

JOB 38–41

Job has spent the book wrestling with his predicament and demanding that he have a chance to face God so he can argue his case. With the Lord’s arrival in a whirlwind, Job is given his chance. As readers, we might expect the Lord to explain Satan’s accusations and His giving permission for Job to be tested and tried (Job 1–2). We might expect the Lord to give us the real answer for why we suffer and to explain exactly the reasons why the speeches Job and his friends gave weren’t correct. However, the Lord’s encounter with Job does little to clear up any ambiguity, and readers have long struggled with interpreting the Lord’s answer. The Lord asks Job a series of questions that make Job reflect on what God has done and continues to do for the world. Although the questions may seem uninformative and even harsh to us, when we put God’s answer in context, it can be read as a comforting confirmation of God’s power to care for His creations, Job included.¹

Isaiah 40:12–31 and Psalm 104 help us better understand God’s speeches to Job. Isaiah 40:12–31 addresses the mistaken belief that God has forgotten His people, who may fear that their “way is hid from the Lord and [their] judgment is passed over from [their] God” (Isaiah 40:27). This fear that the people hold is shown to be false because of God’s power and care over His creations. The statement by the people in Isaiah 40:27 is similar to Job’s feelings, and the way that God disputes this statement is similar to the approach taken in Job 38–41. Additionally, Psalm 104 is a hymn that is meant to celebrate and praise God’s goodness and does so by outlining God’s care over the heavens, the earth, and the creations upon it. There are a number of similarities between Psalm 104 and Job 38–41. Isaiah 40 highlights God’s care over His

¹ It is common in scholarship to read God’s answer as less than comforting. For a challenge to this view that I draw upon for my understanding of God’s answer, see the reading in Michael V. Fox, “God’s Answer and Job’s Response,” *Biblica* 94, no. 1 (2013): 1–23.

creations in order to reassure a grieving people, and Psalm 104 praises God's majesty over His creations in order to express awe and wonder. Reading Job 38–41 against the backdrop of these two passages can help us feel God's love and watchful care over all His creations, humanity and Job included.

God gives two speeches to Job, and Job has a chance to reply at the end of each of them. God's first speech is Job 38:1–40:2, and His second is Job 40:6–34. At the beginning of each speech, God challenges a certain aspect of Job's complaints. First, in Job 38:2 the Lord asks, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2). The word translated as "counsel" also means "plan."² God is making it clear that He has a plan for the world, a plan that Job is obscuring through his speech.

God's second speech begins with a challenge: "Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?" (Job 40:8). Here God reprimands Job for attempting to "disannul my judgment" or "frustrate my justice." Job has set up a zero-sum game where God must be wicked for Job to be righteous. God does not condemn Job nor tell him that he is wicked, and He becomes the first one in the dialogue to suggest that both parties can both be righteous. God does not condemn Job, but He does make it clear that Job's speech has darkened the "plan" and frustrated His justice.

God does not provide answers for Job or the reader in His response other than to assure Job that there is a plan and that God does care for the world. God cares for mythical beasts like the Leviathan (Job 41:1–34) and the Behemoth (Job 40:15–24) and takes care to send rain to uninhabited areas (Job 38:26–27) but is also mindful of pregnant deer (Job 39:1–2) and the abandoned eggs of the ostrich (Job 39:13–15). We can see this as being similar to Jesus's reminder that "are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father?" (Matthew 10:29).

The question of why we suffer is not the primary question that the book of Job is meant to answer, and tellingly, God does not even attempt to answer this in His response to Job. Rather, the book of Job has much more to say about what it means to have a proper relationship with God. Real relationships are built on trust. Job has been wounded in his relationship with God and demands an accounting; he wants to be right, and he wants God to admit He has mistreated Job. In other words, Job wants certainty. He wants to keep score with God. God knows that the only way forward for Job is to learn how to trust again and to not treat their relationship as a transaction.

Job is at a crossroads. He must choose what kind of relationship he wants with God. Job has lived his life trying to avoid pain and suffering, and he saw his relationship with God as a way of keeping suffering at bay. He has now discovered that God does not view their relationship in the same way. Job must choose

² Fox, "God's Answer and Job's Response," 3.

if he wants to continue a relationship with God, a relationship in which God will not always prevent bad things from happening. God has come to Job and has reaffirmed that He is still God and that He is still worthy of Job's trust. This begs the question for us as readers: if our relationship with God will not save us from terrible trials, what value is it to us?

We might ask the same about our friends and family. If friends and family do not give us riches or prevent bad things from happening to us, what value are they to us? Such a question sounds silly. Our life is made richer and more meaningful with friends and family. The time and effort we put into caring for and helping our friends and family is what makes life beautiful. The same is true when we consider our relationship with God. Perhaps, like Job, we demand and expect our relationship with God to be too transactional. Perhaps we forget what God needs. Every relationship of value will demand something of us, and we are reminded of Satan's question to God in Job 1:9, which can be paraphrased as "Does Job's relationship with God come at no cost?" We, along with Job, must decide whether our relationship with God is worth the cost.

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