

FOURTEEN

Praying

Though dark be my way, since He is my Guide,

'Tis mine to obey, 'tis His to provide. . . .

By prayer let me wrestle, and He will perform.

With Christ in the vessel I smile at the storm.

—John Newton, “Begone Unbelief?” *Olney Hymns*

The Uniqueness of Job

No one can understand what the Bible tells us about suffering without coming to grips with the Old Testament book of Job. It is here that we see writ large that famous saying of Rabbi Abraham Heschel, “God is not nice. God is not an uncle. God is an earthquake.”³⁶⁴ Philosopher Peter Kreeft says, “Job is a mystery. A mystery satisfies something in us, but not our reason. The rationalist is repelled by Job, as Job’s three rationalist friends were repelled by Job. But something deeper in us is satisfied by Job, and is nourished. . . . It puts iron in your blood.”³⁶⁵

No other book in the Bible or, to my mind, in all of ancient literature, faces the questions of evil and suffering with such emotional and dramatic realism yet also with such intellectual and philosophical deftness.³⁶⁶ Obviously, the main theme is that of innocent suffering—why do so many very good people have a disproportionate number of afflictions and tragedies, while many dishonest, selfish, and greedy people have comfortable lives? The book of Job is uniquely balanced in its treatment of this theme. It treats it neither abstractly nor just viscerally. The problem of

evil is examined through one man’s vividly described agony. His cries are poignant and provocative. Nevertheless, the long speeches of Job are filled with profound, thoughtful reflection. This perfectly conveys that the problem of horrendous suffering is both a great philosophical *and* a great personal problem. To treat it as only one or the other is inadequate.

Another way the book of Job is unique is in its implicit critique of nearly all the common answers to the problem of evil. When suffering comes upon us, we wonder why it is happening to us. The traditional religious answer to this question is: *You must have done something wrong or bad.* The secular answer to the question is: *There is no good reason. A good God wouldn’t allow this—so he doesn’t exist or he’s cruel.* One of the main messages of the book of Job is that both the religious and the irreligious, the moralistic and the nihilistic answers are wrong. Both are, in the end, pat answers that can be stated in a sentence or two. But neither the author of Job nor Job himself will go for such easy solutions. Both classic answers are given withering critiques in the book, and that is largely what creates the dramatic tension and makes the book so intriguing. The religious answer expressed by Job’s friends is revealed to be slanderously wrong: Job’s difficulties come upon him not despite his goodness but because of it. But the nihilistic view, which Job veers toward at times, is also a grave mistake.

My Servant Job

The first two chapters of Job are in prose, not verse, and they prepare us for the confrontation between Job, his friends, and God himself.

Job was a good and godly man, “blameless and upright” (Job 1:1), meaning that he was beyond reproach. No one could make a charge against him in any area of his life. He was a caring father and husband, deeply devoted to God, just and compassionate in all his dealings, and successful and wealthy on top of it all. He is said to have been “the greatest man” in the East (Job 1:3). Each of his children had their own home, which was highly unusual, and were engaged in constant feasting. It was a sign of their family’s prosperity.

But suddenly, this very good man is inexplicably overtaken by a series of disasters in which he loses his wealth, family, and health. Why? The readers are given a view of things that neither Job nor any of his friends ever see. In Job 1:6–8, we are shown a great heavenly council with God and the angels, and with Satan present. The first response of modern readers to this is confusion. What in the world is Satan doing in the heavenly court? Wasn't he cast out of heaven? But the biblical authors are notoriously selective in what they tell us. We have a similar kind of dialogue in Luke 16, Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In that story, a man in hell has a dialogue with Abraham, who is in heaven. Why would people in heaven be talking to people from hell?

The best response to this question is to accept the narrator's restrictions. The purpose of the author is to give us enough details to understand the actions within the story. The Bible gives us very little in the way of details about heaven, angels, and the supernatural world, so let's not press the details. It is interesting, however, that in the Job narrative Satan never shows any deference to God—never addressing him as Lord nor bowing or showing any respect. That fits in with what we would expect from other things that Scripture tells us. Nevertheless, if the purpose of the author was to inform us about such things, he would have given us more specifics. Instead of speculating about matters that are not in view, we should just read the story and see the remarkable way this dialogue teaches the “asymmetrical” relationship of God to suffering and evil.

God points to Job as his finest servant. “There is no one like him on earth . . . a man who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8). Satan—and his name means “Accuser”—immediately charges Job with a kind of hypocrisy. He seems to bristle when God calls Job his servant. “Does Job fear God for nothing?” he hisses. “You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face” (Job 1:9–11). Satan is saying, quite simply, that Job is in his relationship with God merely for the benefits. “He doesn't serve and love *you*,” Satan is arguing. “He is only loving himself, serving himself, and using you to do it. You are just an instrument, a

means to an end. I'll prove it to you and to this council. Make things unprofitable for him, stop blessing him—and you will see. He'll drop you like a hot iron.”

Satan is saying that, for Job, obeying God is just an exercise in self-love and self-salvation. If the earthly benefits of serving God were removed, then Job would be revealed for what he is. But ultimately this is an attack on God. Job, you see, is the best servant God has. If he is indeed a phony, then it means God has completely failed to make any men or women into his loving servants. Satan hates the good, and he hates God. And so his motives are completely evil. He enjoys inflicting pain and he wants to see people suffer. And he knows the heart of love God has for the human race, so he wants to defeat God's purpose to turn them into joy-filled, great and good worshippers of him. He wants to frustrate the great desire of God's heart.

Becoming “Free Lovers” of God

God allows Satan to test Job. Why? I believe it meant that God knew Job already loved him. And yet there was still a need for Job's love to be refined—in a way that would do enormous good down through the ages. The suffering was allowed to bring Job to a level of greatness.

But that means Satan had a point. There is a difference between external religiosity and internal heart love and devotion to God. That gap is to some degree in us all, and it is one of the reasons we don't have the intimacy with God and the peace and joy in him that we should. What is a real servant of God? Well, think of any love relationship. What if you fell in love with someone who seemed to love you back, but then when you had a financial reversal, he or she broke off the relationship? Wouldn't you feel used? Wouldn't you think the person loved the things you could give him rather than loving you for you yourself? It's no different with God. We should love God for himself alone, not for the benefits he brings.

How do you develop a love like that? Let's say you initially fall in love with a person, and, if you are honest, it was partly because of some of

the person's "assets"—his or her looks or connections, for instance. But as the relationship progresses, you begin to love the person for himself alone, and then when some of the assets go away, you don't mind. We call that growth in love and character. Now, what if you grew in your love for God like that? What if you could grow in your love for him so that he became increasingly satisfying in himself to you? That would mean that circumstances wouldn't rattle you as much, since you had God and his love enriching and nourishing you regardless of the circumstances of life.

How can you get there—how can you move from loving God in a mercenary way toward loving God himself? I'm afraid the primary way is to have hardship come into your life. Suffering first helps you assess yourself and see the mercenary nature of your love for God. When your most cherished things are taken from you, you may be tempted to angrily reject him. But then suffering gives you an opportunity. Instead of giving up on God and moving away from him you could adjust and focus on him in a way you had never done before. C. S. Lewis, in his satirical work *The Screwtape Letters*, depicts a senior devil writing advice to a junior devil still out on the tempting field. He tells him that Jesus—called the Enemy—uses difficulties and hardships to turn believers from mercenary employees into people who serve him out of love:

The Enemy allows . . . disappointment to occur on the threshold of every human endeavor. It occurs when the boy who has been enchanted in the nursery by stories from the Odyssey buckles down to really learning Greek. It occurs when lovers have got married and begin the real task of learning to live together. In every department of life it marks the transition from dreaming aspiration to laborious doing. The Enemy takes this risk because He has a curious fantasy of making all these disgusting little human vermin into what He calls His "free" lovers and servants—"sons" is the word He uses, with His inveterate love of degrading the whole spiritual world by unnatural liaisons with the two-legged animals. Desiring their freedom, He therefore refuses to carry them, by

their mere affections and habits, to any of the goals which He sets before them: He leaves them to "do it on their own." And there lies our opportunity. But also, remember, there lies our danger. If once they get through this initial dryness successfully, they become much less dependent on emotion and therefore much harder to tempt.

God knew that Satan was ultimately wrong about Job. But he also knew that Satan was penultimately right. Job was not fully the servant he should be, and could be, and God was going to enable him to attain that kind of greatness the only way it can be attained—through adversity and pain. Job would become more fully someone who serves God for nothing and loves God for himself alone. And so God willed to show the hosts of heaven as well as all the hundreds of millions of readers of the book of Job that he *can* make human beings into loving servants.

God and Evil

So God gives Satan permission to bring pain and suffering into Job's life. In chapter one, he says that Satan can take away Job's things but not touch his body (Job 1:12), while in the second chapter, he allows Satan to send Job painful diseases but not to take his life (Job 2:6). Modern readers cringe at God's granting these to Satan, but, again, we must not miss the main point of this narrative action. It conveys vividly the asymmetrical relationship of God to evil. There is profound philosophy here. In the book of Job, we do not have a dualistic view of the world, in which there are two equal and opposite forces of good and evil. In that view, life is truly a battlefield and a "crap shoot" because there is no single force in charge. History is just a struggle between equally balanced forces of good and evil. There is no being powerful enough to carry out a coherent plan for history. The Bible shows us no such world. God is completely in charge. He has total control over Satan. Satan can go so far, and no further. God is clearly sovereign.

But on the other hand, the book of Job does not depict God himself

inflicting all these things on Job. This is a brilliant way to get across the truth that, while nothing happens outside of God's plan, God does not will evil things like he wills the good. God is not out of control of history, yet he does not enjoy seeing people suffer. Evil and suffering are not God's original intent for the world, and therefore only a temporary condition until its renewal.

The first disasters that come upon Job are the loss of his wealth and of his children. Job's response is to express great grief but nonetheless to bow and worship, saying famously, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). Job's response is emotionally authentic. Job got up and tore his robe . . . and fell to the ground—he is not stoic. He shows proper gratitude ("the Lord gave") and appropriate deference ("the Lord has taken away"). And so, we might say, round 1 goes to Job. Satan loses.

But when Job loses his health as well, he cannot maintain that composure. Now Job loses his poise. In 3:23, he blames God for his troubles though he does not "curse God and die" as Job's wife counsels in 2:9. He does not turn away from God or contemplate suicide, but he also struggles enormously with what feels like grave injustice. A life of goodness can make affliction even harder for a person to take, since it makes it all seem so completely senseless and unfair.

The Speeches of Job and His Friends

The middle chapters of the book of Job consist of three long cycles of speeches by Job's friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—who come to "comfort" him. But their counsel to him wounds deeply. Chapter 4, a speech of Eliphaz, is a sample of their basic approach. "Consider now," he says, "who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the up-right ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it" (Job 4:7-9). The message of Job's friends is clear: Job wouldn't be suffering like this unless he had failed to pray, trust, and obey God in some way. God would never be so unjust as to let all this happen unless Job had done something to deserve it. So if Job

wants to be restored, he simply needs to confess all his known sin, get his life straight.

Eliphaz's speech is uncomfortably close to conventional evangelical piety. He says many things that are, in the abstract, true biblical propositions. There *is* a moral order to the universe. It *is* true that bad behavior can lead to painful consequences, sooner or later. We *should* trust God and not always assume we are in the right. And if we come into times of trouble, we certainly should humble ourselves before God and examine ourselves. As we have noted before, we might be in the position of a David or a Jonah. Maybe God is trying to wake us up. Eliphaz says to Job in 5:17, "Blessed is the man that God corrects; do not despise the discipline of the Almighty." That again is true. But, as Old Testament commentator Frances I. Anderson says about these speeches by Job's friends, "True words can be thin medicine for a man in the depths."³⁶⁷

Even though Job's friends can piece together strings of technically true statements, their pastoral mistakes stem from an inadequate grasp of the grace of God. They have a moralistic theology. Eliphaz says, "Hardship does not spring from the soil, nor does trouble sprout from the ground" (Job 5:6). He means that suffering doesn't happen naturally—it only happens if you live wrongly and bring it on yourself. But here he shows an ignorance of the teaching of Genesis 3:16, where God says that, because of sin, thistles and thorns *will* come up out of the ground—now for everyone. In other words, the world is broken by sin, and bad things do happen to people regardless of how well they live. Job's friends therefore have a view of God that is very domesticated. There is never a mystery—if life goes well, it is because you are living rightly. If life does not go well, it must be your fault.

But Anderson shows that this puts God on a leash, as it were. "To bring God under obligation to a [human] morality . . . is a threat to His sovereignty."³⁶⁸ In other words, a moralistic person like Eliphaz believes God can be managed with morality. His advice to Job is: Push the right buttons, confess all known sin, straighten up and fly right, and everything will be good again. Guaranteed.

Job does not take his friends' tone-deaf cruelty lying down. His re-

sponse in chapter 6 is spine-tingling in its emotional realism. He knows his friends' domesticated view of God is wrong, yet neither will he simply curse and reject God as unjust. To go in either the traditional religious or irreligious direction would have been the easier ways to go, but he will not take either. As a result, his agony is enormous.

If only my anguish could be weighed
and all my misery be placed on the scales!

It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas—

no wonder my words have been impetuous.

The arrows of the Almighty are in me,

my spirit drinks in their poison;

God's terrors are marshaled against me (Job 6:2-4).

He so fears that he will speak unworthy of his God that he imagines it might be better to die before he can do so.

Oh, that I might have my request,
that God would grant what I hope for,
that God would be willing to crush me,
to let loose his hand and cut off my life!
Then I would still have this consolation—
my joy in unrelenting pain—
that I had not denied the words of the Holy One (Job 6:8-10).

But he is also brutally honest with his friends about what he thinks of their counsel.

Anyone who withholds kindness from a friend
forsakes the fear of the Almighty.

But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams. . . .

Teach me, and I will be quiet;
show me where I have been wrong.
How painful are honest words!

But what do your arguments prove?
Do you mean to correct what I say,
and treat my desperate words as wind?

Relent, do not be unjust;
reconsider, for my integrity is at stake

Is there any wickedness on my lips? (Job 6:14-15, 24-26, 28-29).

Job's sarcastic responses to his friends are classic: "Miserable comforters are you all!" (Job 16:2) he says, and "Doubtless you are the only people who matter, and wisdom will die with you!" (Job 12:2).

And so, for many chapters, Job and his three friends engage in a heated, extensive dialogue and debate about the meaning of Job's suffering. In Job's speeches, he not only debates with his friends but also cries out to God, asking the perennial questions of sufferers—Why this? and Why me? Eventually another figure appears, a younger man named Elihu, who criticizes both Job and the other friends (Job 32-38). Dramatic interest builds as it becomes clear that neither Job nor his friends seem to be "winning" or seeing the ways of God clearly. Many of the friends' speeches are extremely eloquent—but Job's speeches are often the same. Who is right? Who will win? And what does God think?

Both the prologue and middle chapters of the book of Job reveal to the reader that Job's sufferings are not punitive. They are not retribution for Job's personal sin. But they also are not corrective. They are not designed to wake Job up to a particular mistaken path, or to bring him back to faith from a wandering path. Francis Anderson says that slowly but surely it emerges that the purpose of Job's suffering is "enlarged life with God." This is the only other possible reason for it, once Job's devout life eliminates the other possibilities. Anderson writes:

If there is a grain of truth in Eliphaz's teaching about "the [correction] of the Almighty" (5:17), it is not in the negative sense of training so a person is restrained from potential sin. Job had long since attained this. . . . The readers know what

Job does not know, namely that *Job's highest wisdom is to love God for Himself alone*. Hence Eliphaz's words, far from being a comfort, are a trap. The violence with which Job rejects them shows his recognition of the danger.³⁶⁹

Anderson means that if Job agreed with his friends that this was punishment or correction for some specific sin, he would have missed the real purpose and benefit of what he was going through. He was being called to live on a new plane. Job shows that he has an inkling of this. Through all the speeches and prayers, Job repeatedly states his desire to meet God and hear from him directly. At the end of the book, his desire is granted, but not in the way he expected. When God actually does appear to speak to Job in the final chapters of the book, there are four great shocks and surprises.

The Lord Appears—and Job Lives

The first surprise is that God does indeed show up, taking a terrible form—and yet he does not destroy Job. At first, the harsh words lead us to think God is about to judge Job severely. God thunders:

Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.
Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone—
while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy? (Job 38:2-7).

But despite this strong, challenging language, God has not come to judge or crush Job but rather to reach out to him in grace. The first indication of this is the sudden appearance of the Hebrew personal name Yahweh (translated into English as “the Lord”), which has been almost completely absent from the book of Job until now. Yahweh is the name God reveals to Moses in the burning bush when he calls him. It is the personal, intimate revelation of his name that God gives to those in a covenantal, love relationship with him. It is *Yahweh* who now speaks to Job.

Also, we are told that Yahweh *answered* Job out of the storm.³⁷⁰ This phrase, as generic as it looks to us in English, is significant. Many readers, such as George Bernard Shaw, have understood God's speech to Job as a “sneer” and a “jeer.”³⁷¹ But in Hebrew idiom, to “speak to” someone indicates a one-way communication of an authority to an inferior, while to “answer” or “reply to” expresses a dialogue between two parties. It is striking, then, that when God shows up, he enters into a dialogue—he does not come to simply denounce. In other words, God is inviting Job into a relationship. He even gives Job the final word! (Job 42:1-6) One commentator writes:

This evidence of condescension and accommodation on the part of God gives the interaction between God and Job a different character than is commonly assumed. God is not the caustic, confrontational deity who seeks to rebuke Job and ridicule him. . . . Instead, God comes in his fullness and brings to Job an overwhelming experience of the reality of God. . . . Thus Job (and the reader) is put in his place—not by a rebuke, nor by a warning against questioning God, but by the gracious advent of God who allows himself to be seen inasmuch as that is humanly possible. As a result, the [appearance of God]—overwhelming as it must be—can only be understood as an act of grace.³⁷²

Nevertheless, despite the intimacy of the name Yahweh and the mode of address, God appears to Job in a *storm*—literally, a “storm-wind.” An-

cient people knew nothing more terrifying or destructive than a hurricane-force windstorm. Job's children had been destroyed by one (Job 1:19). Job was afraid that, if God actually did appear to him, "he would crush me with a storm" (Job 9:17) and indeed, when God shows up, he comes in the most fierce, overwhelming, majestic form possible—as the Storm King. Job and the readers of the Old Testament would expect that God in this form would immediately destroy him. But he does not. When God appears on Mt. Sinai, no one could approach or even touch the mountain lest they die. But here God's very presence appears before Job, and he lives.

The paradox, then, should not be missed. God comes both as a gracious, personal God and as an infinite, overwhelming force—at the very same time. He is both at once. How can this be? Only in Jesus Christ do we see how the untamable, infinite God can become a baby and a loving Savior. On the cross we see how both the love and the holiness of God can be fulfilled at once. God is so holy and just Jesus had to die for sins or we could not be forgiven. But he was so filled with love for us he laid down his life willingly. The gospel, then, explains how God can be both the God of love and of fury that Job meets on that dark and stormy day.

The Lord Does Not Answer—and Yet Does

The second surprise is that God's long speeches do not, at first glance, address any of the concerns of Job or his friends at all, even though the text says God "answers" Job. Job expected an *explanation* if God showed up. Job's friends expected a *condemnation* of Job if God showed up. They get neither. Instead, God gives us long poetic discourses about the wonders of the natural world.

Before looking at the speeches themselves, we must stop and weigh the significance of the fact that God gives Job no explanation for what happened to him. He says nothing about Satan or the heavenly council. He gives no reasons why he allowed Satan to bring suffering upon Job. It would not have been hard for God to do this. He could have said something like this: "Job, I know it has been painful. But you must realize that because of all this, you will become great and someday be an

inspiration to hundreds of millions of sufferers until the very end of time. No one except my own Son will be better known for patience under affliction." If he had said that, Job might have said, "Oh, that's different. I guess if that is the outcome, it puts things in a different light." But no. God says nothing. Why not? Francis Anderson is again very insightful.

It is one of the many excellences of the book that Job is brought to contentment without ever knowing all the facts of his case. . . . [T]he test would work only if Job did *not* know what it was for. God thrusts Job into an experience of dereliction to make it possible for Job to enter into a life of naked faith, to learn to love God for himself alone. God does not seem to give this privilege to many people, for they pay a terrible price of suffering for their discoveries. But part of the discovery is to see the suffering itself as one of God's most precious gifts. To withhold the full story from Job, even after the test was over, keeps him walking by faith, not by sight. He does not say in the end, "Now I see it all." He never sees it all. He sees God (Job 42:5). Perhaps it is better if God never tells any of us the whole of our life-story.³⁷³

The accusation of Satan was that Job did not actually love or serve God—he was loving and serving himself through compliance with God's will. And we have said that this is always partly true of even the best of God's followers. But it is because we don't fully love God just for his own sake that we are subject to such great ups and downs depending on how things go in our lives. We do not find our hearts fully satisfied with God unless other things are also going well, and therefore we are without sufficient roots, blown and beaten by the winds of changing circumstances. But to grow into a true "free lover" of God, who has the depth of joy unknown to the mercenary, conditional religious observer—we must ordinarily go through a stripping. We must feel that to obey God will bring us no benefits at all. It is at *that* point that seeking, praying to, and obeying God begin to change us.

And so the expanded life with God that Job eventually receives can come to him only by God's *not* telling him why he suffered. God would have been cooperating with Job's impulse for self-justification had he given him those reasons. Instead, the experience of suffering leads Job to the place where he loves and trusts him simply because he is God. Job becomes a person of enormous strength and joy, who does not need favorable circumstances in order to stand up straight spiritually. This makes the suffering—or, more accurately, the results of the suffering—a very great gift indeed, and it is doubtful that this level of reliance on the grace of God can ever be gotten any other way. As Anderson says, Job never sees the big picture, he sees only God. But that's what we really need—for all eternity.

And there is another crucial reason for God to not give Job any explanation for his suffering. Satan had charged that Job was a phony, that he lived morally and obeyed God only for the personal benefits. Satan wanted to not only bring pain on Job but to discredit him, to expose him as a fraud. But God allows Satan only enough space to accomplish the very opposite of what Satan had wanted. Modern readers may be upset when they see God giving Satan permission to attack Job, but we should keep in mind that Satan's attack in the end gave Job a name that will live forever, made him one of the most famous men in history. If you knew that 3,000 years later, millions of people would be reading about and discussing your words and deeds, you could consider yourself successful. And in afflicting Satan with suffering, God only created one of the great resources in the history of the world, which has inspired countless sufferers to face their adversity with endurance and patience.

God allows evil just enough space so it will defeat itself. The story of Job is a smaller version of what God is doing in your life and in the history of the world. God has now mapped out a plan for history that includes evil as part of it. This confuses and angers us, but then a book like Job pulls back the veil for just an instant and shows us that God will allow evil only to the degree that it brings about the very opposite of what it intends.

The Lord Is God—and You Are Not

In these final speeches the Lord calls Job to consider the creation of the world (Job 38:4–7) to make the point that human beings have only the most infinitesimal knowledge of all God has put into creation. “Surely you know!” God says ironically (Job 38:5). He depicts the great oceans of the world as just a helpless baby to him, bundled up in clouds by God as a midwife wraps a newborn in swaddling clothes! (v. 8–9) Next, God goes out to the edges of the world—to the sunrise and sunset (v. 12–15); to the depths of the earth, to the uttermost foundations of stone and sea (v. 16–18); and to the heights above the earth, to the storehouses of snow, hail, rain, and lightning (v. 19–30), and even to the constellations and the stars (v. 31–38). God has created and knows all about them. Does Job?

After looking at the physical world, God calls Job now to consider the lion (v. 39–40), raven (v. 41), mountain goats and birthing deer (39:1–4), the wild ass (v. 5–8) and ox (v. 9–12), the ostrich (v. 13–18), the horse (v. 19–25), and the hawk and falcon (v. 26–30). God does not draw moral lessons from the animals, as many religious authors over the years have done. There is no “be like the deer, who . . .” The animals are God's works of art, to be loved and enjoyed for their own sakes, and for what they show us about the wisdom, joy, power, and beauty of the Artist himself.

The catalogue of natural wonders is staggering. The point is simple: We are not God. His knowledge and power are infinitely beyond ours. This first speech ends in Job 40:2 with the Lord's question: “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him.” A seven-year-old cannot question the mathematical calculations of a world-class physicist. Yet we question how God is running the world. Does that make sense?

In God's second speech (Job 40:6–41:34), God makes this argument directly. In Israelite society, the judge not only gave a verdict but enforced it. When a king sat as an adjudicator and found a plaintiff guilty, he then proceeded to restore the man's place in society, putting

things to rights. After telling Job in Job 40:8 that he has essentially put himself in the seat of Judge of the World, in order to justify himself, he then forcibly argues in v. 9–14:

“Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his? Then . . . unleash the fury of your wrath . . . 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.”

Now we see what God had been driving at as he pointed out the wonders of the created order. Since Job does not have the power to be judge, he does not have the right. Job says that he can run the universe better than God—but that is simply a fiction. Job is being told to drop his claim that he can do so. Anderson says that Job is being called to “hand the whole matter over completely to God more trustingly, less fretfully. And do it without insisting that God should first answer all his questions.”³⁷⁴

This is the way of wisdom—to willingly, not begrudgingly, admit that God alone is God. The alternative is to become evil yourself. Anderson notes:

Here, if we have rightly found the heart of the theology of the whole book, is a very great depth. There is a rebuke in it for any person who, by complaining about particular events in his life, implies that he could propose to God better ways of running the universe than those God currently uses. Men are eager to use force to combat evil and in their impatience they wish God would do the same more often. But by such destructive acts men do and become evil. [If Job were to do what is described in 40:8–14, he] would not only usurp the role of God, he would become another Satan. Only God can destroy creatively. Only God can transmute evil into good.³⁷⁵

Few people have expressed this idea better than Elisabeth Elliot, who, thinking back over her life, the deaths of two of her husbands, and countless inexplicable tragedies and troubles, reflected on the end of Job and wrote this:

God is God. If He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in His will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to.³⁷⁶

Job Is in the Right—and You Are in the Wrong

Finally, there is the fourth surprise. We said that Job expected an explanation from God, but his friends expected a *condemnation* of Job as a sinner. Instead, when God is completely finished with his speeches, he turns to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, telling them that they and their legalistic, self-justifying, retribution theology has been in the wrong, and that Job “my servant” (!) has been in the right in his insistence that he is an innocent sufferer (Job 42:7–9). God then says that Job must pray for them if they are to escape divine punishment.

This part of the story leads many modern readers to wonder aloud. “But why would God be so affirming of Job? Job cursed the day he was born, challenged God’s wisdom, cried out and complained bitterly, expressed deep doubts. It didn’t seem that Job was a paragon of steady faith throughout. Why would God vindicate him like that?”

The first reason is that God is gracious and forgiving. But the crucial thing to notice is this: Through it all, Job never stopped praying. Yes, he complained, but he complained to *God*. He doubted, but he doubted to *God*. He screamed and yelled, but he did it in God’s presence. No matter how much in agony he was, he continued to address God. He kept seeking him. And in the end, God said Job triumphed. How wonderful that our God sees the grief and anger and questioning, and is still willing

to say “you triumphed”—not because it was all fine, not because Job’s heart and motives were always right, but because Job’s doggedness in seeking the face and presence of God meant that *the suffering did not drive him away from God but toward him*. And that made all the difference. As John Newton said, if we are not getting much out of going to God in prayer, we will certainly get nothing out of staying away.

Now, this is perhaps the single most concrete and practical thing sufferers can learn from the book of Job. The Bible says that God is “near to the brokenhearted” (Ps 34:18). “He upholds all who fall, and lifts up all who are bowed down” (Ps 145:14). Those are universals—God is near and cares about all sufferers. In addition he promises to help groaning Christians with his Spirit (Rom 8:26). And he says to believers in Christ “I will never leave you; I will *never* forsake you” (Heb 13:5). Jesus says that we are his sheep and “no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28).

All of this means that even if we cannot feel God in our darkest and most dry times, he is still there. And so there is no more basic way to face suffering than this: Like Job, you must seek him, go to him. Pray even if you are dry. Read the Scriptures even if it is an agony. Eventually, you will sense him again—the darkness won’t last forever. The strength you need for suffering comes in the doing of the responsibilities and duties God requires. Shirk no commands of God. Read, pray, study, fellowship, serve, witness, obey. Do all your duties that you physically can and the God of peace will be with you.

There are other examples of this in the Bible. One of the most famous is Psalm 42, where the psalmist addresses himself.

These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go to the house of God
under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise
among the festive throng.
Why, my soul, are you downcast?
Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.
My soul is downcast within me;
therefore I will remember you (Psalm 42:4–6).

Psalm 42 is an intense, sustained, and eloquent prayer. He is “pouring out his soul” to God. What does that mean? First, to “pour out your soul” means to get into one’s own heart. It is an ancient and healthier version of what is sometimes now called getting in touch with your feelings. It means to look honestly at your doubts, desires, fears, and hopes. But notice that this is not abstract self-examination but, rather, something he does before God. This man is not over in a corner looking at himself, he is exposing his inner being to God. This is crying, longing, reflecting, remembering—all before God. “Pouring out one’s soul” means also simply calling to God. As we look through the psalm, we see many honest, direct statements of confusion and frustration. But nevertheless he prays—in a sustained, focused way.

The other thing to notice is that the psalmist is not merely listening to his heart but also talking to it. He is addressing himself when he says, “O my soul.” This is something all people in the midst of suffering and trials must remember. Yes, we must listen to our hearts. We must learn what we can about ourselves by an honest look at our feelings. But we must not only listen to our hearts, we should also talk to them. We should listen for the premises of the heart’s reasoning but we should challenge those premises where they are wrong, and they often are.

We may hear our heart say, “It’s hopeless!” but we should argue back. We should say, “Well, that depends on what you were hoping *in*. Was that the right thing to put so much hope in?” Notice how the psalmist analyzes his own hopes—“*Why* are you so cast down, O my soul?” Notice that he admonishes himself. “Put your hope in God, for I *will* yet praise him.” The psalmist is talking to his heart, telling it to go to God, looking to God. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, in a sermon on this text, says that the psalmist is downcast but is taking up an important strategy that you must use when you are discouraged.

The first thing we have to learn is what the Psalmist learned—we must learn to take ourselves in hand. . . . He is talking to himself, he is addressing himself. . . . [It is important to see that this is not the same as] morbidity and introspection. . . . We must talk to ourselves instead of allowing “ourselves” to talk to us. In spiritual depression we allow ourself to talk to us instead of talking to our self. Am I being deliberately paradoxical? Far from it. This is the very essence of wisdom in this matter. Have you realized that so much of the unhappiness in your life is due to the fact you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? . . . So this man stands up and says: “Self, listen for a moment. . . .” Then you must go on to remind yourself of who God is, and what God is and what God has done and what God has pledged himself to do. . . . Then end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with the man, “*I shall yet praise Him . . . for he is my God.*”³⁷⁷

Lloyd-Jones is careful to say this is not forcing your emotions. It is the opposite. It means regularly spending time in prayer and Bible reading even when you are quite dry. John White, who was a Christian psychiatrist, wrote a book called *The Masks of Melancholy*. He said,

Years ago when I was seriously depressed, the thing that saved my sanity was a dry as dust grappling with Hosea’s prophecy. I spent weeks, morning by morning, making meticulous notes, checking historical allusions in the text, and slowly I began to sense the ground under my feet growing steadily firmer. I knew without any doubt that healing was springing from my struggle to grasp the meaning of the passage. If sufferers have any ability to concentrate, they should do solid, inductive Bible study rather than devotional reading, because in most depressed people, devotional reading is stopped all together or degenerated into something unhealthy and unhelpful.³⁷⁸

White knew that when you are despondent an effort to read the Bible “devotionally”—that is, looking for inspiration and uplift—is not the answer. Instead, he counsels that you should study the Bible for content. Get the truth out of the text. Remind yourself of who God is, and who you are in Christ, and what he has done for you. Simone Weil says that it is important to at least *want* to love God. So do what you can to pray to him and ponder the truth. And wait. Wait like Job waited.

Many people who have done this work—this “dry meditation and prayer”—have especially used the Psalms to great profit. The Psalms are filled with teaching about God, of course, but they are also, in the main, prayers. And they are prayers that cover almost the entire range of human experience. They show us people processing their condition before God—they are “praying” their situation instead of merely thinking about it. We see psalmists praying their tears, their doubts, their fears, their griefs, their hopelessness—as well as their joys and blessings. There is no better place to wait for God than deep inside the Psalter.

“My Servant Job”—Again

Job gives his final reply to God in Job 42:2–6. It is clear from the grammar and the words that this is an act of worship, not a begrudging knuckling under, for Job calls God “wonderful” (v. 3). His opening lines are really an exclamation, almost an outburst: “You can do everything! None of your plans can be frustrated!” Job admits that his demands had not taken into consideration the wonder of who God is (v. 2–3). He also admits that God has plans behind everything that happens, even if those plans are hidden.

To what do we owe this new change of tone, this new sense of discovery? Job says that originally he had heard of God with the ears, but now “my eyes have seen you.” This means that the abstract concepts of God’s power, majesty, and might had not really gripped his heart. God’s appearance and speeches had brought all this home to him, and had shaken him out of his desire for self-justification, his insistence on explanation and public vindication, and out of his belief that he knew better

than God what needed to happen. So the change in Job is as much a matter of spiritual experience as deeper theology. It is both, really, not just one or the other.

And finally Job says, “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (v. 6). This statement is not quite what it appears to be on the surface. The word *myself* is not in the Hebrew—it is an interpretive move by the NIV translators, and many commentators don’t think it is the best one. The word *repent* can also mean “retract” and since this has been the point of the whole of God’s speeches, it seems that is the best way to read it. Job is not here expressing a general repentance for all his depravity. That would defeat the whole purpose of the book, because that is what Job’s friends have been trying to get him to do. Instead, he is doing what he was unwilling to do in Job 40:3–5. He abandons his self-justification project. He retracts his demand that God, because of Job’s righteousness, must give him explanation and public vindication. He gives up trying to control God (that is to say, he stops mistrusting God) in any way. He bows before God and lets him be who he is. He serves God for himself alone.

The Other Innocent Sufferer

But we must notice something that is easily missed. Though God’s long speeches are filled with strong words reminding Job of his finite humanness—they do not contain any statements about Job’s sins. God never says anything about any sins bringing on Job’s suffering. And so, though Job never learns the reasons for the tragedy, he also learns something crucial for his peace of mind. “The fact that God does not come forward (as the friends did) with a list of Job’s sins was itself proof that this was not needed,” writes Anderson.³⁷⁹ God’s appearance to Job in a terrifying storm, yet as *Tahweh*, without any accusations, means that God loves and accepts him, that his unusual suffering is *not* punishment for unusual sin. And so the very lack of condemnation means that Job is right with God. In effect God is saying, “This should be enough for you, Job.” And it is.

God’s great silence about Job’s sin is a tremendous assurance of love. How do *we* get this assurance in the midst of our suffering? How can we be sure that no matter what it looks like to the world, we are loved and accepted by the only eyes that count? How can *we* trust God’s grace, not our own righteousness, so we can refrain from being Judge of the World even when things are so confusing?

We don’t need a voice out of the storm. Rather, we need to know that Jesus Christ bowed his head into the greatest storm—the storm of divine justice—for us, so we can hear a voice of love from the holy God. He took the condemnation we deserve so God can accept us. For Jesus is the ultimate Job, the only truly innocent sufferer. Jesus “was willing to live the life of Job to its ultimate conclusion. He was willing to die while considered by friend and foe alike to be a fool, a blasphemer, even a criminal—powerless to save himself.”³⁸⁰ As Job was “naked,” penniless, and in physical pain (Job 1:21), so Jesus was homeless, stripped naked, and tortured on the cross. While Job was relatively innocent, Jesus was absolutely, perfectly innocent, and while Job felt God abandoning him, Jesus actually experienced the real absence of God, as well as the betrayal of his foolish friends and the loss of family. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus saw that if he obeyed God fully, he’d be absolutely abandoned by God and, essentially, destroyed in hell. No one else has ever faced such a situation. Only Jesus truly “served God for nothing.”

Far more than Job, Jesus was assaulted by Satan. But in the greatest reversal of all, Satan only brought about the achievement of God’s salvation and grace. Francis Anderson says, “This is the final answer to Job and all the Jobs of humanity. As an innocent sufferer, Job is the companion of God.”³⁸¹ In other words, when you suffer without relief, when you feel absolutely alone you can know that, because he bore your sin, he will be with you. You can know you are walking the same path Jesus walked, so you are *not* alone—and that path is only taking you to him.