

When God Speaks . . . p. 1

Last week you got a pretty full run-down on the kind of conversation that went on between Job and the three friends who had dropped by to sympathize with him and to give him advice on how to get right with God. The very quick version of chapters 3 through 31 is “Job protests that he is innocent and his three friends refuse to accept his defense.”

Why would they refuse to accept Job’s contention that he had done nothing to deserve this? I think for two reasons:

1. They couldn’t accept that any human is innocent before God, and
2. They couldn’t accept the implication that if Job is innocent, then God is guilty -- He has done wrong to His most trusted and loyal servant on earth.

So they prodded Job to admit his guilt, to confess his sin and to get right with God, while he stubbornly refused and asked for a chance to defend himself before his Maker.

I think you or I might have the same challenge if we were confronted by someone who claimed to be innocent before God, and we, too, might look for guilt that wasn’t justified.

Before we look at God’s response to Job, let’s read some of chapter 31 where Job describes his lifestyle of honoring his God:

Have I lied to anyone or deceived anyone? Let God judge me on the scales of justice, for He knows my integrity. If I have strayed from His pathway, or if my heart has lusted for what my eyes have seen, or if I am guilty of any other sin, then let someone else harvest the crops I have planted . . . If my heart has been seduced by a woman, or if I have lusted for my neighbor’s wife, then may my wife belong to another man . . . for lust is a shameful sin, a crime that should be punished. It is a devastating fire that destroys to hell. It would wipe out everything I own. If I have been unfair to my male or female servants, if I have refused to hear their complaints, how could I face God? What could I say when He questioned me about it? For God created both me and my servants. He created us both. Have I refused to help the poor, or crushed the hopes of widows who looked to me for help? Have I been stingy with my food and refused to share it with hungry orphans?

(remember that he was accused of refusing to help the poor and needy, the widows and orphans by Eliphaz, way back in chapter 22 -- now, he answer this accusation)

No, from childhood I have cared for orphans, and all my life I have cared for widows. Whenever I saw someone who was homeless and without clothes, did they not praise me for providing wool clothing to keep them warm? If my arm has abused an orphan because I thought I could get away with it, then let my shoulder be wrenched out of place! Let my arm be torn from its socket! That would be better than facing the judgment sent by God. For if the majesty of God opposes me, what hope is there? Have I put my trust in money or felt secure because of my gold? Does my happiness depend on my wealth and all

that I own? have I looked at the sun shining in the skies or the moon walking down its silver pathway, and been secretly enticed in my heart to worship them? If so, I should be punished by the judges, for it would mean I had denied the God of heaven.

Have I ever rejoiced when my enemies came to ruin or become excited when harm came their way? No, I have never cursed anyone or asked for revenge.

My servants have never let others go hungry. I have never turned away a stranger but have opened my doors to everyone.

And shortly after this Job's final speech is ended.

What do you think of Job? Would you trust him to manage your finances? Would you let his household take care of your children for a few days? If you had an issue that you desired counsel about, would you take it to Job? He's the most trustworthy, kind, compassionate, responsible kind of person you could ask for in those situations and he is all of those things because he has a huge respect for God. His whole orientation in life is determined by his devotion to his Creator. As with other books of Hebrew wisdom literature, the message here is clear: the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

Now, the next six chapters contain a long speech by a younger man named Elihu who is never mentioned in any other part of the story. God doesn't rebuke him, the narrator doesn't refer to him prior to chapter 32 nor in the conclusion to the book, and neither Job nor his 3 friends speak to him. He parrots the others in saying that God punishes sin and always rewards good, the "God-in-the-box" interpretation that we saw last week. But, he says more, and in a way, Elihu's speech prepares us for the things that God will say starting in chapter 38. Let me give you a small sample, then we'll turn to God's response to Job:

God will not do wrong. The Almighty cannot twist justice. Who put the world in His care? Who has set the world in place? If God were to take back His Spirit and withdraw His breath, all life would cease, and humanity would turn again to dust. Could God govern if He hated justice? Are you going to condemn the Almighty Judge?

Look, God is exalted beyond what we can understand. His years are without number . . . By His mighty acts He governs the people . . . We cannot imagine the power of the Almighty, yet He is so just and merciful that He does not oppress us. No wonder people everywhere fear Him. People who are truly wise show Him reverence.

That's Elihu, six chapters from the man who nobody else even mentioned in this story. But it sets the stage. Each of the other characters has run out of words. They have tried to convince one another of their position and they have exhausted themselves of arguments and patience in the process. Now, it's time for resolution. Now, it's time to hear from God.

Then Yahweh answered Job from the whirlwind: 'Who is this that questions My wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them. Where were you when I laid the

foundations of the earth? Tell Me, if you know so much. Do you know how its dimensions were determined and who did the surveying? What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

I'm not going to read all four chapters today, but let's look at this first paragraph. Remember that God later said that Job had spoken the truth about Him, but here He says that Job's words were ignorant. What's ignorant truth? Job spoke out of what he knew, what was real, what he knew from his experience of life. He knew that he was not guilty of some great evil that had brought on the suffering he had been forced to endure. He knew that God did not always punish evil and reward good in this life. He also knew that God is sovereign and so, when things aren't right in this world, it's appropriate to appeal to God to make things right or to at least ask why things are wrong. Those things are true, but they also demonstrate a lack of insight into the complexity of issues that God faces in making decisions as to what to allow and what not to allow. Job's comments don't give us understanding of the wisdom that is required to govern the lives of humans, the wisdom that has to make choices between good and greater good, evil and greater evil.

So God's first pronouncement -- "Who is this that questions My wisdom with such ignorant words" is not a sarcastic put-down as much as it is a statement of fact. Job spoke out of his pain, but he also spoke without deep knowledge of all that was involved in his circumstances.

God then calls on Job to prepare to defend himself. "I have some questions for you, and you must answer them!" This is perhaps not what you or I would expect from God. What we might expect is that God would tell Job how sorry He is that Job has had to suffer so much, and how He is already preparing to restore all his wealth to him. We might expect God to come up with a brief history of his conversations with Satan and that He might even tell Job how proud He is of the way Job stood up under the trials he faced. But it almost sounds as if God is angry with Job for questioning Him at all. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell Me if you know so much." You might protest at this point that God is not helping Job with his questions or giving him any kind of comfort. Job is still in pain, still covered with boils, still plagued with hopelessness and still without an answer to the questions of his existence. But God pushes forward with His questions of Job: "Who laid earth's cornerstone as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?"

What is God doing here? He's opening Job's eyes to a world that he has had no experience of, the world of ancient past, of supernatural power, and of infinite wisdom. He's describing this earth from the point of view of the Creator, with stars that sing and angels that shout for joy. Job has never heard stars sing or angels shout. There is nothing in Job's experience to this point of his life that can help him relate to the scene that God is describing. This is a description of infinite wisdom and infinite power at work in the creation of a vast and complex universe which still challenges the understanding of the brightest humans.

I think God is challenging Job's perspective, saying that he has no basis to make such demands of God because He has so little knowledge. Let's look at some of the limitations to Job's understanding in portions of the text that follow:

Have you ever commanded the morning to appear and caused the dawn to rise in the east? Have you ever told the daylight to spread to the ends of the earth, to bring an end to the night's wickedness? ... Can you hold back the movements of the stars? Are you able to restrain the Pleiades or Orion? Can you ensure the proper sequence of the seasons or guide the constellation of the Bear with her cubs across the heavens? Do you know the laws of the universe and how God rules the earth?

Here again we see God's immense power and wisdom contrasted with Job's powerlessness, his absolute weakness in the face of loss and disease. He can't even rid himself of boils on his skin, let alone restrain the movements of the stars or command the morning. It's not that God has no compassion for Job - we'll see that in awhile - but before he deals with Job's losses, he deals with Job's smallness. Here's something we need to grasp today -- if we can only know how small we are, how tiny in the greatness of the cosmos, how insignificant we are in relation to the 7 billion + other people who share the planet with us -- then we can begin to appreciate the fact that God loves us; He loves you and me in a personal and intimate way. He knows us, He cares about us, He relates with us, He answers our prayers and supplies our needs, not because we're the heavy hitters on planet earth, but because He is the great lover of His creation.

I love this line, "Do you know the laws of the universe and how God rules the earth?" I find it fascinating that in our day there is great debate about the laws of the universe and in particular, how they got there. Why are there laws that govern the movements of planets and stars, that determine the function of different elements, that bring things together that form the building blocks of all life? Why, if there is no Creator, if there is no Designer, are there such observable laws that bring order out of chaos? 4000 years ago God pointed out to Job that there were laws through which God rules the earth -- fascinating!

From the end of chapter 38 and all through 39, God asks Job if he understands the ways of a wide variety of wild animals. Most of what He describes is positive: the strength of the wild ox, the agility and courage of the horse, the grace of a hawk in flight or the vision of the eagle. I'm intrigued by one description in chapter 39, that of the ostrich:

She lays her eggs on top of the earth, letting them be warmed in the dust. She doesn't worry that a foot might crush them or that wild animals might destroy them. She is harsh toward her young, as if they were not her own. She is unconcerned though they die, for God has deprived her of wisdom. He has given her no understanding. But whenever she jumps up to run, she passes the swiftest horse with its rider.

There is strength and there is weakness, or vulnerability, in each of God's creatures;

and this is by His design and for His purpose.

Then we arrive at chapter 40 and Yahweh asks Job for his response:

Then Yahweh said to Job, "Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?"

Then Job replied to Yahweh, "I am nothing -- how could I ever find the answers? I will put my hand over my mouth in silence. I have said too much already; I have nothing more to say."

At this point God asks the key question that forms the heart of His response to Job:

Are you going to discredit My justice and condemn Me so you can say you are right?

So, first God asks Job if he wants to keep arguing, even though he doesn't have answers, then He asks if Job is willing to discredit God, to accuse God, just so Job can say he is in the right. Job has nothing to say in reply, so Yahweh continues to describe some of the amazing creatures He has made. Finally, Job gives his answer:

I know that You can do anything, and no one can stop You. You ask, "Who is this that questions My wisdom with such ignorance?" It is I. And I was talking about things I did not understand, things far too wonderful for me to know.

You said, "Listen and I will speak! I have some questions for you, and you must answer them." I had heard about You before, but now I have seen You with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.

What a gift Job was given -- to see God and live, to see himself in relation to the power and wonder and wisdom of God and to be given the grace of humility. "I am nothing -- how could I ever find the answers? . . . I have said too much already; I have nothing more to say . . . I was talking about things I did not understand; things far too wonderful for me to know . . . I take back everything I said and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance."

Did God answer any of Job's questions? No. Was it necessary or even somewhat important that God answer Job's questions? No. Because when Job met God, he was satisfied. He no longer needed to complain about his circumstances or to seek to defend his innocence. Once he had seen God, it was enough.

I think that the final question God asked of Job is the question for our day. "Are you going to discredit My justice and condemn Me so you can say you are right?" So many of the new atheists write and speak as if they are in a position to judge God, to determine whether He has acted justly or not. Even some Christians wonder if God wasn't over the top in some of His judgments in Old Testament times. But the presumption that we can judge God is really off base. We can only judge from a human point of view and we can easily value human welfare and happiness above God's interests, His purposes. If we are so biased in our own favour before we even look at the issues, and if we are so limited in our knowledge of what is taking place

that we don't fully comprehend what those issues are, who are we to judge God? Who are we to say that He should have done something different when we have no clue what the consequences of that action would be?

If God had answered Job's questions, we would have gained little more than a recap of the opening two chapters, but instead we gain great insight into our smallness in relation to God's greatness. I love the story that is told of the funeral of Louis IV of France. He had been known as Louis the Great or the "Sun King" and still holds the record for the longest reign of a monarch in a major European country in history, over 72 years. Under his reign France was the most powerful nation in Europe and he was the most powerful monarch as he continually took greater power to himself at the expense of the aristocrats and the church. His funeral, for which he had planned every detail, was attended by all the heads of state of Europe and was full of pomp and ceremony. It included a solitary candle which represented his life as standing alone and above the lives of everyone else there. But when the cardinal stood to deliver the message, he snuffed out that candle and said, "Only God is great." What a message for our day. When all is said and done, the Creator is greater than His creation, the Master understands more than His servants, and the world moves forward in time in ways that we cannot control or even comprehend.

One of the core lessons of the book of Job is that living well, living with wisdom at your right hand, requires faith. To live as God wants us to live means that we will trust Him, that we will acknowledge His great power and great wisdom in all He does and, when we don't understand, we'll continue to work our way forward with God. We don't turn around and start trusting the empty schemes of this world simply because we don't understand. We don't give up on God because His ways are higher than our ways. And we don't lose hope, or light, or the life of the Spirit because we can't explain the ways of God to the person who doesn't believe, who doesn't share our faith. From the beginning to the end of the Bible, God was always looking for a people who would trust Him more than they trusted themselves, and when He found them, He did great things in and through their lives. May it be so again in our day.