his establishing and maintaining order. Chapter 38 focuses on the big stuff and then in Chapter 39 the Lord zeroes in on the smaller affairs of life. We've got a long passage today, so we can't read the whole speech, but that's okay. The Lord makes his point through repetition so we'll start with the first stanza, verses 4-7:

**“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone,
when the morning stars sang together**

and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

“Were you there?” or some variation of that is the Lord's persistent question through these chapters. Job is righteous, but he's known horrible suffering and so he's called the Lord's justice into question. Job's has accused the Lord of not ordering the cosmos, of not running things properly. Remember the Retribution Principle is his basis for understanding justice. God is supposed to punish the wicked and reward the righteous. God's fallen down on the Job when it comes to Job and so Job has questioned God's governance. For ancient people *order* was key. The duty of the gods was to maintain order and God clearly, Job as accused, isn't doing it right. God, Job thinks, is not just.

So the Lord asks, “Were you there when I laid the foundations of the earth?” The Lord describes his giving order to Creation. He's asking Job, “Could you have done that?” And he goes on: Who brought the waters of chaos under control? Was that you, Job? No, that was me. Who causes the dawn to break every morning? Have you walked the depths of the sea? Do you know what's down there in the dark? Have you ever been to my storehouses of snow and have you ever cleft the clouds to make a channel for the rain? Who has begotten the morning dew and the frost? Was that you, Job. No, that was me. Did you set the stars in the heavens? Can you send forth lightning? If you were to command the lightning would it even recognise your voice? This is Chapter 38 in summary.

Job has questioned the Lord's establishment of the cosmos and his governance of it. Job has presumed to think that, given the opportunity, he could do a better job. He's reduced the governance of the cosmos to a naïve and overly-simplistic model. And so the Lord asks a series of questions. Were you there? And Job has to admit that, no, he wasn't. Was it you? And Job has to admit again, no, I wasn't. It was the Lord. Not only that, none of this is even remotely fathomable to Job or to any human being. If Job were in charge, the earth would have no foundations, no storehouse of snow, and he'd never be

able to figure out how to get the rain to the earth.

Beginning at 38:39 the Lord continues the speech, but narrows his focus going from big things like the foundations of the earth and the stars in the heavens to the animal kingdom: Can you hunt the lion's prey? Do you know how the mountain goat gives birth? Who has let the wild donkey run free? Is the wild ox willing to serve you? Do you give the horse his might? And finally, in 39:26-30:

**“Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars
and spreads his wings toward the south?
Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up
and makes his nest on high?
On the rock he dwells and makes his home,
on the rocky crag and stronghold.
From there he spies out the prey;
his eyes behold it from far away.
His young ones suck up blood,
and where the slain are, there is he.”**

The Lord has ordered the animal kingdom just as he's ordered the heavens, the rains, the storm, and the foundations of the earth. Does Job know anything of these matters? No. He can observe them and he knows the hawk soars and that the eagle makes his nest on high, but he doesn't know why and if it were up to him to govern these things, the lion would starve and the eagle would plummet to the ground. And so the Lord concludes his first speech in 40:2 asking, “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer.”

And Job finally responds with wisdom:

**“Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?
I lay my hand on my mouth.
I have spoken once, and I will not answer;
twice, but I will proceed no further.”**
(Job 40:4-5)

The Lord has answered. It's not the answer Job wanted, but the Lord's point has been made. Job puts his hand over his mouth and is ready to listen—the wisest thing he's done all day. The Lord continues 40:7:

**“Dress for action like a man;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.
Will you even put me in the wrong?
Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?
Have you an arm like God,
and can you thunder with a voice like his?
“Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity;
clothe yourself with glory and splendor.
Pour out the overflowings of your anger,
and look on everyone who is proud and abase him.
Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low
and tread down the wicked where they stand.
Hide them all in the dust together;
bind their faces in the world below.
Then will I also acknowledge to you
that your own right hand can save you.”**
(Job 40:7-14)

The Lord challenges Job a second time. This time he begins very frankly: You've condemned me to justify yourself. Will you really defame the Lord in order to defend your own righteousness, Job? And so the Lord challenges Job: How about I hand over control of the cosmos to you and you can impose order on it. What would happen if Job were to be God for a day? Could he bring justice on the basis of the Retribution Principle?

It's interesting that the Lord only goes on to talk about Job punishing the wicked, probably because it would be a lot easier to punish the wicked than to protect the righteous from suffering, but the Lord's ultimate point is that Job would fail all around. Not only is Job incapable of fulfilling God's role, his concept of justice, embodied in the Retribution Principle, is flawed. Job and his friends have been looking to

justice to explain the cosmos, but back in Chapter 28 the narrator instead has pointed us to wisdom and the Lord points us to wisdom as well.

Beginning at 40:15 the Lord shifts gears a bit. He's exposed the shallowness of Job's complaint and silenced his accusations. Now the Lord shows us the way forward. Back in 28:28 the narrator told us that the fear of the Lord is wisdom, and now the Lord's going to show Job what that looks like. He does that by describing to mythical creatures, Behemoth and Leviathan. We could spend a *lot* of time talking about the identity of these two creatures, but we don't have time this morning and we'd run the risk of missing the point of the text. Behemoth and Leviathan were chaos creatures in the thought of Israel and her neighbours. They were mythical creatures on the periphery of the ordered world. They're sort of the tornadoes of the animal kingdom. They weren't evil; they were just sort of outside the order of creation. They might wreak havoc, but not because they're bad. It's just what they do. And yet the Lord still exercises control over them. The Lord brings them into the dialogue here, because Job earlier accused God of treating him as if he were one of these chaos creatures in need of taming. And so the Lord now sort of say, “Okay Job, you accused me of treating you like Behemoth, let's look at that.”

**“Behold, Behemoth,
which I made as I made you;
he eats grass like an ox.
(So the Lord draws a connection between Behemoth and Job. He's made them both. And Job, just like Behemoth has been well fed.)
Behold, his strength in his loins,
and his power in the muscles of his belly.
He makes his tail stiff like a cedar;
the sinews of his thighs are knit together.
His bones are tubes of bronze,
his limbs like bars of iron.
(I've made him strong, just as I've made you, Job.)
“He is the first of the works of God;**

let him who made him bring near his sword!

(He is first amongst his kid, just as you are, Job.)

For the mountains yield food for him where all the wild beasts play.

(I care for him as I care for you.)

Under the lotus plants he lies, in the shelter of the reeds and in the marsh.

For his shade the lotus trees cover him;

the willows of the brook surround him.

(I protect him just as I protect you, Job.)

Behold, if the river is turbulent he is not frightened;

he is confident though Jordan rushes against his mouth.

(When trouble comes he is not afraid, just as you should trust me and not be afraid, Job.)

Can one take him by his eyes, or pierce his nose with a snare?

(Behemoth is invulnerable and so should you be, Job. But, instead of trusting me, you've accused me of injustice and foolishly left yourself open to my snare.)

Job accused God of mistreating him, of treating him not as his friend and loyal servant, but as a chaos creature and the Lord's response is to say, "If only, Job. I care for you, just as I care for Behemoth, but when the storms come, Behemoth knows that I have ordered the cosmos well and he remains unafraid—he certainly never accuses me of incompetence. Instead, you've been sitting on your ash heap shaking your fist at me and accusing me of injustice. Job, you need to be more like Behemoth!" Brothers and Sisters, be like Behemoth! Fear the Lord. Trust in the one who laid the foundations of the earth, who places the stars in the heavens, who provides prey for the lion and causes the eagle to soar. That is the beginning of wisdom.

Then, beginning with 41:1, the Lord compares *himself* to Leviathan, another chaos creature. The way most of our English translations work with both of these passages gives us the sense that God is asking Job all of these "Can you do this?" and "Can you do that?" questions with the implication that, no,

Job can't, but God can. That's misleading. That's what the Lord was doing in his first speech in Chapters 38 and 39, but here he's addressing how we should approach him. Unlike the stanzas of the first speech, here the Lord never says what he can do that Job cannot. The Lord is comparing himself to Leviathan here. It's a longer passage so I'll have summarise it a bit.

"Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook...?" (v. 1)

(Job, you cannot control Leviathan and you can't control me.)

Will you play with him as with a bird, or will you put him on a leash for your girls? (v. 5)

(He will not submit or become your pet and neither will I.)

Can you fill his skin with harpoons or his head with fishing spears? (v. 7)

(You cannot win a battle with him and you cannot win a battle with me.)

No one is so fierce that he dares to stir him up.

Who then is he who can stand before me? (v. 10)

Who can strip off his outer garment?

Who would come near him with a bridle? (v. 13)

(Leviathan cannot be domesticated and neither can I.)

Out of his mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap forth.

When he raises himself up, the mighty are afraid;

at the crashing they are beside themselves. (vv. 19, 25)

(You don't want to arouse Leviathan and you don't want to arouse me.)

Though the sword reaches him, it does not avail,

nor the spear, the dart, or the javelin. (v. 26)

(Leviathan is invulnerable and so am I.)

On earth there is not his like, a creature without fear. (v. 33)

(No creature is his equal. That goes for Job and if Job isn't Leviathan's equal, he certainly isn't the Lord's equal—but that's more or less how Job has approached him in his demands.)

He sees everything that is high; he is king over all the sons of pride. (v. 34)

(The Lord is king over the proud. They think they can stand up to him, question

his governance, and even make demands of him, but the Lord is King.)

Job has tried to confront the Lord and what the Lord's done here is to say, "Okay Job, let's back up a bit. Would you dream of confronting Leviathan? Do you think you could control him? The obvious answer is "no" and Job knows that. And so the Lord is saying, if you can't subdue Leviathan, what makes you think you can subdue and domesticate me and issue commands to me? In summary the Lord is saying here, "Job, if you can't even control Leviathan, what makes you think you can control me? No, you need to be more like Behemoth. I care for him as I care for you and he knows to trust me when times are tough. Have faith job. To fear me is the beginning of wisdom."

We'll stop at this point today and finish up the book of Job next week with Job's response and the epilogue. There's a lot here to think about. Maybe one of the most striking things is that Job isn't really about helping the suffering to find comfort. At least not directly. That's often what we want when things are bad. In times of trial we often set our faith on asking and believing that God will make everything better. He'll heal us or heal a sick loved one. He'll heal or restore a broken relationship. He'll get us through tough economic times. He'll save us from someone who's out to get us. He'll bring an end to a pandemic. We've all been there in one way or another. Other times we set our faith on God somehow giving us an answer to why we're suffering or at least expect that he'll explain how our suffering fits into his working all things for good. But the book of Job gives us a very different answer and points our faith in a different direction. Here the Lord tells us that in midst of trial and suffering, in the midst of loss and sorrow we need to point our faith towards the God who is perfectly wise and who has established and governs the cosmos with wisdom. Not only that, but as we take hold of him in faith, as we trust in him, our first priority ought to be to ask for the grace, to ask for the help to live well before him no matter our circumstances.

Wisdom is key. All through the book we've seen Job and his friends looking to justice. Justice is important. Justice is good. But God isn't subject to or contingent on some external standard of justice. He is just, but justice flows *from* him and, ultimately, his justice is governed by his wisdom. This is the point of the Lord's first speech. He is the one who has established and governs the cosmos. Whatever we think of how he does it, neither you nor I nor Job are worthy to devise a scheme to govern even the smallest part of it. As this reality sinks into Job it moves him to admit, "You are God. I am not." But that's only the first step. It's not enough. Knowing who God is and knowing our place ought to foster a certain attitude or posture towards God, and that's the point of the second speech. Knowing who God is and knowing who we are, ought to move us to humility and to submission. Now, that's not an easy posture to take. We want to be in control. We at least want to know why things happen. But part of knowing who God is, is to move us to faith. Reflecting on his establishment and governance of the cosmos, even in light of our trials and tribulations, ought to move us to a trusting faith.

It's worth noting that the Lord never does give Job an explanation for his suffering. If he did, that would undermine this whole exercise, because in the real world we do not receive such answers. God rules in wisdom. We create the problems. He pronounced his creation good. Then we rebelled and messed it up. He established order. We spend out days creating disorder. And then we complain to God that we suffer. Could God remove our suffering? Yes, he could, but in his mercy he's opted for something else. In our self-righteousness and short-sightedness we think that others are the problem and forget that God could whip creation back into order by removing evil from it, but in so doing he would have to remove us as well. Instead, the Lord has lovingly chosen the path of mercy and grace even though it means that we, his creatures, continue to make a mess of things, to hurt each other, and to hurt

ourselves. Rather than wipe us from the face of creation, he draws us back to himself, enfolds us with his grace, and gives us hope that one day he will set everything to rights. He offers redemption rather than judgement to the very people who have upended his creation, who daily rebel against him, who have made ourselves his enemies. He has, himself, become one of us and died the death we deserved that we might be reconciled to him. And for some reason we still want to question his justice and his governance of the cosmos.

Brothers and Sisters, we can never fathom the wisdom of God and so he calls us simply to trust. That, for us, is wisdom. The Lord's comparisons here to Behemoth and Leviathan make no comment on righteousness or justice. In his suffering, Job's focus was on his righteousness and he angrily accused God of injustice. But in all that he missed the point. Behemoth isn't an example of righteousness. Behemoth is an example of stability and trust. Leviathan isn't a paragon of justice, but an example of one who cannot be challenged or domesticated. Wisdom lies in recognising that God cannot be challenged and that we can stand secure in the midst of raging rivers as we trust in his wisdom, goodness, and faithfulness.

But don't forget that you and I have so much more reason to trust the Lord than Job did. Job was not an Israelite and did not know the life of the Lord's covenant. Presumably he knew little or probably nothing of Abraham and the Lord's faithfulness to him and to his family. Job knew nothing of the Lord's deliverance of his people from slavery or his establishment of them as his people. Job was not amongst those who cried out to the Lord and were heard and delivered. And Job, of course, knew nothing of the faithfulness of God revealed so profoundly in Jesus and his death and resurrection. Brothers and Sisters, if God could expect Job to trust in his wise governance of Creation, how much more ought we to trust him. We not only have the evidence around us in the natural world, we have not only the

foundations of the earth, the rain and snow, the soaring eagle and the stalking lion, but we also see God's faithfulness to his people over and over again. We live in the shadow of the cross, which gives us insight into the relationship between suffering and God's wise governance the likes of which Job never imagined. And this morning the Lord invites us to his Table. As we gather here, as we eat the meal, as we participate in that great exodus from sin and death led by Jesus, let us be moved again to faith, to trust in this God who inexplicably loves us despite our sin.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, thank you for your patience with us. You've not only created us, but you've show us mercy and grace even in our rebellion. Even still, we fight, we struggle against you, we question your goodness and your wisdom and you are patient. Teach us to be more like Behemoth, we ask. As we look on your creation and as we look at your faithfulness to your people, strengthen our faith and teach us to trust in you, because you are supremely worthy of our trust, even as we stand in the midst of raging rivers. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.