

Scripture Reading for Oct 24, 2021

Job 42:1-17 (NIV)

42 Then Job replied to the LORD:

² “I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

³ You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.

⁴ “You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’

⁵ My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

⁶ Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

⁷ After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, “I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. ⁸ So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has.” ⁹ So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the LORD told them; and the LORD accepted Job’s prayer.

¹⁰ After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD restored his fortunes and gave him twice as much as he had before. ¹¹ All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the LORD had brought on him, and each one gave him a piece of silver and a gold ring.

¹² The LORD blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the former part. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys. ¹³ And he also had seven sons and three daughters. ¹⁴ The first daughter he named Jemimah, the second Keziah and the third Keren-Happuch. ¹⁵ Nowhere in all the land were there found women as beautiful as Job’s daughters, and their father granted them an inheritance along with their brothers.

¹⁶ After this, Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. ¹⁷ And so Job died, an old man and full of years.

Sermon: “Job—The Confusing Finale”

This week is the last in this lectionary series on Job; some of you may be giving a sigh of relief! Remember, last week we considered God’s long-awaited response to Job in two powerful and emphatic¹ speeches.² We noted the *mismatch* between Job’s demands and God’s reply which focused on God’s creative and sustaining acts. Those divine speeches stressed God’s care for *wild* animals in the wilderness and his constraining—but *not taming*—the mysterious sea serpent, Leviathan, that symbolizes chaos.³ I suggested the discourse affirms that God is indeed powerful, creative, and the sustainer of all that is, but that he is *not* in meticulous control of every detail, as Job and his friends imagined. By divine design, there is a space for freedom,⁴ including randomness within nature that is being confined by scientific laws. Today we explore the strange finale of Job, which comes in three short sections, beginning with Job’s response to God’s speeches.⁵

As we just heard, Job concedes his ignorance before God and proclaims that God is indeed *powerful*.⁶ Job says, “I have spoken boldly without an appreciation or understanding of things that are simply too wonderful for me to know.”⁷ Yet given the brevity of Job’s reply, it’s not at all clear that he really understood the substance of those divine speeches. Even so, the implication is that Job now has a better insight of himself from hearing God’s perspective.⁸ Job concludes: “Therefore, I recant and relent, being but human—just dust and ashes.”⁹ However, of what exactly was Job recanting? We don’t really know. There is no mention of Job repenting from any wrongdoing; he still proclaims his innocence before God. It therefore seems that Job is withdrawing his brash legal challenge concerning God’s *justice*. Job still doesn’t understand his suffering, rather he now has a clearer understanding of *who God is* and the complex dimensions of the wisdom, power, and freedom that God exercises in governing his world.¹⁰

In a way, that transformation of Job’s thinking is truly amazing. When we have a certain view of God and a framework that explains in *our* minds *how* God works in the world, and then when we have some

¹ “Emphatic” because they are described as from a “whirlwind,” a Jewish *theophany*—like Moses and the burning bush.

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

³ See [13]. (Note too that God created Leviathan and declared the monstrous sea creatures “good” (Gen 1:21).

⁴ Including human free will.

⁵ Job’s earlier response is one of stunned silence (Job 40:4-5). Even so, Job 42:2-6 could be seen as a reply to *both* speeches.

⁶ Job 42:2.

⁷ Job 42:3.

⁸ Job 42:5. Job has therefore been transformed by the voice of God from the whirlwind (the theophany).

⁹ Job 42:6 (*Jewish Study Bible*, p1561). This critical verse is *very* ambiguous in Hebrew and open to multiple interpretations! Indeed, the interpretation one adopts is also strongly influenced by one’s reading of the two divine speeches, which are also somewhat enigmatic. And since this concludes the poetry portion of Job, one’s understanding is also shaped by how one views the connection between the prose and poetic sections of this book (and the precise dating of the final form).

¹⁰ It could further be argued that Job came to understand that his suffering was *not* an unjust punishment from God, rather he recognizes that the chaos in the world—the disorder that was a significant feature of his own suffering—is a feature of God’s good world that is restrained but never fully eliminated. Note that Rev 21:1b has the new heaven and the new earth having “no sea”—chaos is illuminated in John’s vision. Even so, the issue of divine *justice* is left hanging . . .

kind of tragedy that doesn't fit our framework, it results in a *crisis* of faith. In the immediacy of our trauma, the main thing is to simply work through the calamity trying to stabilize the chaos and uncertainty. Later, it's wise to address the root cause of that crisis of faith. What we had *assumed* about the character of God, the nature of creation, and God's action in the world proved to be unsatisfactory to us. In other words, like Job, the faith framework that we leaned upon was not able to support the weight we were placing on it. It's scary to examine the foundations of our faith framework and to try and discover another more stable alternative that better addresses the questions, doubts, and issues we are facing.¹¹ There is an element of *fear* involved here because we *have* to view God in a different way. Such change is best done in a supportive community, but as Job discovered, his friends were not willing to explore new possibilities with him. They simply affirmed their traditional orthodoxy. Yet clinging to the old interpretive framework denies our present reality and tries to maintain the certainty we desire. This is where *courage* is needed to let go of our quest for certainty and control in order to adopt a new more flexible faith framework,¹² one that better corresponds to reality and stabilizes us in uncertain times.¹³ As I said last week,¹⁴ the real question is ultimately not "why," but do we continue to *trust* in the *character* of God when explanations are missing?¹⁵ I think Job discovered that courage.

Now that reply of Job's to God was likely the original ending of the story because now the text reverts from poetry to prose, presumably added by the editor who inserted chapters 1 and 2 to the front end of the book. It will become clear that I—like many—find this finale to Job troubling and confusing! So let's see what happens next.

God says to Job's three friends, "I am *incensed* at you because you have *not* spoken the truth about me, as did my servant Job."¹⁶ Recall that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar insisted that Job *must* have sinned terribly for him to be experiencing such intense suffering. They were holding firm to the traditional Jewish view that God *rewards* the righteous and *punishes* the wicked. However, in the prologue, the writer makes it clear that God *knew* that Job was righteous.¹⁷ God is therefore angry at the three friends,

¹¹ This examination results in an adopting a new Christian *paradigm* or *worldview* and this transforms *all* of our thinking.

¹² This new faith framework is still tentative and may need to be further revised, but we consider it to be better than the old one and so is a major step along the journey of faith.

¹³ Note that if the divine speeches had nothing to say to Job except that "pain is part of life," then they would hardly be worth hearing; how does that comfort or strengthen! But Leviathan is *not* the only topic of the divine speech; there are *boundaries* in the created order which ensures that *goodness* exists and persists. A further aspect about the divine speeches and the story of job is that it helps us to handle what we perceive to be divine rejection and our own isolation. God's nurture and pleasure of the *wild* animals living in the *wasteland* is a provocative image. In those alien places God takes care of those beasts, and they give him pleasure. There is *nothing* outside of the care of God. In our sense of aloneness, it's worth remembering that image.

¹⁴ See [2].

¹⁵ And if we don't believe that God is fundamentally good and loving, then we are in danger of becoming bitter through our sufferings and disappointments of life.

¹⁶ Job 42:7b, repeated in 8b (*JSB*, adapted). Some have argued that God cannot reprimand Job for speaking "words without knowledge" (38:2) and now praise him for speaking correctly and rebuking at the three friends. That is, in my view, harsh and taken out of context—yet it illustrates the tension in this final "conclusion" (as well as within the whole book).

¹⁷ Job 1:8 (1:1); 2:3. Moreover, God makes no mention of Job's guilt or innocence in his speeches. Because of the prologue, the implication to the reader throughout the book is that Job is indeed a righteous person.

presumably because they tried to protect God's *reputation* at the great cost of diminishing God's wisdom and good character. God demands they provide a guilt offering sacrifice, as stipulated in Leviticus,¹⁸ for they have committed sacrilege—claiming to speak on God's behalf and getting it badly wrong. But *more* than that, God wanted Job to prayerfully intercede on their behalf, something Job had done earlier for his sons.¹⁹ All this Job and his three friends did, and God accepted the prayers of Job.²⁰ And so we have the 2nd possible ending of the book of Job. Before moving on, given such a damning indictment of Job's friends, I hope you can better appreciate the weight of responsibly preachers should feel in teaching their congregation! But more than that, let us *all* be more cautious and humbler when claiming to speak definitively to the question of "why" or unwisely trying to justify God²¹—particularly in the context of suffering, because of the added damage we can inflict to those who are already vulnerable.

In the final prose section, Job has his fortune restored to him in *double* portion. He was initially described as "the greatest man among all the people of the East,"²² so now he becomes mega-rich with double the number of sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys!²³ Moreover, his social isolation was ended by a lavish meal of celebration with his siblings, where they all gave him valuable gifts. His wife, who must have getting-on in years (!) now allegedly has a *second* family, again with 7 sons and 3 particularly beautiful daughters.²⁴ Job lived to be 140 years, *twice* the normal life span,²⁵ and died a contented man. This is the formulaic "happy ever after" ending that was somehow felt necessary to round off this *story*. And that word "story" must not be forgotten; the epilogue is no more real or historical than the prologue. As I said before, this book is a brilliant fiction—a legendary tale—that bravely explores the real and timeless issues of suffering.

But there is, in my mind, a real theological problem here! That's because there's a *major* inconsistency between this ending and the one before.²⁶ In the previous ending, God was *very angry* that Job's three friends were insisting Job's suffering was a punishment from God. In this section, we read that Job's siblings consoled and comforted Job "for all the evil *that the LORD* had brought upon him."²⁷ This appears to be unravelling major themes within the *whole* drama. This also seems to be regressing back to the traditional Jewish view of punishment and blessing that we find in the book of Proverbs. This reassuring "happy ever after" therefore looks like a reverting to type, perhaps an appeasement to those Jews who found this story disturbing and unpalatable. In my mind we can't have *both* of these prose

¹⁸ See Lev 1:3-17; 4:1-21; 5:15-26.

¹⁹ Job 1:5. (See also Gen 20:7, such an allusion—if deliberate—gives the impression of age, i.e., a patriarchal saga.)

²⁰ There is irony here as Job's words (in prayer) now have huge value.

²¹ The word "theodicy" is a justification or defense of God in response to creaturely suffering. The real danger with theodicies is that there is an attempt to justify the unjustifiable – evil. Ultimately, God doesn't need us to defend him!

²² Job 1:3b.

²³ Job 42:12 cf. Job 1:3. (There are, surprisingly, no mention of the slaves in Job's restoration.)

²⁴ Job 42:13-15. On one level this is outrageous! (Interestingly, the daughters also received a portion of Job's inheritance.)

²⁵ See Ps 90:10. See also Gen 25:8; 35:29.

²⁶ This conclusion creates irony and dissonance rather than coherency. So instead of a resolution, we have frustration.

²⁷ Job 42:12.

endings, and this latter one is theologically suspect in the context of the whole book. This inconsistency may have been poor editing, or it may have been deliberate, as it leaves further questions for the reader to ponder.²⁸ We simply don't know.

Allow me to expand on this briefly. One real difficulty with this last ending²⁹ is that “we can't un-ring the bell.” We have now read and heard the story of Job and the questions that the writer dared to raise can't be *unasked* just because of this happy ending. Moreover, the Jews themselves had experienced the tragedy of exile, as the psalmist says: “By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept.”³⁰ They, like Job, had experienced the silence of God.³¹ And when they returned to Jerusalem under Nehemiah and eventually rebuilt Jerusalem, it was hardly the happy ending of being “twice as wealthy.” Life for them continued to be very hard. Their losses in the exile and afterwards were *real* losses, and simply repeating the tired old proverbs didn't—and still doesn't—bring reassurance. Not everything in life can be fixed. Yes, in the story, Job has a second family and while that may bring joy and security, it doesn't bring back to life his dead children and servants. Nevertheless, life moves on, as we say. All this is very personal for me, because as you know, my first wife, Anne, died from breast cancer 10 years ago. My own life has changed enormously since then. I am very happily remarried to Mary and have a second family as it were, one that is a mutual blessing and brings great joy. But I am not twice as wealthy! And the losses to my son Philip and his family—and to myself—are real and irreplaceable. The same thing can, of course, be said about *your* own real losses that have followed from your personal tragedies. And so Job's questions concerning divine justice or fairness are *not* resolved, despite the partial restoration he and his wife apparently experience. That same justice issue plagued the Jewish nation following the exile, and—in a way—it still does. Nevertheless, somehow because of those divine speeches, Job is released from his obsession with justice and can begin the difficult process of living beyond tragedy. How did that arise? I suggest it was because he chose to trust in God's good character rather than in some kind of reward in this life. I encourage you to ponder these three endings to the book of Job and consider how they fit in with *your* faith framework. My hope is that, like Job, you will have an epiphany—an *aha!* moment of discovery that is freeing, perhaps even releasing you to *forgive* God for past hurts you blame him for and so enable you to trust God more.

I have two further brief-but-important points to make. This trio of different endings to the book of Job illustrates that the divine inspiration of Scripture is clearly a more complicated concept than many people assume. Numerous Christians think that the Bible is the place to find *definitive* “answers” to hard questions. Open-ended ambiguity is, however, more of a characteristic of biblical teaching than

²⁸ The book of Job's confusing inconsistent conclusion may reflect the fact that life is not as neat and tidy as we would like it to be! The story obviously doesn't answer all our questions, but it does redirect our attention toward God and his character.

²⁹ This has been referred to as the “Disney” ending!

³⁰ See Ps 137:1. (I take the present form of the book of Job to have been written either during or just after the Babylonian exile. See: <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Why-Is-This-Happening-To-Me.pdf> (footnote [3]).

³¹ God may remain silent, but that silence does not mean God is absence. (Even the Jews had the Ezekiel in the exile!)

we might like to believe.³² Even with certain parables and sayings of Jesus we are left hanging in the air as to their meaning!

And that gives me a segue to a further pertinent point, namely, how Jesus views wealth in the New Testament.³³ Unfortunately for us, there is no ambiguity there, although how to put his teaching into practice is very challenging! You will recall that Jesus famously said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”³⁴ This saying follows on from a conversation between Jesus and a rich, young man.³⁵ At the conclusion, Jesus says to his disciples, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples were astonished at those words. Their amazement indicates that they shared the general Old Testament view that regarded wealth as a *blessing* from God, a sign of divine favor.³⁶ The final conclusion of Job reinforces that perspective. However, Jesus, in the Beatitudes, redefines God’s blessing in entirely different terms; shockingly, it is the poor who are honored and welcomed into the Kingdom.³⁷ Jesus turns that whole way of thinking upside down and the disciples are astounded. Too many Christians on reading the ending of Job are still waiting for their prosperity to be unleashed, as if it were a divine promise!³⁸ We therefore need to be wise in reading Job, not just in terms of its internal consistency, but because we can take that story’s fairy-tale ending and think it accurately describes reality.

Moreover, and as I said last week, the story of Job is *not* the final word on suffering in the Bible, and Christians have to reconsider the very real problem of suffering in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. One thing is clear, while suffering will never make perfect sense, the *resurrection* reveals suffering is never the last word. Amen. Let us pray.

³² Another problem in our culture is the tendency to assume that every issue has a single answer, every problem has a single solution. Not everything can be neatly resolved; we are left with dilemmas and paradoxes in which we must continue to live. There is no simple (or single) answer to the question “why.”

³³ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/God-and-Money.pdf> ; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Wealth-and-the-Kingdom-of-God.pdf> .

³⁴ Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25; Matt 19:24. (See also Matt 6:24; 13:22; Mark 4:18–19; Luke 8:14; 1 Tim 6:9–10.)

³⁵ See Mark 10:17–31; Matt 19:16–22; Luke 18:18–30.

³⁶ See Deut 28:1–14; Job 1:10; 42:10; Prov 10:22. In the wider Greco-Roman world, as well as in the Jewish faith, material property was widely seen as a reward or a by-product of spiritual virtue. Today this has morphed into the “prosperity gospel” heresy.

³⁷ See Luke 6:20 (cf. Matt 5:3).

³⁸ Such teaching only compounds their suffering and only leads to further disappointment with God.