

“How Can I Reply to You?”

Texts: Job 40:1-14; Romans 8:28-39

The Book of Job is not only a great piece of literature, but as Francis Anderson points out, Job is truly God’s gift to humanity, while at the same time one of the supreme offerings of the human mind to the living God.¹ There is a reason why John Calvin preached one hundred and fifty-nine sermons on Job—there is a seemingly endless treasure of wisdom to be mined from its pages. Here in the Book of Job we find the account of a good and respected man who lived about the time of Abraham, who was nearly overwhelmed by the loss of all that he owned, who faced the death of all those whom he loved, who lost his health and his good name and who suffered all of this without knowing why. And yet, as a man of faith, Job refused to curse God or blame him for his troubles, before finally being restored and vindicated in the end. And while the Book of Job has a happy ending, the story of Job also raises a number of important (and daunting) theological questions for all who read it. Why do the righteous suffer? What can we learn from Job should God call us to suffer? And what can we learn from the story of Job to help should our friends and family suffer?

Having worked our way through the entire book, are we now in a position to draw some final conclusions and make some application. Throughout this series, a number of you have asked thoughtful questions about how the story of Job applies to Christians today or even to your own particular circumstances. The reason why we need to address these questions only after we have worked our way through the entire book, is simply because we cannot properly make application about the mystery of suffering until we have read the entire story of Job and placed his ordeal against the backdrop of redemptive history.

I recently heard someone cite from Eliphaz’s first speech to Job and recount how they used his words as biblical counsel to someone they knew who was suffering. Then they turned to Job’s words in Job 42:6—“*Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes*”—as the proof that Eliphaz’s counsel to Job was correct—Job needed to repent of his sins so that God would restore him. The suffering friend was told, “if only you would repent of your sins, like Job, God will end your suffering.” The problem is that, as a Christian, the poor sufferer had already repented of their sins, perhaps hundreds of times, and yet was still suffering! The only conclusion the sufferer could draw was that either God did not love them or did not hear their prayers, or else Christianity is simply not true—no one is home to answer their prayers. But there was one conclusion the sufferer should have drawn, but apparently did not. And that is his friend was quoting Eliphaz favorably because his friend was as every bit as cruel and bone-headed as Eliphaz was. In this case, the failure lies not with the sufferer, but with the counselor!

But if we know the entire Book of Job, we know that in Job 42:6, Job is not repenting for sins he did not commit so that God would restore him. Rather, Job was repenting for seeking to justify himself rather than God once his ordeal began! Furthermore, if we know the whole story of Job, we know that Job is easily able to silence Eliphaz, because of the self-evident fact that righteous people suffer and that wicked people prosper. We also know that Eliphaz is easily silenced by the much younger Elihu. And we know that God rebukes Eliphaz for speaking improperly about God’s altogether just and righteous

¹ Andersen, *Job*, p. 15.

ways, even as Job is vindicated. While Eliphaz correctly believed that the holy God must punish all sin, Eliphaz incorrectly jumped to the conclusion that Job was suffering because God was punishing him for some sin (secret or otherwise) which Job had supposedly committed. But you know this only if you take the time to read the whole book of Job and view Job's ordeal in light of the broader story of redemption.

There is nothing worse than when someone (no matter how well-intended) lifts passages like the speech from Eliphaz without regard to context or the big picture of redemptive history, and then uses such a passage as a club on the sufferer—"all you need to do is repent and your suffering will end." A number of you have told me similar stories, and many of the sufferers in our midst can recount similar counsel being given to them during the dark night of sickness and suffering. Many times people (with the best of intentions) feel like they have to provide answers and remedies for the suffering of others without having a clue as to why the sufferer is actually suffering. Such well-intended advice can become as cruel as the words of Eliphaz to his friend Job. This is why it is only after we have seen the big picture, read the entire story and put Job's ordeal in its proper place in redemptive history, that we are finally in a position to talk about application to our own particular situations today.

The most important question raised throughout our series is this: "What can we learn from Job about the mystery of suffering?"

The answer is very simple—in the Book of Job, God never once gives Job an answer to this question, other than to point out to Job that YHWH is the creator and sustainer of all things, that he rules over all of creation, and that Job has no right whatsoever to question the ways of the Lord. To many (especially for those in the midst of suffering or to skeptics who doubt the Christian faith), this is no answer at all. But while we can empathize with the sufferer who wants to know "why me?" and while we reject the views of the skeptic, nevertheless, the fact remains, God will not be questioned by sinners. He is holy and we are not. He need not give us an answer.

As one wag once put it, when God appears to Job from the midst of the storm, we have something like Job being told to "sit down and shut up." This becomes perfectly clear in the first fourteen verses of Job 40. After Job had demanded a written indictment and to be treated as a prince, the Lord appears to Job from the midst of the storm. While this is an act of grace, because God does not confront Job with his sins, nevertheless, Job is put in his place. Thus when God speaks to Job, we read, "*The LORD said to Job: 'Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!'*" It is God who now questions Job, since Job has no right to question God!

The litany of questions God asks of Job as recorded in Job 38-41 is one of the remarkable passages in all the Bible. Where was Job when God created the world and hung the stars into space? Where was Job when God separated the day from the night, or set the boundaries for the ocean? Job is but a mere man. A sinful (albeit justified) man at that. YHWH has him by the belt and has completely subdued him! As God speaks to Job we are reminded that God's ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. No one can fathom him. Like Job, we are bound by time and space. But God is not. Like Job, we too are confronted with the questions asked of him by YHWH: "*Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this. What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years!*" The creature is not the Creator. Grasping this fact is the beginning of true wisdom!

There is only one thing for Job to say in response. In Job 40:3, "*Then Job answered the LORD: '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.” Even though there is nothing he can say, it is enough for Job to know that YHWH was not angry at him and that the Lord would graciously condescend to speak to him. And yet, as we see in verses 6 and following, there was much more for Job to learn: *“Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: ‘Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. ‘Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at every proud man and bring him low, look at every proud man and humble him, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you.’”* Only God can vindicate himself, since only God is holy. The sins for which Job repents in ashes and dust were not the sins of which he had been unjustly accused of having committed by his three friends. Rather, Job repents for having questioned God’s justice toward him. But Job gets no answer whatsoever to his question, “why me?” Once God appears to Job from the storm, the question just goes away.

On one level then, the answer we get from the Book of Job about the mystery of suffering is that God is holy, we are not, and we are not to question God’s ways. Just as God will not be questioned by Job, so too, God will not be questioned by any sinful creature—including us. As Paul puts it in Romans 9:20, *“who are you, O man to talk back to God?”* We might say that trying to find the answer to the question of human suffering by looking directly to the God of the whirlwind, is like trying to understand the sun by staring at it for hours upon hours. It is too much for us. We are blinded. Creatures cannot understand the ways of the creator, because God is simply too far beyond our comprehension.

Yet on another level there is a very profound and wonderful answer to the mystery of suffering hinted at throughout the story of Job. Unlike Job, we do not have to deal with the God in the whirlwind! As Job’s ordeal unfolds, Job slowly comes to see that he needs God’s wisdom both to understand and to accept what has happened to him. As his suffering drags on, Job realizes that what is truly needed is a mediator—someone who will argue his case before the sovereign God of the storm. Recall that in Job 9:33, we read Job’s lament: *“If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both.”* In Job 16:20, we find these words, *“My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God.”* Then we read the amazing confession of faith from Job 19:25: *“I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.”* Finally, in Job 33:23, we read, *“Yet if there is an angel on his side as a mediator, one out of a thousand, to tell a man what is right for him.”* Having gained true wisdom, Job points us in the right direction, and although he himself encountered God in the whirlwind, given our place in redemptive history, we don’t have to face God in the storm. Rather, we encounter God through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the man of sorrows.

It is clear from the story of Job that we cannot see God, nor even begin to understand his mysterious ways, unless and until we seek divine wisdom in Holy Scripture. Such divine wisdom is to be found in the mediator of whom Job was speaking, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God incarnate. In fact, when placed in the context of the larger drama of redemptive history, Job’s trial by ordeal itself becomes one important key to the resolution of the mystery of suffering. It was YHWH who brought Job to Satan’s attention. It was Satan who took the bait and afflicted Job. And it was Job who emerged from the trial by ordeal victorious. All of this points us ahead as type and in shadow to the life of Jesus Christ—the greater Job yet to come. Not only was Jesus tempted by the devil, but Jesus endured both the shame from and rejection of his people before he suffered to the point of death. But unlike Job, Jesus was without sin. Job the sinner could not complain because even though he was justified and had done nothing to bring about the ordeal he would face, Job was in no place to challenge the purposes of God.

But Jesus Christ—the holy one of God—deserved none of things he received. We ought to take note of a pattern in Job’s ordeal which later comes to full flower in the gospel. Job made burnt offerings on behalf of his children, and then later for his friends. But Jesus offered the supreme sacrifice for sin—namely himself. Our guilt was imputed to Jesus and it is through his perfect obedience in the midst of his trial by ordeal, that we are saved from sin’s guilt, its power over us is broken and we are reckoned or accounted as righteous. Thus in Jesus Christ, we have the very thing Job saw was needed, but did not have—a mediator. The practical consequence of this is vital to see. We need not encounter the God in the storm! No, God graciously comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ—the man of sorrows—who has suffered in all ways as have we, who makes intercession for us in times of trial, and who pours out the Holy Spirit into our hearts, so that we are guaranteed the redemption of our bodies. In this, the wisdom of God is wonderfully displayed for all of God’s people to see in the doing and dying of Jesus.

Therefore, while God never tells us why we suffer, he does tell us that there is a reason for our suffering—a reason perhaps known only to himself. In fact, the universal pattern of redemptive history demonstrates that whenever God brings suffering into the lives of his people, it always followed by a glorious restoration. God has revealed this pattern to us in the life, death and resurrection of his own dear son. For as Jesus—the greater Job—suffered and died, so too, Jesus rose again from the dead, completely victorious, and is now crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And through our union with Jesus Christ through faith and through the bond created between us by the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ victory over death and the grave is ours. The lesser Job was a justified sinner. But he was also blameless and upright. Yet Job suffered horribly, before receiving a glorious vindication and restoration in the end. The greater Job, Jesus, is without sin and yet suffered far more than did Job before being raised from the dead and ascending on high, where our Lord lives to make intercession for us, his people.

We have the very thing Job longed for—an intercessor in times of trial. But what Job did not anticipate is that our heavenly intercessor is a fellow sufferer, someone who knows both the meaning of suffering and the glories which lie ahead for all those for whom he intercedes. Thus as we suffer, our intercessor can not only empathize with us as a fellow-sufferer, as God in human flesh he has the power to ensure we will share in his glorious victory. Job longed for the very thing we so easily take for granted.

While the “why?” question is never answered, nevertheless, there is a resolution of the mystery. The suffering of God’s people will—either in this life or in the next—lead to a glorious victory and to an inheritance which so far surpasses human understanding that we cannot conceive of it. How do we know this to be true, when the God of the whirlwind is so far beyond our ways and our thoughts that we cannot possibly conceive of his greatness? We know this because of the God of whirlwind took on human flesh and came to die on a cross before being raised from the dead. The pattern is clearly established in the gospel. The ordeal of the cross and suffering the goes with it, must precede the victory of the resurrection. Why? Because this is how God redeems us from the guilt and power of sin, and why it is utterly foolish to talk about the mystery of suffering without looking at the big picture, of which the story of Job is an important part, and which ultimately directs us to the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, it is only after Jesus Christ has come and fulfilled all righteousness through his own suffering and resurrection, that the words of Paul in Romans 8:28-39 finally make any sense and bring true comfort. *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* Nothing happens by chance. God works all things for good—even things which might be sinful and horrible in themselves. God can and does turn all things to good—not just some things. And unlike Eliphaz, we need to see that this might not come to pass until the next life. This becomes clear in the balance of Paul’s doxology. *“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be*

conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” God does not start the process—which may include suffering—and then quit in the middle. “*What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?*” If true, this means we do not suffer because we have committed some particular sin. We might suffer because of the consequences of our actions—but God is not about the business of punishing us retributively or exacting revenge.

In fact Paul goes on to say, “*it is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* There is no circumstance, no situation, which is beyond God’s control and presence. The God of the whirlwind does not approach us in the storm, but in the person of Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. And this is where the story of Job ultimately directs us, for in Jesus Christ are all the mysteries of suffering resolved.

With that question dealt with, we can turn to the second question, “what can the sufferer learn from Job?”

In the suffering and ordeal of Job we meet a real-life flesh and blood sufferer, who has moments of great faith (in which he serves as a wonderful example to us), and yet who becomes increasingly embittered and self-righteous over the course of his ordeal (matters about which Job provides us with a much more negative example). Thus when we look to the life of Job for guidance as to what to do when we suffer, we need to keep these facts in mind—there are things in the life of Job to emulate and things in the response of Job to avoid. But the most important thing we need to keep in mind is that the role Job’s ordeal by suffering plays is very important and unique in redemptive history, and that his suffering (at least as to the reason why Job suffers) is unlike anything we will face.

It is YHWH who calls Satan’s attention to Job, YHWH’s blameless and upright servant. When Satan sees an opportunity to undermine the foundation of the gospel (God’s just and righteous ways in dealing with all his creatures), Satan takes the bait and seeks permission to afflict the man (Job) who is the apple of God’s eye. When Job endures the trial, a very important principle is established. God is not a cosmic blackmailer—“obey me and I’ll make you rich”—nor is Job a hypocrite who obeys God only to gain health, wealth and prosperity. Despite the loss of everything, Job refuses to curse God or blame him for his ordeal. All of this is intended to point us ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ, who will fully and finally defeat the Devil when Jesus suffers and dies upon the cross (Colossians 2:15).

We live in an age in which Satan is not only an already defeated foe, but he has been cast down from heaven and, according to Revelation 20:1-10, is confined to the abyss, where he is prevented from deceiving the nations, because the preaching of the gospel is said to “bind him.” What this means for us is that Satan no longer has access to the throne of God to accuse us, as he did in the days of Job (or of Zechariah, the prophet). When we suffer, it is not because the Devil has made a deal with God to test our allegiance. Satan can no longer do such a thing. When we suffer it is not because the Devil is afflicting

us, but because God allows it (for reasons he may or may not chose to reveal to us). Nor does our own faithfulness in times of trial help to establish the truth of the gospel (as did Job's), nor does any lack of faithfulness on our part undermine the gospel. To put it bluntly—while God cares greatly about each one of us when we suffer—we are not that important! Christ has already defeated Satan and any obedience or faithfulness we muster, surely serves as a glorious vindication of God's righteous ways.

That being said, when Job is first afflicted, we read, *“At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: ‘Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised. In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.’”* The most important way in which Job serves as an example to us when we suffer is when he refuses to blame God and acknowledges that God can do with us as he wills. This anticipates the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, recorded in Matthew 26:39, *“Yet not as I will, but as you will.”* This should be our prayer, whenever suffering comes.

We should also learn from the story of Job, that it is a sin to seek to justify ourselves rather than God. As we watch poor Job become increasingly concerned with the loss of his good name when he had done nothing wrong, he finally gets to the place where he is demanding that God answer him, and that God treat him as a prince. This is something we must strive to avoid whenever suffering comes. The grim reality of suffering is that it is very easy for the sufferer to do exactly what Job did. Nothing chips away at the proper perspective on these matters as does sickness, pain and grief. And while we have every right to ask of God that our good name be vindicated, the way we should seek the vindication of ourselves is to defend the rights of God to do with us whatever he wishes, with the expectation that he will keep his promise to vindicate us in the end. But even here, the focus should fall on the faithfulness of God, not upon our rights to be delivered or vindicated.

All of this means that the time to prepare for suffering is before suffering comes. For once suffering comes upon us it is very easy to lose all perspective on these things and to fall into despair or bitterness. It also means that the sufferer—who will go through times of despair, doubt, complaint, and self-pity—remains justified. What does this mean for us? It means that Jesus Christ was the perfect sufferer, who never doubted, complained or pitied himself. When we trust in Christ, his perfect suffering is imputed to us, so that God sees us not as a doubting, complaining, demanding, self-pitiers, but as someone who always prays, *“Not my will, but thine will be done.”* Furthermore, the one in whom we trust and whose righteousness we receive through faith, is a fellow-sufferer, who has suffered far more than any man living has suffered. Not only does he empathize with us in our trials and will never abandon us, but Jesus himself has promised us that he will never give us more than we can bear, and that he will always provide us with a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). This then, is what we should learn from the suffering of Job. Job points us ahead to Jesus Christ, the perfect sufferer.

Last, what can the friends and family of the sufferer learn from Job?

One thing should be perfectly clear—having read the words of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, we now know what not to tell someone who is suffering! There is no direct connection between the degree of someone's suffering and their sins and we cannot leap to such conclusions. Yes, there are times when it is perfectly clear why someone is suffering. Someone who does something stupid or sinful might end up paying the consequences for their actions. Someone who drinks and drives might go through tragedy. Someone who cheats on their spouse, might ruin their life and destroy their family. Someone who smokes might get lung cancer. Yes, in some cases there is a cause and effect relationship between a person's behavior and suffering. But in most cases when people are called to suffer, there is no such

observable connection. This is especially the case in the lives of the righteous (justified sinners), who like Job, have done nothing to bring down covenant curses upon their heads. Only God knows why such people must endure trial. We do not and should not presume to speak to such things.

Yet, in one sense, Job's friends serve as a wonderful example of what to do when someone we love suffers. Recall that when Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, learned of Job's suffering, we read of them—*“they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort [Job]. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.”* Had they kept silent and continued to comfort their suffering friend, they would have helped Job greatly. But after Job's lament (Job 3), they were no longer concerned with comforting Job, they became preoccupied with correcting Job. So much so, they cruelly applied to Job their flawed view of God's justice. Instead of comforting Job, they were soon accusing him of certain sins. This we cannot do.

And yet, what is the first thought people have when something horrible happens? “What did I do that made God mad at me?” While it is my sacred duty as a minister of the gospel to serve as the absolver of sins, every Christian participates in the priesthood of Christ and is, therefore, perfectly capable of declaring to a suffering Christian that whatever the reason for their suffering may be, if they are in Christ, their sins are forgiven and God is not retributively punishing them. This is why James connects healing with forgiveness and why he exhorts sufferers to ask for the elders to come and pray for them (James 5:7-16). As James tells us, *“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”* First and foremost, sick people and sufferers need to be assured of God's favor. They do not need to be accused of sinning!

At the end of the day we have no business whatsoever trying to figure out why someone is suffering and then informing them of our opinions on the matter. We cannot do what Eliphaz did and bombard the sufferer with what we think are the reasons for their suffering and then “confront” them with what they can do to change the will of God. This is not helpful, it is cruel. If we learn one thing from the story of Job it is that God alone knows why he does what he does and God alone has the power to turn suffering to good. As creatures, we cannot speak for God, nor do we hold the keys to the resolution of the mystery of suffering. Christ does. Most times it is better to just be silent, content to be with the sufferer, so that they are not alone in times of suffering and despair—unless of course, they prefer to left alone.

God's people are to comfort the sufferer by praying for them, by reminding them of the promises of God from holy Scripture (including the forgiveness of sins and the glories of our inheritance in Christ), and by showing the kind of compassion which eliminates the hardships of their suffering as much as is humanly possible. Nothing helps the sick and the suffering any more than helping them with the worries of life: watching the kids, preparing meals, providing transportation, helping them find work, and so on. What the sufferer needs is a word of comfort, someone to listen to them, someone who will just quietly sit with them—like Job's friends did at the beginning. All of these things are vital to aid the sufferer and it is our joyful duty to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ in such ways, whenever they are called to suffer.

No one wants to suffer. But we will. Like Job, all we can say to God when suffering comes is, “how can I reply to you?” But we also pray as Jesus did, “not my will, but your will be done,” And yet, unlike Job, we do not find God in furies of the storm. We find him in the person of his own dear son, Jesus Christ, who is the man of sorrows and the great physician, and who has loved us and gave himself for us. For he is the greater Job and he will never leave us nor forsake—even in our darkest hour. And it is to Jesus Christ, that the Book of Job ultimately directs our gaze. For Job knew full well that his redeemer

lives! Amen!