



## COMFORT IN STRANGE PLACES

### Musings on the Book of Job

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Job only makes sense to the suffering man. We often approach this book like Job's friends approached him. We find its message questionable and dangerous. At times we may find the message irrelevant. This is not surprising. Job himself tells us that men at ease hold misfortune in contempt (12:5).

“JOB HOLDS TREMENDOUS AND SURPRISING RESOURCES FOR THE SUFFERING MAN. I BELIEVE THIS IS ITS PURPOSE.”

When we are free from suffering we are wearied by others suffering and seek to avoid them like the plague. We imagine that the sufferer is exaggerating his circumstances. We determine that things are not nearly as bad as they are making them out to be. We shrug off their hardship and wish them to just buck up.

This is not true for the man in the throes of adversity. The man garbed in sackcloth and covered in ashes will not scrutinize the book of Job. He will cherish it. It will

be to him a drink of water in the desert that has now become his life. He will leave Eliphaz and Zophar and find a place in the dirt next to Job. His voice and Job's wail will become indistinguishable.

He will join the journey of tortuous questions and bold laments. He will walk the path of sorrow, pain, and confusion with Job. He will grieve and be stung by the words of comfort he used to throw toward the hurting. When he looks at Job he will no longer see a stranger. He will see himself.

Your circumstances inevitably influence the way you read this book. A current experience of ease or of suffering will determine your friends and your seat as you read. I assume that both experiences are necessary to understand the dynamic tension in the book of Job. I do believe, however, that suffering is the hermeneutical factor that brings this divine masterpiece out of the realm of theological speculation and into the experience of the believer.

Job holds tremendous and surprising resources for the suffering man. I believe this is its purpose. God, the

“The dramatic power of the book of Job attests to the reality that faith, beyond easy convictions, is a demanding way to live that thrives on candor and requires immense courage.”

Walter Brueggemann

greatest pastor alive, takes us by the hand and leads us through this important journey called Job to equip us for life in this painful and confusing world. Job is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.

For the man who has seen affliction (Lam 3:1), this book will be a faithful companion throughout this earthly sojourn. Job continues to increase in value for me. In these last months I have been surprised by comfort through this book.

The solace I have known has sprung forth from unexpected and strange places in this book. This most recent journey through Job has taught me an invaluable lesson. There are resources stocked away in Scripture awaiting us.

Resources we stroll by and have no use for at certain times in our journey. But there they sit and wait. Our time will come when we desperately need them. I have found Job to be such a resource. What a gracious and wise gift from the author of Scripture.

Some have argued that Job is a theodicy, a philosophical and theological attempt to explain or justify the existence of evil. I demur. The tone of this book is intensely personal and pastoral. This is no philosophical approach to the problem of evil. This is a pastoral approach to that problem.

This book is filled with pastoral resources that will bolster, equip, and persevere the suffering individual and community. Equipping people against evil, not explaining it, is the intent of this book. We may have no further answers to the problem of suffering after reading this book, but we will have resources to endure and assail it.

Suffering poses more of a threat to our faith than our philosophical underpinnings. A thorough explanation of the problem of evil is no guarantee that our faith will endure the evil we know everything about. The Bible is more interested in giving us what we need to go on believing and trusting in the face of absurd suffering, confusion, and evil. Answers and explanations do not do this. The book of Job is a strong testimony to that fact. God gives no answers. Apparently they are not necessary.

The following are some musings from the past month about the book of Job. They are in no specific order and there is no intended organization to these thoughts. I am not certain why I am writing this; except that writing is often the way truth gets worked deeper into my heart. It helps me chew it, digest it, and draw out its energy for my own faith. In sharing these thoughts with you my prayer is a simple one. I desire that the resources of the book of Job would bring you comfort and produce in you a holy stubbornness in the face of hardship.

### **Job in 3D**

I have been intrigued by the three-dimensional nature of Job. In this book we can discern a heavenly dimension, an earthly dimension, and a collision of the heavenly and the earthly. Each of these three dimensions is an important angle from which to read and understand the book of Job. All three angles also provide important pastoral insight to the issue of suffering.

#### **Dimension 1: The Heavenly**

##### ***God and Satan***

Chapters 1-2 take place in a realm that is foreign to Job. The heavenly throne room is the setting for the first scene of the book of Job. The main characters in this scene are God, Satan, and some other angelic onlookers. This scene is completely hidden from the sight of Job and his friends. They are never given any word from God or anyone else that this conversation went on. We the readers are granted this perspective. We, the readers, see the heavenly logic behind the earthly circumstances. This insider's perspective is crucial to keep in mind as we read the book of Job.

As the heavenly scene opens, Satan is strolling into the throne room of the Almighty to give an account of his wanderings on the earth. He is a creature and like all creatures he is subject to the will of the Sovereign. Even his rebellion is placed in the service of the King. The conversation that ensues between the Accuser and the Almighty is shocking. God initiates the dialogue about this unique man named Job. He asks the enemy if he has considered this man.

Apparently it is the vocation of the enemy to “consider” (1:8, 2:3) God’s standout servants. But in this situation it seems his lack of omniscience had hidden God’s prized possession from his eyes. God calls Satan’s attention to the superstar of the East. There was not a man like him in all the earth. Job was a righteous, God-fearing man.

It seems that God’s boast of Job is nothing short of a challenge to the enemy. Satan gladly takes up the challenge. He insults the Maker with his assertion that Job’s faith is fundamentally utilitarian. Satan is confident that praise will be replaced by curses as soon as the gifts of God are removed from Job.

God grants authority over everything belonging to Job. His only demand is that Satan refrain from harming Job’s body, everything else is fair game. In the second dialogue between Satan and God the ban is lifted and Job’s body is no longer off limits.

For Job, he was broadsided with wave after wave of senseless suffering. For the reader, his suffering directly corresponds to an ongoing dialogue in the heavenly realm. Job was oblivious to this conversation. It is clear from this dialogue that God initiated and authorized the suffering of Job. It is also clear that Satan initiated the suffering of Job and under the authorization of God enacted it.

The reason for the suffering is not clear from the text. In fact God says that Satan incited him to destroy Job “without reason” (2:3). The what, and who behind the suffering of Job are clear, but the why is not. The reader is in no better shape than Job on this question. Other testimonies in the canon assure us that God’s purpose and intention in Job’s suffering was not whimsical, but laced with compassion and mercy (James 5:11).

The reader must learn from these first two chapters that there is always a heavenly dimension to the various circumstances and events occurring in the earthly realm. The reality is, however, that we are like Job and his friends. We do not know what is behind the curtain. And for the most part (apart from Biblical revelation) we are not privy to that information.

It is futile to try to search this out. It is also futile to try to interpret what God is doing or saying through his

providential arrangements. This point is implicit in the earthly dialogue between Job and his friends. The text does invite us to understand that the earth is a battlefield. We have an enemy that roams the earth and “considers” how to best ravage its inhabitants.

The text also invites us to trust in the true God, not our perceptions of him. Most of us would like to cut out the first two chapters of Job. At the very least, we would like to edit God’s script. In these chapters we see God initiating a conversation that will undo his creature, Job. Job was not on Satan’s radar before this conversation! We see God granting the enemy authority to annihilate his property, destroy all his wealth, kill his entire family, and take away his health.

“HERE IS AN IMMENSELY FREE AND SOVEREIGN DEITY...THIS SAME GOD USED HIS FREEDOM TO BIND HIMSELF TO A BODY, SUFFER DEATH ON A TREE, AND CONQUER THE SOVEREIGN GRAVE...THE GOD OF JOB IS THE CARPENTER OF NAZARETH.”

How can God speak like this? How can God act like this? How can he give permission to the enemy to do this? If you let the text speak---astonishment and dread will grip you. If you dismiss the book of Job as an old covenant relic that’s mistaken in its portrait of God then you can go safely on your way. The truth is, there is no animosity between the testaments in their sketch of God.

Here is an immensely free and sovereign deity. Here is a God who is accountable to none, but himself. Here is a God who does not explain himself. Here is a dangerous God, One who is unthreatened by our finite notions of him and unmoved by our feeble attempts to corral him. He is clearly infinite in his being, comprehensive in his dominion, and unfettered in his actions.

This same God used his freedom to bind himself to a body, suffer death on a tree, and conquer the sovereign

grave. It is not another deity revealed in Jesus Christ. No, the God of Job is the Carpenter of Nazareth.

Like Job, when we come to terms with the expanse of his person we will put our hands over our mouths. Like the disciples, when we come to terms with a crucified King we will do away with our safe conception of discipleship. The nature of God revealed in his sovereign activity is intended to humble his creatures and inspire them to worship. These unveilings also have a way of destroying our ideas about him that we may reconstruct a proper view of his majesty in our hearts. In this regard, Job is a bulldozer.

The heavenly scene is a significant challenge to our naturalistic and mechanistic worldview. In the West, we rarely consider the possibility of a supernatural explanation for a fire, a theft, an attack, a house collapsing, a sickness, or a death (1:13-19). These are natural events that happen to people by chance.

Job helps us understand the overlap of realms that provides the context for our existence. He helps us see the ripple effects of one simple heavenly discussion. What then has been the earthly impact of other heavenly events (think for example of Revelation 12:1-17)? This does not mean we always know what is happening, but it does guard us from thinking we can explain every event that occurs.

At the end of the day, the heavenly dimension of Job teaches us that the terminal cause of all things is God. Job presents the reader with a staggering vision of the sovereignty of God. Job is correct in his assessment of the situation: “the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away” (1:21). Satan is merely a link in the chain of events. God is the creator and holder of the chain.

This is why Job is also correct in his approach to his suffering. God and God alone must be pursued, argued with, lamented to, and worshipped---for he is the bringer

and reliever of the pain. Brueggemann is on point in his observation. “The lament form [of psalms]...gives expression to Israel’s most fundamental conviction, namely, that Yahweh is sovereign over the present situation and can work good out of it.”<sup>1</sup>

The lament of Job that forms the heart of this book is the correct and logical response to his doctrine of God. Lament, not silence, is the touchstone of a robust belief in God’s unqualified rule over all things.

## **Dimension 2: The Collision**

### ***Satan and Job***

Heaven and earth collide as soon as the dialogue between God and the Accuser has concluded. The enemy descends to the earth with a fiendish strategy to strip Job of every thing he values. And this he does.

Behind the marauding caravan that steals and destroys every last animal of Job’s livestock is the prince of the power of the air (1:13-17). Incited by the evil one, these men became tools in his hand to assault the faith of Job. Though Satan steps off the stage in Chapter 2, the reader of Job must recognize his crucial role in creating the situation of suffering.<sup>2</sup>

The book of Job speaks to us of a world where an enemy roams about seeking to devour his prey (1 Pet 5:8). The shocking thing about this book is that God is his hunting guide. Leaving aside that enigma, the book of Job is a relentless assertion that we are not the sole inhabitants of this earth.

There is an unseen community that directly influences our lives. Angelic activity, whether fallen or righteous, has consequences for our existence. Two realms collide when fallen angels assault human beings. Two realms converge when righteous angels serve us and defend us. The conversations of the heavenly court ripple out into our lives.

Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 20. “Satan is not simply a minor figure who has a walk-on part in Chapters 1 and 2 and then disappears from the action. Rather the battle with evil is a major motif in the book as a whole.”

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 77.

<sup>2</sup> There is a good possibility that he makes another entrance in the form of Leviathan in chapter 41. This is the argument of Robert S. Fyall, *Now my Eyes have Seen You: Images of creation and evil in the book of Job* (Downers

The collision between Job and Satan is one-sided. The enemy crashes into Job. He seems unaware that one other than the Sovereign is acting upon him. Job does not try to engage the evil one in any dialogue or legal contest. In fact, he does not even acknowledge his place in this entire event. Satan assaults Job and Job looks directly toward God. This book gives us lenses that challenge our view of reality.

### ***Job and God***

We also see this collision as God engages Job. The Sovereign deity inserts himself into this earthly realm and interacts with Job on three levels. His hand is discernible in the suffering of Job. His ear is ever present in the lament and petition of Job. And his presence is overwhelming in the whirlwind encompassing Job.

“VOICE IS JOB’S ONE REMAINING  
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CALAMITY PASSES.”

#### *1. The suffering*

There is tension and paradox in these first chapters regarding who is behind the calamities of Job. We see this in the event of fire falling from heaven (1:16). Clearly this is Satan’s intention and plan and yet we recognize that this feat is outside of his capacity. He is a maverick angel, not an omnipotent being.

The text says the fire is explicitly “from God” and that “heaven” is its place of origin (1:16). We see a similar tension in the wind that takes out the house of Job’s children (1:19). This is clearly the prerogative of the Creator.

When Job laments his situation he does not identify Satan as the ultimate cause of his suffering. He identifies God. It is God who has “taken away” (1:21), an assertion that God himself does not dispute (1:22). We see this same dynamic in Chapter 2 and Job’s physical ailments. We are left questioning whose “hand” is responsible for Job’s malady (2:5-7).

The book of Job tells us that both good and ill come from God. This is an inconvenient truth that most would like to deny. Doesn’t identifying God as the author of our pain only compound our pain? It may be. But, failing to identify the true source of our suffering also removes us from the one who can do anything about it.

Living in denial about suffering is no way to deal with pain. The only way to deal with pain is to go through it. Sheltering sufferers from the extensive sovereignty of God is ultimately damaging. Job certainly teaches us this much.

He looks his suffering in the face. He rightly, though incompletely, identifies its source. And he correctly walks in it and through it before the face of God. It’s actually his view of the absolute sovereignty of God that equips him to suffer well.

#### *2. The lament and petition*

The heart of the book of Job is an extended and rigorous lament. As Job feels the assault of heaven he in turn besieges the celestial gates. He comes before God with nothing but his voice. He cries out to the Sovereign.

When you step back and think of it, prayer is an audacious undertaking. It is nothing short of an invasion of earthly inhabitants upon heavenly soil. It is the bold acting of a creature upon his Creator. In prayer, two realms collide. Communication takes place between two dimensions. This is simply remarkable.

Job teaches us much about the place of lament in dealing with pain. He shows us that open, honest, transparent language is the appropriate way to engage with God in suffering. He shows us that silent suffering is dangerous.

Communication in suffering is the lifeline of the hurting person. Voice is Job’s one remaining possession after the barrage of calamity passes. His friends try to rob him even of this. This book teaches us that voice is integral for working through pain and suffering.

#### *3. The whirlwind*

The realms crash into each other in dramatic fashion at the end of Job. All realm convergence to this point has

been subtle and muted. Both the Sovereign and the Accuser have worked through secondary means.

The whirlwind is an unmediated visit of the Almighty. No messenger. No angelic in-between. No written communication. God shows up and blows Job's mind. The whirlwind reveals and conceals the Creator. He wraps himself in it like a garb to protect frail Job. A glimpse through the storm into God's glory would bring total ruin to Job.

The whirlwind also reveals something of his nature. It is a fitting revelation of himself to Job. He is a storm. His origination is not of man. His direction and decisions are not swayed by flesh. He will not be fenced. He will not be controlled. He is not safe. He is glorious and awe inspiring. He is the Storm Rider. The Sovereign. The King. Let all the earth tremble and quake before him.

The sheer magnitude and weight of God overwhelms Job. Suffocated by greatness and glory, Job is silenced. The one-sided dialogue that ensues is breathtaking. With broad strokes, God paints a masterful picture of his exhaustive sovereignty and unassailable wisdom.

All of creation is called upon to bear witness to his wisdom and governance---from the mountains to the deserts, the sun to the rain, the leviathan to the rock badger---all created things. The testimony is a harmony of praise for the wise and intentional Creator. There is nothing outside of his carefully ordered providence, nothing without intention and design.

At the end of the day it is the sight of God that changes things for Job, not answers to his questions (42:5). Encounter, presence, nearness, and vision---all more valuable and transformative in suffering than understanding. This is one of the most important lessons of this book. Job was convinced that a trial, answers, and vindication would soothe the pain and bring about the needed solution to his suffering. Like Job, we don't know what we need.

This whirlwind conversation is a rich resource for hurting people. A few of these gems are particularly noteworthy. We learn that God's absolute sovereignty is a surprising source of strength and hope in tribulation.

Job is in the storm of adversity. God shows up in a hurricane like wind. God is not hiding the fact that he is the God of the storm. He does not cover up his governance over Job's situation. The truth of his sovereignty is not to be swept under the rug when adversity strikes. Ironically, the source of Job's pain is also his only hope. Cutting the kingship of God out of the conversation on suffering is not only unwise it is precarious. Only a sovereign God can help.

We also draw from this dialogue that creation theology is foundational for suffering well. It is astonishing to observe God's approach to Job. After a barrage of lament, complaint, and petition God sits Job down for a creation lesson.

By drawing everything back to creation God schools Job in the most important and foundational truths of human existence. God is the Creator. We are his creatures. Affirming these two truths and living within them has profound implications for the human being. We give God his rightful place and take our own. We affirm God's infinite capacity and ability and recognize our finite limits.

In this arena, our perspective and questions on suffering or anything else for that matter are placed in the appropriate context. When we live within creaturely boundaries and refuse to confine the Creator we are rooted in reality and wisdom is sure to follow. God's questions to Job are absurd precisely because he is a mere creature. Knowing one's place before God is vital for right thinking about suffering and pain.

One final thing that can be discerned from this give and take is God's tremendous concern for his creation. Skill and forethought accompanied every creative activity of this God. His sustained care is expressed through his extensive knowledge and ample provision for all that he has made.

He is a God that delights to bring water on a land where there is no man and feed the young of animals we rarely ever see (38:26, 39-41). Jesus viewed this loving providence as a baseline for understanding God's care for human beings (Matt 10:29-31). If the "how much more" (Matt 10:31, Rom 8:32) formula can be laid over top of



these final chapters then we have a striking affirmation of God's care for Job.

Stepping back, we have spent time considering the collision of dimensions in the book of Job. We saw that the realms converge when Satan acts upon Job to afflict him with suffering. We also saw this convergence in the relationship between God and Job. We have noted that understanding the heavenly dimension is vital for a proper reading of the book. This interaction of the two realms is of equal importance for a right understanding of Job.

### **Dimension 3: The Earthly**

#### ***Job and Friends***

The third and final dimension to consider is the earthly one. The lion's share of Job takes place on this plane. The heavenly court provides the setting for the heavenly dimension. The dust of the ground provides the setting for the earthly. Job takes a seat in the mud. He is an earth-bound creature and as such he must process, grieve, revolt, and engage his situation on that level.

His friends come and take a sit next to him. They too are earth dwellers. Their perspective is also creaturely. This dynamic is so important to understand. Both Job and his buddies are oblivious to what has occurred in the earthly realm. Borrowing from Ecclesiastes, their entire discussion takes place "under the sun."

The five men (including Elihu) in this story all possess a theocentric worldview. Their thoughts are clearly informed by faith in the unseen. Nevertheless, their discussion is limited to their earthly capacities, perspective, and experience. The book of Job is a brilliant portrayal of human beings grappling to understand things outside their purview.

There are important implications here for the life of faith. We live out our lives on the soil of this earth. All of our experiences and the way we process them are necessarily shackled to the earth. We are always in the position of Job and his friends. We are unaware of all that is happening. We are limited in our perspective and understanding. In short, the book of Job teaches us the

significant limitations of a creature. It teaches us to know our place. It teaches us humility.

As rebellious human beings we balk at and kick against our creaturely limits. Sin in its essence is attempting to transgress our creatureliness. Being a creature is freedom for the creature. It is what we are made to be. It is liberating to live within our God-given parameters. It is freedom to leave off trying to exceed our limits. We are to leave omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and sovereignty to God.

When we relinquish the illusion of control, comprehensive knowledge, and limitless power we are free, free to be creatures fashioned by God. The book of Job tells us we cannot know and understand everything. This is a good thing. It is God's prerogative to know all things. It is ours to know a few things. It is the vocation of the creature to be limited in his knowledge. The glory of God is his infinitude. The glory of the creature is his finitude.

Another take away from the earthly dimension of this book is a profound truth about God. God cares about the thoughts and conversations of his people. Chapters 4-37 matter to God. His omniscience and wisdom does not keep him from listening and caring about his creatures. He sees every flaw in our thinking and yet engages us with concern and patience.

Our level of understanding and accuracy in thinking are not prerequisites for meaningful interaction with our Creator. He meets us where we are. He communicates with us there. He comes down. This is humility. We see this condescending glory all over the Christ. It is evident in his lowly birth, his human interaction and conversation, and his cross. Job's God comes down again in the person of Jesus.

### **Four Views of Reality**

In thinking about the three dimensions of the book of Job and the way they collide and converge we learn some interesting things about the main characters of the book. We quickly learn that they all view the events of the story

in very different ways. This also creates a very intriguing dynamic in the book.

### ***God***

God enjoys the only perfect view of reality. He knows exactly what is going on and why it is happening. He knows perfectly the journey and outcome of the characters in this story. The gaps in the thinking of Job and his friends are no mystery in the mind of God. God knows the main characters in this story better than they know themselves. He knows their thoughts, motivations, emotions, wills, and hearts. He knows how they will act and why long before they do. He is the only character in the story that possesses omniscience.

### ***Job***

Unlike God, Job enjoys a very limited vision of reality. As a creature he is dependent upon God for any understanding of what is really happening in this world. He fears God and therefore takes him at his word. This gives him the edge on creatures that ignore God and try to define their own reality.

Nevertheless, he is a sinful human being and extremely limited in his capacity to understand things outside his purview. As things happen to him, he interprets them out of his worldview, experience, and understanding. Job has major gaps in his understanding although he is doing his best. This is one of the distressing tensions in the book of Job. We can see both sides and we long to bring them together. We want Job to see what we see.

### ***Friends***

The friends of Job are in the same position of Job. They are limited by their humanity and further by their sinfulness. They share the same worldview as Job. They fear God and believe what he has to say. Like Job they have major gaps in their understanding of the events at hand.

The only difference between Job and his friends is the way they fill in the gap. The friends believe that Job's actions are responsible for the situation in which he finds himself. This is another painful dynamic in the story. As

the reader, we want to connect the friends to God's perspective and vindicate Job long before the whirlwind.

### ***Satan***

Satan has his own perception of reality. He has access to information that Job and his friends do not. However, his interpretation of every event is skewed and flawed by his rebellion and pride. His view of God, Job's character, and Job's test are all far from reality. He rounds off the story well. He is a deluded spirit that knows more than Job and his friends, but ultimately knows much less because he does not fear God.

As readers we can see all four of these perspectives in play as the story unfolds. We witness tension when these competing visions of reality collide. This dynamic is key to the development of the plot line. Notice how this can be seen in the interaction of the various characters.

Take for example Job and his friends. They are constantly speaking past each other because their view of the situation is so different. Think also about God and Job at the end of the book. Their view of the event and the solution to the problem are radically different. This can also be seen in the interaction of the other characters.

### **Themes in Job**

In this section, I meditate on some further themes in the book of Job. These themes have been meaningful to me in this season of my life. They are not necessarily major themes, but themes that have captured my attention and encouraged or challenged my heart.

### **Misusing the Bible**

The Bible is one of the most dangerous weapons in the world. How many people have been damaged, oppressed, and even killed by those with Bible in hand? Think of all the evils and atrocities that have been justified by pointing to the Bible: the crusades, slavery, mass suicides, and the oppression of women to name a few. These are heinous and shameful. These are glaring misuses of Scripture. But what of the more subtle ways that people are damaged by the wrong use of the Bible? The book of Job speaks to this.



Job's buddies are theologians. They are biblical students. They know the Word. They seem to have pretty solid skill in biblical interpretation. They also deeply care about Job and have the best of intentions in coming to his aid.

They desire to comfort him and speak truth to him. They fear God and they want to honor God in their interaction with Job. I believe all these things are true. Nevertheless, they are of no help to Job. In fact, their comfort turns out to be an assault on the already wounded Job.

With Bible in hand they urge and plead with Job to see the truth. Maybe they had tears streaming down their faces at first. As time goes on they grow impatient with Job and their tone becomes stronger and more assertive.

They point to the book of Proverbs. They demonstrate great aptitude in biblical wisdom. They are eloquent as they quote texts and explain truth with examples. But they are getting it all wrong and they are damaging their friend.

I really don't believe they were trying to kick Job while he was down. I believe they truly thought they were helping him. After all, they had to be helping since what they had to say was scriptural. The problem was not the truth but the application of the truth. Their solution to Job's problem was wrong because their assessment of his situation missed the mark. A misdiagnosis will always damage a patient when it comes time for treatment.

Just as a doctor must be skilled with the scalpel we must be careful and proficient with the Word. It is really easy to damage people. I have been on both sides of the scalpel. I have gashed people with the Bible and I have been deeply wounded from others.

I am terrified of teaching the Bible for this reason. I believe this is part of why very few should become teachers. Rightly dividing the Word of God is of the uttermost importance. Lord, have mercy on us for all the ways we have hurt people in your name with your book.

### **The Revelation of the Hiddenness of God**

Isaiah tells us explicitly that God is in the business of hiding (Is 45:15). He conceals himself. This is a fact. Job is one book in Scripture that fleshes out this theme. In fact, we may even walk away from Job convinced that we

know far less about God than we did when we began reading. I believe this is one intention of the author.

Yes, as strange as it sounds, I am saying that this book was written that we might know less about God. It is a paradox for God to reveal to us that he is hidden, but that is exactly what he is doing. In essence he is saying, "I want you to know that there is so much of me that you cannot know."

This concealment is tied to his glory (Prov 25:2). God alone has an exhaustive knowledge of God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit hold the exclusive rights and ability to fully comprehend one another (Lk 10:22, 1 Cor 2:10-11, Rom 8:27). There is splendor in his infinite and incomprehensible nature. There is majesty in a God who can never be totally understood.

As creatures it is beyond our capacity to ever know the fullness of God. As creatures any knowledge we have of God is based on his free choice and nothing we do. God chooses the content and limits of his self-revelation. He chooses what to reveal and what to conceal. According to Isaiah and Job, he has left a lot hidden.

### **The Art of Comfort**

I'm not sure why we hold to the stubborn belief that the tongue is the most useful tool in the labor of comfort. Job is not so optimistic about the helpfulness of words in times of suffering. The pain of Job is only compounded by the worthless words of his so-called friends. As the narrative progresses, Job grows increasingly frustrated with his comforters. Here is one of the strongest statements he makes toward them.

"As for you, you whitewash with lies; worthless physicians are you all. Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom! Hear now my argument and listen to the pleadings of my lips. Will you speak falsely for God and speak deceitfully for him? Will you show partiality toward him? Will you plead the case for God? Will it be well with you when he searches you out? Or can you deceive him, as one deceives a man? He will surely rebuke you if in secret you show partiality. Will not his majesty terrify you, and the dread of him fall upon you? Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay" (13:4-13).

Job considers his friends as unqualified and unskilled doctors. They have been worthless in assessing his disease and prescribing any healing procedure. He calls them liars. He wishes they would just shut up. He says that they are in danger of speaking falsely and deceitfully for God. He compares their wisdom to ashes. That is, it is a wisdom that is empty, wasted, and contains no helpful content. To Job, his friends are fundamentally unhelpful.

“FAITH LIVES BEFORE GOD AND SPEAKS ABOUT EVERY THING IN LIFE. JOY AND SORROW, LAMENT AND PRAISE, THESE ARE THE TOPICS OF FAITH TALK.”

Their first few days with Job were by far their most helpful. They said nothing. They just entered his pain. They did not try to explain it. They did not try to understand it. They did not try to fix him. Their presence, not their mouths was what Job needed. This is a lesson we do well to learn. When you are with hurting people silence is likely the best posture.

### **A New Window into Worship**

It is shocking to see Job’s *initial* response in the face of tragedy. The text tells us that he falls on his face in worship (1:20). He confesses his limitations and expresses submission to the sovereignty of God (1:21). We look at this with amazement and we should. However, this is the beginning of the story, not the end. We must also observe the narrative portrayal of Job’s *ongoing* response to his suffering.

After all, what should we do with the entire middle section of the book of Job? What should we make of chapters 3-37? Do we have two different Jobs in this book? Is he a believing worshipper in chapter 1 and a doubting sinner in the remainder of the book? Is it possible that Job’s *ongoing* response is actually a continuation of worship? Is it an act of unbelief? Is it a wrongheaded venting session?

At the end of the book we are left with an interesting paradox. Job is commended for saying nothing wrong

and at the same time Job repents. It is clear that God is pleased with certain ways that Job has engaged him throughout the narrative. I am of the opinion that Job’s honest and rigorous complaint was pleasing to the Lord. It is my view that Job is demonstrating what has been called “the two-sided conversation of faith.”

That is, faith lives before God and speaks about every thing in life. Joy and sorrow, lament and praise, these are the topics of faith talk. Faith looks at reality in the face and does not flinch. It calls a thing what it really is and then talks about it with God. Job does not transition out of worship from Chapter 2 to Chapter 3. He moves from one topic of conversation to another. The key thing to understand is that Job stays before the face of God. His posture does not change.

In my view, worship is one of the unifying themes of Job. He helps us see that worship is about honesty and integrity. Job feels no pressure to sing happy songs when his heart is overwhelmed with pain. In Job, we have passionate lament. On more than one occasion he makes a statement like this one: “I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (7:11). This is a commitment to worship.

### **I Made You**

What would you do if God audibly spoke these words to you? Job was given this humbling and honoring privilege. He heard this from the mouth of God (40:15). It is no wonder that silence followed. What do you say to this? It is the ultimate trump card.

How can the created thing know better than the Creator? This assertion insinuates so much on so many levels. I know you Job, better than you know yourself. I know what you need Job. I know everything about this situation. I know Job. I know. You are very limited Job. I know you cannot understand. I love you Job. You are my creative work. You belong to me.

### **Comprehensive Sovereignty**

Creation theology undergirds the entire book of Job. By nature, theology with creation roots has an elevated view of the sovereignty of God. Creation is concerned with an

omnipotent ruler who intricately fashions and extensively governs the world.

The book of Job has a high view of God's sovereignty. The entire narrative is sandwiched by two strong biblical affirmations of God's total control of all things. Nothing stands outside of his reign. All created things do his will whether they are cognizant of it or not. Humans, demons, trees, mountains, oceans, animals, and lightning bolts---they are all under his sway.

If Job were the only book in the Bible there would be sufficient material to formulate a sturdy doctrine of God's sovereignty. It is that pervasive in Job. In the narrative, God's comprehensive control of everything accomplishes many things.

It provokes fear in Job as he recognizes that his situation is from God's hand. It gives Job boldness to engage with God in complaint because he knows that God alone is responsible for and capable of transforming his situation. It is also Job's source of comfort as God reminds him of his careful governance of everything.

### **An Invitation to Honesty**

Job leans into his pain. He walks through it. He refuses to numb it. He is a man who worships with all his heart and a man who grieves with all his heart. I love the passion of this man. The entire middle section is a biblical model for pouring out our guts before the Lord. God affirms Job's passionate lament. He does not affirm all of his conclusions, but he is certainly pleased with his honesty.

The book is an invitation. It is a welcome to honesty in the midst of pain. It is a summons to grieve with everything in you when you suffer. This is no passive defeatism in the face of evil. Job will not accept things as they are. His lamentation is a revolt against his present situation. He won't sit by silently.

His petitions are bold and aggressive maneuvers against his suffering. He presses his way into the throne room and receives an audience with Almighty God. The whirlwind appearance is not disconnected from his loud cries and unyielding petitions. God comes *in response to* Job's persistence. We have much to learn here.

### **Interpreting Circumstances**

The book of Job is a brilliant example of human attempts to assign meaning to events that occur in our lives. Like Job and his friends we assume that we can discern why something is happening or why something is not happening.

We look at the events in our lives and from it we draw conclusions about God's heart toward us. We believe he is revealing his thoughts toward us in our circumstances. This type of subjectivity is dangerous and yet difficult to escape.

The truth is that we are creatures that must depend on the ultimate interpreter. God alone knows the meaning behind every event—and he has not chosen to disclose the why behind his every providential action. As creatures, we must accept our limits and not grasp for omniscience. We do not know and therefore should rest in the freedom that comes from not attempting to know all things.

Instead of attempting to understand the mysteries of his providential arrangements in our lives we should anchor our souls in the place where he has spoken and communicated his heart toward us. It is in the gospel that we see his un-shifting posture toward us.

In the cross we see God's unchanging opinion of us. In the good news of Jesus we see God's final and definitive word over us. The cross is where God speaks his heart to us—we are not left to discern his voice in mysterious providential activities.

### **Losing Everything Except Voice**

Job was a wealthy man. He had an abundance of children, possessions, and relationships. He was rich on so many levels. In a moment's time he lost everything. For the majority of the book Job is robed in sackcloth, covered in boils, and sitting in the dust. He is an icon of human devastation.

Job grieves his tremendous loss throughout the book highlighting the one thing that remains: his voice. Though he has been stripped of all else he still has this. Both Job and Lamentations show us the grace of voice in the midst of severe loss. God never takes this away from

his people. He never robs them of communication with him. He never shuts down their lament.

The cries of God's people motivate him to action. This is confirmed repeatedly throughout the storyline of Scripture. This gives us great hope in our pain. The gift of voice is key to moving through suffering and pain. God has provided us with psalms to speak to him in any situation. He has provided us community to process with. And he has given us the voice that makes it all possible. A voice he won't take away.

### **Lament dramatized**

Claus Westermann called the book of Job a "dramatized lament." In the psalms we hear the voice of the lamenter, but rarely know his situation. In Job we see everything. We see the circumstances in detail. We know the man behind the lament.

We watch his lament develop and unravel. We watch the movement to solution. On one level, Job is a lament psalm extended and detailed. It fleshes out the journey of the lament. It is a tortuous but necessary voyage. It's a road that must be walked if we would ever come to a place of reorientation.

When you read the psalms sometimes it appears like a quick road from lament to praise. At times, it looks like the shift occurs in a moment. Job shows us otherwise. The road can be long and grueling.

The process is not easy, simple, or quick. At times, the darkness will not relent, the questions go unanswered, the confusion prevails, and hope remains in exile. The resolution comes at a tremendous emotional price. There is nothing comfortable about this road.

The resolution is hard won, mainly because it is a gift unattached to our effort. We must journey but ultimately this path is about receiving. Just as God orchestrates the calamity so he must work the restoration.

The way of the lament is a path that strips us bare in order that we may be clothed. Lament earns a man nothing. God owes him nothing when he has voiced his complaint. The answer, though rooted in covenant, is ultimately

grounded in grace. God brings solution if, when, and how he deems best.

### **Unique Creatures**

The nature of every creature is unique. What makes the donkey carelessly free? How is the horse so courageous and bold? How come the ostrich is foolish? Why is the ox beyond domestication? It is amazing to watch God draw attention to this creative strand in the animals of his making.

He takes full responsibility for every creaturely idiosyncrasy. It is God who fashions the spirit and inclinations of every animal he makes. Astonishing isn't it? In this, he shows his benevolence, creativity, and intentionality in a striking fashion.

"THE NEW TESTAMENT IS CLEAR  
THAT ALL GOD'S ACTIVITY TOWARD  
JOB WAS MARKED BY COMPASSION  
AND MERCY (JAMES 5:11)."

By showing Job the uniqueness of all that he has made he is hinting at how well he knows him. He fashioned Job. He placed within him his every inclination. He shaped his personality. He made his soul. He created his body. He knows Job inside and out. He knows Job better than Job. As he delights in these amazing creatures, so he rejoices over Job. His creation lesson is a sermon of his love to Job.

### **Living with Confusion and Tension**

Job shows us that life can move from wonderful to disastrous in a moment's time. We desire life to be free from tension and difficulty. I believe this to be a good desire, but one that will be constantly thwarted here and now.

When we are in places of darkness and pain we expect something to give. Job shows us that sometimes that doesn't happen for a long, long time. And even when there is resolution, confusion can remain. Though Job's wealth was restored his family never was. He was given

another family. But there is no replacing one family with another. Job had to live the rest of his life with this pain.

We likely will not receive answers for many things we experience. There may be situations where there is no resolution. There may be seasons that are pitch black and excruciating. We may hit patches that are so confusing our heads will explode if we keep trying to figure things out.

We love to live with clarity and certainty. Life is just not that clean. Job helps us with the dark confusing side of life. He helps us see how to live in it. He does not shut down, but he leans into it. He engages with God. He engages with his community. He laments, prays, grieves, and argues. This is a sign of vitality. This is the way to walk in darkness.

### **The Literary God**

Many have noticed the literary quality of the book of Job. Some have said it is “universally admired as a literary masterpiece in world literature.” It is an incredible book. When you think about divine authorship and inspiration it shines light on the character of God.

He is a genius. He is an artist. He cares about literature. When he takes the pen in hand he devises beauty. It would be an interesting study to think about all the different types of literature in the Bible and what that says about the divine penman. As for Job, we see a love for literature.

### **The Comfort of Creation**

The book of Job is grounded in creation. We can see it on nearly every page. There are innumerable references to creation, its order, its purpose, its design, and its Creator. It is most amazing to watch how God engages with suffering Job at the end of the book.

How would you come to Job? How would you seek to comfort and counsel him? It is simply amazing to watch God’s approach. He sits Job down and gives him a thorough creation lesson! This is incredible. Of all the things God could have said he goes to creation. I think there is something significant here.

His creation sermon is intended to humble, comfort, strengthen, and awe the suffering Job. We know God’s intention was not to further crush Job. The New Testament is clear that all God’s activity toward him was marked by compassion and mercy (James 5:11). His whirlwind appearance was no exception.

Through his exposition of creation he is instilling in Job his providential concern for him. He is demonstrating to him that he knows him inside and out. He is helping him understand that he fashioned every facet of his being. He is helping Job see that he loves him. He is also putting Job in his place as a creature and encouraging him to trust his Creator with things beyond his capacity.

Apparently, God sees creation as a significant source for counseling. Jesus confirms this when he uses a sparrow as a baseline for thinking about how much God cares for people (Matt 10:31). He turns to creation to encourage his disciples of God’s concern for them.

I wonder where else we see creation used in Scripture to counsel and comfort the people of God. This would be an intriguing study. In Job, we see a skilled counselor at work and creation is his manual.

### **Soft and Hard: The Fruit of Suffering**

Suffering does things. It changes us. As the Holy Spirit attends and shares in our suffering he brings about transformation. Apart from the Spirit we will grow bitter and jaded. It seems inevitable.

The Spirit guides us through our experiences by the Word. He enables us to think intelligently about suffering. He creates in us tough skin and biblical realism. He softens our hearts with longing to come alongside hurting people.

Suffering has a way of driving home to us the reality of the fall, human depravity, and the curse we all live under. It obliterates our hopes for how things should be here and now.

It schools us in the inevitable frustration and vanity of much of our labor. It peels back our grip on everything in this world by bringing us face to face with our mortality. It chastens our minds and hearts. It toughens us. It

conditions us to walk this world with eyes looking forward to our only secure hope.

Though it creates tough skin it also has a way of instilling compassion in us. The more we suffer the more equipped we are to come alongside others in pain. Compassion is the capacity to suffer with another person. Pain often strips us off trite answers and insensitive approaches to suffering. It equips us to come alongside and genuinely be of help to those hurting.

### **Crushed and Confined: Defining Pain**

In the New Testament there are two words in the vocabulary of suffering that make me think of Job. The first word is *thlipsis* (θλίψις). It means to squeeze or press down. The idea is clear.

It is the experience of having a heavy weight press down upon you. It is the experience of feeling constricted and pressed in on from all sides. It is the experience of being squeezed and crushed. Suffering is like a boa constrictor that wraps itself around you and compresses down upon you threatening to take away all your breath.

The second word is *stenochoria* (στενοχωρία). This word literally means “narrow place.” I love the image of this word. It is spot on when it comes to what suffering does. It puts us in tight, constricted space. It makes us feel like the walls are closing in.

It makes us feel claustrophobic. It makes us feel like we cannot breathe. It feels like a narrow place with no windows or doors, no light, no air. It is a terrifying place. We ache for broad space and joy. Suffering and pain drive these from us and lock us in a tiny cell.

I see both of these things at play in the story of Job. I can see how the pain is suffocating. I can see it squeeze the life out of him and crush his hope. I can envision him in a narrow space where he feels trapped.

I can see how pain goes to work on him, unraveling him from head to toe. I think these two images of pain are helpful. They put into picture what we feel in our souls.

### **Whisper and Shout: The Gospel According to Job**

The book of Job is a stunning portrait of God as the Creator and Sovereign of the universe. In many ways, it

is Genesis 1-2 with flare. Genesis 1-2 paints with broad sweeping brushes. Job 38-42 paints with small elaborate strokes. We read of God’s intimate involvement in all of creation.

In four chapters we see God as the Creator, Overseer, and Sustainer of all these things: the sea, waves, mountains, wind, lightning, thunder, stars, clouds, sun, day, night, snow, rain, the desert, lion, raven, oxen, donkey, ostrich, mountain goat, horse, hawk, Behemoth, and Leviathan. As our view of God expands and grows in the reading of these chapters we grow smaller and smaller. We are put in our rightful place as creatures and drawn to worship a great God.

As Paul made clear in his letter to the Romans, creation is a sermon all its own. It is telling us of the great power of the invisible God (Rom 1:19-20). It is speaking of God’s glory (Ps 19:1ff). It is a magnificent sermon. But listen to what Job says about this creation sermon. “Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him!” (Job 26:17). Astounding. The sun, the Pacific Ocean, the Rocky Mountains, the sunflower, the rhino—whispers!!

Incredible. When we have explored all that he has made we have only arrived at the outermost boundaries of his ways. We have merely heard him whispering.

With the coming of Christ we move from the fringes to the center. Whispering gives way to shouting! The invisible God unseen by any human eye is made visible in the miraculous birth of the Son of God. In Christ, we see God. He is the God of the manger. He is the God of the cross. His character, his heart, his will, and his plans—these are made abundantly clear.

Though creation can tell of tremendous inventive power and careful design, only the cross can tell of sacrificial love and regal humility. Creation whispers, the cross shouts. The cross is God’s definitive sermon on his kindness, generosity, hospitality, patience, love, humility, goodness, faithfulness, mercy, and justice. It is his defining word about himself

At the cross, the veil is shredded and we are welcomed past the fringes into the most holy place. At the cross, God mounts the pulpit and heralds a message that



practically eclipses the sermon of creation. This is why the cross alone must be our theology. This is why we must sit ourselves down at Calvary and open our ears.

The whirlwind has been replaced by a cross and God is speaking to us about his deep concern for us and our future.

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