

Readings for October 17, 2021

Psalm 33: 1-9, 20-22

- ¹ Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.
² Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
³ Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.
⁴ For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.
⁵ The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.
⁶ By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.
⁷ He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses.
⁸ Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him.
⁹ For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.
- ²⁰ We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.
²¹ In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.
²² May your unfailing love be with us, LORD, even as we put our hope in you.

Job 38:1-11, 18; 40:1-2

- ¹ Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:
² “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
³ Brace yourself like a man, I will question you, and you shall answer to me.
⁴ Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.
⁵ Who determined its dimensions—surely you know! Or who stretched the measuring line upon it?
⁶ On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone ⁷ when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?
⁸ Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? ⁹ When I made the clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, ¹⁰ and prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors,
¹¹ and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?
- ¹⁸ Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this.”
- ¹ And the LORD said to Job:
² “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond.”

“God Speaks and Job is Silent”

In times of trouble, we cry out to our God for help and many of us—like Jesus on the cross¹—only experience the *silence* of God. Either that or we don’t recognize God’s reply! Even so, many of us persist in our prayers hoping they will somehow make a difference; others give up. As we heard last week,² Job was *persistent* in his demand for an audience with God. He believed in his own innocence and that his suffering was unjust, and he therefore wanted to present his case for justice before a divine court.³ We Christians often think our own suffering is undeserved and unfair too; after all—so the reasoning goes—I do my best to follow God’s ways, I go to church, I give money, I do good deeds, I am a “good” person, so why does God pay me back like this? This kind of thinking assumes two things: first, that God is all-powerful and in *meticulous* control of all events and, second, that our relationship with God is *contractual*, which simply means if I do *this* then God will do *that*. And because, like Job, we think we *are* good people, we become disappointed with God.⁴ In the final analysis, it’s that *silence* of God—not God’s attributes as such—that is so disturbing for people of faith. That’s one reason by this story of Job is so captivating. Now, after 34 long chapters, God *finally* speaks. The writer now presents two speeches as coming out of a *whirlwind*.⁵ The reader understands this to be an emphatic encounter with God, like Moses and the burning bush.⁶ There is no mistaking this is God’s presence. So, how does God respond?

God’s thunderous voice shouts out: “*Who* is this that questions my wisdom by *words without knowledge*? Brace yourself like a man, *I* will question *you*, and *you* must answer *me*. . .”⁷ And, as we heard in our reading, God’s reply is an exhaustive catalogue of his creative and sustaining acts. In the first part, God describes cosmic and physical order, and in the second, of God’s care for wild animals.⁸ The divine speeches are a long series of *rhetorical* questions laced with irony, sarcasm, and taunts, like: “Where were *you* when *I* laid the foundation of the earth?”⁹ All of the questions highlight human ignorance and powerlessness in contrast to the extensive, complex creation that God made and sustains. Such questions put Job in his place as someone who has “words without knowledge”¹⁰ and yet who “dares to argue with God.”¹¹ Yes, Job wanted to argue with God, but it is God who will now ask

¹ Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46.

² See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Job-Rants-and-God-is-Silent.pdf>.

³ See Job 23:1–7; 31:35. (See [1] for detailed context.)

⁴ “*Disappointed With God*” (Zondervan, 1988) is a classic book by best-selling author, Philip Yancey.

⁵ God’s two speeches are in Job 38:1 - 40:2 and Job 40:6 - 41:34; the first verse in each mentions the whirlwind (NRSV); see also Ezek 1:4, Nah 1:3, Zech 9:14; i.e., it’s a *theophany*. Moreover, God’s *personal* name, YHWH, is used in this speech; this word is only mentioned elsewhere in Job 1 & 2 and 42:7-17, otherwise it is “El”, Eloah”, “Elohim”, and “Shaddai.”

⁶ See Exod 3.

⁷ Job 38:2-3. This is echoed in Job 40:7-8.

⁸ The first speech can be divided into two sections: (a) cosmic and the physical order: 38:4-38; (b) providence for (wild) animals 38:39-40:30 (lion, raven, mountain goat, deer, wild donkey, wild ox, ostrich, horse, hawk, and eagle). Like in Gen 1, it is not just the regions that God defines, but also what goes on within them.

⁹ Job 38:4.

¹⁰ Job 38:2.

¹¹ Job 40:2.

the questions! Job finally gets his audience, but this is hardly what he anticipated—nor what we readers expected either.

What are we to make of God’s response? You will notice various obvious omissions. For example, God gives *no* reasons for Job’s suffering nor explains how divine justice reigns in the world. God does *not* inform Job of the initial meetings with Satan that I talked about 3 weeks ago.¹² God does *not* reaffirm the conventional Old Testament wisdom that is proclaimed by Job’s three friends, namely that God rewards or punishes us based on our behavior.¹³ Moreover, God does *not* dispute Job’s innocence—presumably to the shock of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. There is a complete mismatch between what Job demands and how God responds.¹⁴ It is as if God has no interest in Job, or justice, or the orthodoxy of the book of Proverbs, or our existential questions—or at least the ones that preoccupied Job. The question “why” is seemingly unanswered; all Job gets is *more* questions. “*Is that it?*” we may exclaim! Where then do we go from here? Allow me to make a few suggestions as we dig deeper.

First, the Hubble telescope’s dramatic pictures of the cosmos all the way to genetics and the amazing, microscopic discoveries of the life sciences all create the impression that *we* are the masters of the universe. This is illustrated in the story of peace activist and ordained minister, William Sloane Coffin. While he was an undergraduate at Yale, three of his friends were killed in a car accident when the driver fell asleep at the wheel. At the funeral, William was outraged when the priest articulated those earlier words of Job: “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away, blessed be the name of the LORD.”¹⁵ A small voice inside him asked, “Which in part of that phrase do you object to?” His instinctive response was concerning, “The LORD has taken away.” But it suddenly dawned on him that it was the first part: “The LORD *gave*. This is *not my* world. I am merely a *creature* in God’s creation!” The powerful and persuasive voice from the whirlwind affirms that same point: this is *God’s* world, and this challenges all human pride and our sense of entitlement and of controlling our own destiny. The earlier hymn, “This is *my Father’s* world,” also echoes those divine speeches, and our response is to be a little more humble. We are not as smart as we think we are and the more we know, the more we realize how little we know.

Second, if you think about it, demanding one’s *rights* before God—like in Job’s legal challenge—is just as *entitled* as the contract theology of Job’s three friends. One might therefore expect that God’s response is a *new* theological position,¹⁶ one that is meant to reorient Job’s thinking. If that is the case, I suggest that it’s not blindingly obvious, and the many interpretations of this section means that there’s

¹² See Job 1 -2, and: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Why-Is-This-Happening-To-Me.pdf> .

¹³ In fact, they incur God’s wrath – see Job 42:7! (This point is far more radical and shocking than we first think!)

¹⁴ The genius of the writer of Job is that this mismatch between Job’s questions and God’s response has created the space for much theological debate for over 2000 years! Consequently, and not unsurprisingly, there is diverse theological interpretation of God’s response and the ending of Job.

¹⁵ Job 1:21.

¹⁶ In other words, not Job’s view or that of his three friends.

a real danger our prior personal perspectives being read *into* the text.¹⁷ Even so, as already mentioned, one thing that is evident in the speeches is the emphasis on *creation*. Perhaps this connects to the *natural disasters* that killed all Job's children and destroyed his shepherds and sheep, not to mention the severe *physical* suffering he was experiencing.¹⁸ In the first speech, there is much mention of the *wild* animals, and the second goes further with its stress on the mysterious sea serpent, Leviathan, that ancient symbol of turbulent chaos that no human can control.¹⁹ Again God taunts Job and puts him in his place, saying: "Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook or tie down its tongue with a rope? Can you put a cord through its nose or pierce its jaw with a hook? Can you fill its hide with harpoons or its head with fishing spears? If you lay a hand on it, you will remember the struggle and never do it again! Any hope of subduing it is false; the mere sight of it is overpowering. No one is fierce enough to rouse it. Who then is able to stand against *me*? Who has a claim against *me* that I must repay? "Everything under heaven belongs to *me*."²⁰

Taken altogether, I suggest the speeches affirm that God is powerful, creative, and the sustainer of all that is, nevertheless, God is *not* a micromanager as Job and his friends suppose. Alternatively, "You simply don't understand the way my world works," proclaims God. Put in more modern language, the world God made is *not* a well-oiled machine; it's *not* tame. And chaos, though confined,²¹ can still be extremely destructive. Consider water, for example, it's vital for life and can fall harmlessly as in a spring shower or devastatingly as in a hurricane. Evidently, our dynamic world is not risk-free for humans, indeed for all life. The divine speeches suggest that we are to recognize that in addition to the regularity of nature as summarized by scientific laws, God has made a wild, untamed world with a significant element of chaos, randomness, and disharmony. Both order and disorder are an integral and essential part of God's *good* world that is continually in the process of "becoming." That being the case, we are invited along with Job to better appreciate that natural disasters, disease, etc., have the capacity to bring pain and suffering to both human and nonhuman life that have nothing to do with morality, justice, or sin.²² Job's response to God's first speech is stunned silence. Of course, Job is human—like us, how can *we* be expected to comprehend *how* God governs the natural world? Our finite wisdom means that we cannot possibly understand all the detailed, interconnected workings of creation and

¹⁷ In other words, *eisegesis* over *exegesis*, where our theological bias is simply affirmed by our "interpretation."

¹⁸ In other words, addresses "natural" rather than "moral" evil (in our modern categorization). See also Job 1:16, 18-19.

¹⁹ See Job 41. I would argue that chaos is morally neutral and should *not* be seen as "evil." (In Gen 1:21, the sea monsters are part of God's good creation.) Note, Behemoth is also mentioned (Job 40:15-24) as being untamable by humans. Note too that God's parading of animals before Job is mirroring God's introduction of Adam to all the animals in Gen 2:19-20. See also Reddish, *Science and Christianity* (Wipf & Stock, 2016), 155-165).

²⁰ Job 41:1-2, 7-11.

²¹ That God confined the "sea" (chaos) is evident in Ps 33:7; Prov 8:29; Job 38:8-11; Sir 16:26-27.

²² Elsewhere I write: "The disorder we see in nature is, then, not defective and/or divinely "mismanaged" creation, rather precisely the kind of world that God intended," Reddish *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018), 80. John Polkinghorne also concludes: "[We live in] a world of orderliness but not of clockwork regularity, of potentiality without predictability, endowed with an assurance of development but with a certain openness as to its actual form. It is inevitably a world with ragged edges, where order and disorder interlace each other and where the exploration of possibility by chance will lead not only to the evolution of systems of increasing complexity, endowed with new possibilities, but also to the evolution of systems imperfectly formed and malfunctioning" (Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation*, 49).

consequently we should not call into account the Creator. In God's world there is both rhythm and paradox and Job is encouraged try and grasp this subtle balance.²³ Job and his friends have, then, been asking the *wrong* questions. The real question is, "*Who* is God, and can he be *trusted* in what he is doing in the world?"

My third observation is the fact that God *actually responds*. And for many that alone is a sufficient answer to the problem of suffering. And for those who wonder whether God exists, *any* response is a startling discovery! In the story of Job, however, God did *not* answer Job's questions and so perhaps that suggests we can't expect answers to *our* specific questions either. That's frustrating, of course, and is why there will always be an element of mystery to suffering. But *where* we locate the mystery is important. We have three choices: (a) in the mind or character of God, (b) in God's complex creation, and (c) in the relationship between the two—the mystery of God's action in the world. The *kind* of God we believe in really matters. For those who believe that God is literally all-powerful *and* in "control" of all that goes on, worse still that God has predestined everything—including our suffering, then the troubling issue is really God's *character*. I would say that a micromanaging God who orchestrates our suffering is not worthy of our love or worship.²⁴ As I said earlier, the real question at the end of the book of Job is, "*Who* is God, and can he be *trusted* in what he is doing in the world?" I believe God *is* powerful, but *not* a micromanager. As I said moments ago, if we look at the *kind* of world God made, there is both order *and* disorder, laws and randomness—yet God saw creation and declared it "very good."²⁵ If this complex mix is the *kind* of world God made then God's almighty power is qualified²⁶; that being the case, the question is can we still *trust* God is *good*? And I do; I personally don't doubt God's *character* and I will try and explain briefly why.²⁷ I place the mystery in the third option—the *way* God works in the world. Because I believe that God is fundamentally loving and good, then whatever God can and does do in the world, whether in conjunction with our prayers, through the actions of those of us who share God's values, or in those Spirit-inspired serendipitous moments we call miracles and epiphanies, we can be confident that God is continually working behind the scenes to bring good out of evil. That being the case, maybe we can all learn to give God a lot of latitude in that—if we truly *trust* in God's goodness and compassion. Notice here that I use the word "trust," *not* "faith" or

²³ Terrence Fretheim concludes: "God will sustain such an ordered and open-ended creation even in the face of the suffering ones who wish that God would have created a world wherein human beings could be free from suffering. That is a price, sometimes a horrendous price, which creatures pay for the sake of having such a world; but it is also the price that God pays, for God will not remove the divine self from that suffering and will enter deeply into it for the sake of the future of just such a world."²³ Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, 237.

²⁴ Thomas Jay Oord puts it this way: "A God worthy of our worship cannot be Someone who *causes, supports, or allows* genuine evil." Oord, *Uncontrolling Love of God*, 68, emphasis mine.

²⁵ Gen 1:31. This "very good" need not be "perfect" (or static) but fit for its intended purpose and open to further development.

²⁶ God is still sovereign, but God does not exercise his power in an absolute, dictatorial way. It is a category mistake to equate sovereignty (a *status* – King) with omnipotence, omniscience, etc. (i.e., a *capability*).

²⁷ Put another way, do we trust God because of his *attributes* (power, knowledge, etc.) or because of his *character* (love, compassion, etc.). I believe the latter are more important.

“believe,” that is because trust is *relational*—dynamic not static, active not passive or merely intellectual assent. Trust is vital, and Job’s persistence is a sign of his trust in God.

Finally, let’s not forget that as Christians we have *huge* advantage over Job and all the other Old Testament characters; we have the story of Jesus, the one who *embodies* the love, compassion, and even the power of God.²⁸ If we believe that the Jesus of the gospels reveals the heart of God, then that affirms God’s *good* character. If we go a step further and believe in the *Trinity*,²⁹ then the crucifixion of Jesus also reveals the suffering of God the Father and the divine, life-giving Spirit. God has always taken responsibility for the *kind* of world God created, but in the cross the Trinity demonstrated the extent of the divine willingness to bear that responsibility and suffer *with* us and *for* us. That *is* God’s response to the problem of suffering, and this trinitarian perspective reveals just how much God cares for all of creation. This counters the absentee Landlord legacy of deism that continues to influence our age; God is *not* distant or disinterested; God is *not* silent, but intimately involved in history—in our suffering world. That being the case, we *can* trust in God’s good character and live in faith, hope, and love as we carry our own sufferings, and their scars, and journey onwards. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁸ By power I am referring to the miracles reported in the gospels.

²⁹ Put more formally, God’s initial and continuing acts of creation are *not* the last word on divine action. The *incarnation* demonstrates that divine participation in creation is not from a distance but palpably “in-person.”