

God Is Big, We Are Small: Job 38-40
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
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Suffering reveals our sin. That's the main point we drew from Elihu's speeches which we looked at last week in chapters 32-37 of the book Job. Job had not been guilty of some hidden, unconfessed sin for which he was being punished. But following his great losses, and in the midst of his intense suffering, and in the face of opposition from the three friends, the pride in Job's heart was exposed. And Elihu, even though he was similar to the other counselors in certain ways, was also helpful in highlighting the fact that God uses suffering to reveal our sin to us and turn us away from it. It's not the simplistic theology of immediate retribution, which Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar espoused. It's not that you sin, and God immediately afflicts you in some way. That may be true in some cases, but we cannot assume, as the friends did, that this is the rule. When you suffer, you don't need to look back into the past and try to figure out what sin it is that God is punishing you for. But we should look into our hearts and humbly observe the sin that will be exposed in our lives as we face the difficulties of a particular trial. This is God's gracious fatherly care over us. It is proof that we are His children. Hebrews 12 makes this point. "If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons" (Hebrews 12:8). Then a couple verses later it says, "He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

This was the point I wanted to get across in last week's sermon, and I just want to reiterate it again here. God disciplines us for our good. He is not punishing us for our sin. He is not pouring out wrath upon us because of our sin. He would certainly be just to do that, but in His gracious plans He has chosen to pour out His righteous wrath against sin upon His own Son, Jesus Christ. And for all who repent of their sin and put their hope in Christ, this means that their sins are forgiven and there is no more penalty due. There is no more punishment required. So for those who are united to Christ by faith, there is no suffering that we will ever face in life that will constitute divine retribution. He's not punishing us in order to uphold His justice. Our sin has already been punished on the cross, and therefore His justice is satisfied. Rather, what God does for us in our suffering is refine us and change us and conform us into the image of His Son. "He disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness." He

uses trials to give us more of an eternal perspective on all of life, to turn us away from the petty sins and enticements of this world, and to give us a greater focus on Him. He ordains hardships for us so that we might be like Jesus. As it says just a few verses earlier in Hebrews 12, it describes Jesus as “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (verse 2). This will become our attitude toward the crosses that we will bear in this life. We will endure for the joy set before us.

As we think about suffering I don't want us to have an attitude of fear or dread. I don't want us to focus merely on the point that this life will involve suffering, and then become discouraged or depressed by that reality. I want us to truly embrace the bigger reality, the glorious reality, that God is in control of all of our suffering, and He is intending it all for our good, for our joy! Think for a moment about an unbeliever living a relatively pain-free, comfortable life—enjoying work, enjoying family and friends, enjoying food and exercise, enjoying vacations, enjoying retirement. But what depth of joy has really been experienced in such a life? In spite of all the comforts and enjoyments, there is a vast emptiness. There are intense longings—the desire to behold greatness—that is left unfulfilled. And then retirement dissolves into failing health, a failing mind, and eventually death. And then what? Then the person who may have experienced very little physical pain in this world abruptly enters an experience of everlasting conscious torment in hell. That is the fate of those who continue in rebellion against God and rejection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Compare that life and that eternal destiny to the life of the suffering saint. Think of someone like Jim Elliot, who died as a martyr at the hands of the Auca Indians whom he had gone to serve. He and others were there in Ecuador to help these people and share the Gospel with them. But in 1956 Jim Elliot and 4 other missionaries with him were brutally murdered on the banks of the Curraray River. And on that day Jim's words were proved to be true in a glorious way. He had written in a journal these words which have now become well-known and often-quoted, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Jim Elliott, in his life and in his death, proved that he was no fool, for he gave up everything that this world esteems yet cannot be kept in order to gain that which he could never lose. He experienced the deep and profound joy of serving the Lord with his life. He was able to be part of God's work in taking the Good News of Jesus Christ to a totally unreached people group. He may

not have lived out the American dream, but he tasted a joy and intense pleasure that most Americans will never know.

Remember also Elisabeth Elliot, who was left as a widow with their young daughter, and Rachel Saint, the sister of one of the other men who was killed. They experienced the grief of tragic loss, but they courageously continued on in the work that had begun there. God opened the door for them to enter the tribe and eventually translate the Bible into their language and see many come to faith. The very men who had killed Elisabeth's husband and Rachel's brother now became brothers in the faith.

I say these things to encourage us to endure suffering for the joy set before us. There is great joy held out before us. Joy in seeing the greatness of God and the power of God working in our lives. Joy to be experienced now in the midst of a sinful and suffering world, and joy to be experienced forevermore in heaven. Please, do not think of the Christian life, and the hardships that it will involve, as a sad predicament merely to be tolerated. Let us truly trust in and delight in the sovereign plans of God that are for our eternal good, even when it involves much pain in the present.

What I've said so far is basically a review of last week and some additional things I wanted to say about God's good purposes in our pain. Now we turn to the next major section of the book of Job, which begins in chapter 38. From chapters 3-31 Job and the three friends dialogue and debate as to the meaning of Job's suffering. Then in chapters 32-37 Elihu speaks. And through all of this Job has desperately wanted to hear from God, Himself. Finally, he does. But it's not what he expected.

Look back at the end of chapter 31. These are the last words that Job had spoken in response to the three friends. He says in verses 35-37, "Oh, that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!) Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary! Surely I would carry it on my shoulder; I would bind it on me as a crown; I would give him an account of all my steps; like a prince I would approach him." Job is confidently requesting the opportunity to defend himself before the Almighty. He wants to present his case before Him, and he is sure that God will vindicate him. He speaks similarly at the beginning of chapter 23. "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would pay attention to me. There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge" (verses 3-7).

Well, now Job finally has his moment in the presence of God, but he is not given the opportunity to defend himself. He

does not have a chance to make his case before God. Rather than Job speaking to God, God speaks to Job. Rather than Job questioning God, as he has done throughout the book, God now questions Job.

Job posed many questions to God. For instance, in chapter 10 he said, "I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the designs of the wicked? Have you eyes of flesh? Do you see as man sees? Are your days as the days of man, or your years as a man's years, that you seek out my iniquity and search for my sin, although you know that I am not guilty, and there is none to deliver out of your hand?" (verses 2-7). Job has sought to put God in the dock, to question Him, to interrogate Him. But now in chapter 38 God interrogates Job in a way that puts him in his place and humbles him and causes him to repent.

As we come to chapter 38 what might we expect God to say? From Job's perspective, he is simply hoping for immediate vindication. He doesn't know what the explanation might be, but he wants to clear his name and prove his friends wrong. But from our perspective, we know something that neither Job nor the friends knew. We have read chapters 1-2 of this book, which record the conversations between God and Satan that explain how these events came about. The Lord pointed out Job and bragged about him to Satan. He's a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil (1:8; 2:3). And Satan responded by saying that Job only feared God because God took such good care of him. "Stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face" (1:11). Then in chapter 2, "Stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face" (2:5). God allowed Satan to afflict Job, and the purpose was to prove God's worth and God's glory in the life of a man who would remain faithful to God even in the midst of severe trials.

From our vantage point, having read chapters 1-2, and realizing that God is now going to speak in chapter 38, we might anticipate that God is finally going to break this news to Job. "Listen, Job, I do believe that you are a blameless and upright man, who fears Me and turns away from evil. This suffering has not been a punishment, but a way of proving Satan to be wrong and showing the true nature of your faith and to display My worth!" But that's not at all what God does. In fact, God doesn't say anything about the origin of these events. He doesn't reveal any of that to Job.

Instead, he questions Job. He puts Job in the dock and interrogates him. The Lord's two speeches are filled with rhetorical

questions. These are divinely powerful and convicting rhetorical questions. God does not stop after each question to see what Job is going to say. Indeed, there's no response that could be given or needed to be given. The point is clear in the questions. Job only speaks briefly at the end of each of the Lord's speeches, simply to voice his repentant attitude. God's first speech is in chapters 38-39, with Job's short response in the beginning of chapter 40. This is what we'll look at this morning. Then next week we'll study the Lord's second speech, beginning in 40:6 and continuing through the end of chapter 41, and Job's response in 42:1-6.

I want to make two simple points now that come across very powerfully in these chapters. First, God is big. And secondly, we are small.

God Is Big

Chapter 38 begins by saying that "the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind." This is an intimidating experience for Job, to say the least. We see something here of the holiness and majesty of God. He is to be feared. In other places, too, God appears in a similar way. For instance, when God was about to give Moses the Ten Commandments, Exodus 19 says that "Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly" (verse 18). And it says that the Lord "answered [Moses] in thunder" (verse 19). Ezekiel, also, in his visions of God, records this: "As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal" (Ezekiel 1:4). These would have been intense and unforgettable experiences.

And I think we have something to learn from this about the way we approach our study of the Word, about how we think about prayer, about how we enter into times of corporate worship. Our God is an awesome God, a holy God, and transcendent God, and He demands our attention and our reverence. It is also true that God is imminent. He is close to us and loves us and sympathizes with us and is gentle and kind. And the spectrum of His attributes is a wonderful thing. But let's make sure we don't think of Him only as a gentle, imminent, sympathetic God. For He speaks, and the mountains shake. May we never forget that the God who is revealed in Scripture, the God whom we approach in prayer, the God whom we worship together in these gatherings, is the God who speaks out of the whirlwind. And in the presence of such a God you are not concerned about who is sitting around you, or what you're going to do later in the day. In the presence of such a God there is a riveted focus on the majesty of God.

I pray that we will experience this in our personal times of Bible study and prayer. I pray that we will not treat God's Word casually, or view prayer casually. It is a weighty thing to dialogue with God. I also pray that our gatherings of corporate worship will be characterized by reverence and awe. This is a time each week when we come together to worship the Almighty God of the universe, and our demeanor should reflect that. We should enter into this time with a sense of anticipation that is intense and, can I say, fearful. We want to have a reverent fear of God that allows us to see Him for who He is and to treat His Word appropriately. My hope is that children growing up in this congregation will have it ingrained in them that there is something about God's Word that commands our attention. When God speaks, we listen. There is something very serious and special about the Bible, and about prayer, and about times when the church comes together for corporate worship. Let's all pray that God will continue to reveal Himself to us more and more so that our worship of Him will have a greater dimension of this fear and awe. Our God is a big God.

God makes this point to Job in no uncertain terms. After we're told that the Lord is speaking to Job out the whirlwind, we read these many questions that the Lord poses to Job. They are not questions that anticipate answers. They are rhetorical questions—divinely powerful and convicting rhetorical questions. There is nothing Job could possibly say in response to them. God begins by saying, "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" (38:2-3). God is turning the whole situation around now and putting Job in the dock.

In verse 4 the interrogation begins. In chapters 38-39 there are over 40 questions that God poses, and the point of every one is to show that God is far bigger than Job. He first asks, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding." The point: God laid the foundation of the earth when Job did not even exist. And there's no way Job can begin to understand the power and creativity that God exercised in laying the foundation of the earth. God asks Job about the sea in verse 8, "Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?" He asks him about the dawn in verse 12, "Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?" He asks him about light in verses 19-20, "Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness, that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home?" Then the next statement would have certainly stung. God says in verse 21, "You know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great!" God is saying to Job, You think you're so mature and so wise. You think

you've been around for awhile. You don't know anything compared to what I know.

God asks Job about the constellations in the night sky. Verses 31-33, "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children? Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth?" Again, the placement of the stars is something that is far beyond Job's control or understanding.

In chapter 39 God asks questions about various animals and birds. Can Job comprehend the ways of these animals—when they give birth, how they grow up, their strength and abilities? Of course not! God is the One who made these creatures. God is the One who understands them, because He made them. And thus the animal kingdom is yet another example of how big God is, and how small Job is.

At the beginning of chapter 40 God asks His final question in this first speech. He says, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it." At this point the Lord finally gives Job a chance to respond. And, of course, there is not much to say. God has made His point. God has shown that He is the infinite sovereign creator of the universe. He is the Almighty. God is big, and we are small. And all that's left for Job to do is to agree, to admit that he is very small in the presence of the Almighty. Next week we'll look more specifically at Job's repentance, which he states explicitly in chapter 42, after the Lord's second series of questions.

We Are Small

But this morning let's just notice the humbling and shrinking effect that God's presence should have on us. Look at verses 3-5 in chapter 40. "Then Job answered the Lord and said: "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." In other words, Job bows before God in silence, confessing that he had said far too much.

Everything Job thought he would want to say to God now evaporates in the blazing presence of the Almighty. I believe our experience in heaven will be similar as we enter the presence of God (Revelation 21:3-4). We may often think of questions in this life that we would like to ask God when we get to heaven. I'm not sure that we'll ever actually ask many of those questions. I am confident that our understanding of God will increase dramatically, but it won't be due to theological Q&A sessions. Our understanding will increase, and our reverence will deepen, and our passion will intensify, because we are in the presence of the

Almighty God. The questions and concerns that we wrestle with in this life “will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”¹

Job acknowledges his smallness here. He had an inflated view of himself and an all-consuming concern to vindicate himself. Now he shuts his mouth. The word he uses to say that he is of small account is a word that means light in weight. It’s the opposite of the word for “glory” which means heavy, weighty. God is big and infinite and glorious and weighty. We are small and light and finite, and our existence in this world is fleeting. God’s questions to Job have a profound humbling effect on him, and I pray that God will do that same work in our hearts.

I hope the truth that God is big and we are small will sink into the depth of your heart this morning and transform your perspective on this coming week, that it will change the way you perceive the things going on in your life right now, that it will impact your priorities as you plan for the future, and that it will give you great hope and joy in the Almighty God of the universe. God is big, and we are small. God is infinite, and we are finite. The beauty and mystery of God is immense, vast as the sea. And we are one drop in comparison. We are a mist. Our life is as a vapor, as James says (James 4:14).

God is big, and we are small. And this truth makes the Gospel message all the more astounding, when we realize that the infinite sovereign God sent His only beloved Son to become one of us, to take on the form of a mere human, in order to die for us. What a surprise it should be to us that God would do such a thing! This is such wonderful news, and it is true news. And we can see this glorious Gospel for what it is only when we see God for who He is and when we see ourselves as we truly are. We are small and sinful creatures, deserving of God’s wrath because of how we have rebelled against Him and questioned Him and have sought to find fault with Him. God, in His infinite holiness and majesty, is just to condemn us for our sin. But He chose to redeem many through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. I hope this morning that you will lay your hand over your mouth and humbly submit to this great God, and the gracious provision He has made for sin. Let us acknowledge how great God is and how small we are, and rather than coming to God to interrogate Him as to why certain evils exist in our world or in our own lives, let’s come to Him in faith. Our comprehension is so limited. God is unlimited. He knows. He understands. And His plans are good.

Helen Roseveare was a missionary doctor in the Republic of the Congo, and she writes of this struggle to understand, and then simply to trust in the infinite wisdom of God. During her

¹ From the hymn, “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.”

service there she was beaten and raped by some rebel fighters who came through and ransacked her medical clinic. Here is some of what she wrote about how that affected her faith:

“On that night [29 October 1964], beaten and bruised, terrified and tormented, unutterably alone, I had felt at last that even God had failed me. Surely He could have stepped in earlier, surely things need not have gone that far. I had reached what seemed to me the ultimate depth of despairing nothingness. Yet even as my heart had cried out against God for His failure and my mental anguish taunted me to doubt His very existence, another reasoning had made itself felt. . . . Events had moved so fast: everything seemed to happen at once. Pain and cruelty and humiliation had continued in an ever-growing crescendo, yet with it, a strange peace and deep consciousness that God was in charge and knew what He was doing.”²

God will not give us all the answers to our questions. But He does give us Himself. When we cannot understand, we must trust. Mark Dever sums up the point of this book of Job by saying that “God was teaching Job to trust Him based not on why, but on who.”³ We will often not know why certain things are happening to us. Why would God allow this? What purpose is this serving? But in the midst of the whys we must look the One who is in control, whose ways are above our ways and thoughts are above our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9), so that we say as Paul did in Romans 11:34-36 (which is our fighter verse for this week, and also quotes from Job 41:11): “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”

² Quoted in Derek Thomas sermon on Job 38-39, found at www.fpcjackson.org

³ Mark Dever sermon on Job 38-42, found at www.capitolhillbaptist.org