

Where Were You?

Job 38:1-11 (NIV84)

¹ Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: ² "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? ³ Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. ⁴ "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. ⁵ Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? ⁶ On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone— ⁷ while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? ⁸ "Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, ⁹ when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, ¹⁰ when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, ¹¹ when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'?"

Have you ever tried to tell a story only to have someone constantly interrupting you who had heard the story before? Instead of telling it as it happened to you, this person keeps stepping in and spoiling the next part. It's ruining your story. Do you eventually put them in their place the next time they interrupt by honestly, pointedly asking, "Hey, were you there? No, then let me tell the story."

The story of Job is filled with people who want to tell God's story instead of letting God tell his own story. It started as Satan asked to tempt Job, claiming that Job only loves God because God has richly blessed Job and protected him. God allows the devil to do this. In one day, Job loses 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and a large number of servants – only one servant returning from each incident to tell Job that the animals had either been pillaged or carried off by raiders or that fire literally fell from the sky and burned them up.

The loss of wealth, we could see Job recovering from. But then the last servant came. "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead!" (Job 1:18-19) Job has lost 10 children all at once – 7 sons, 3 daughters. On top of that, God allowed Satan to afflict Job with painful sores from head to toe. His wife comes out and tells Job to give up this faith that you're clinging to. Curse God and die! (Job 2:9) In complete misery, Job says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." (Job 1:21) "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10) In all this, we are told explicitly that Job did not sin in what he said and did not charge God with wrongdoing. (Job 1:22; 2:10)

Three friends come to be with Job, to sympathize with him and comfort him. After seven days of sitting in silence, Job finally begins expressing his grief. His friends meet Job's expression of grief with a theology of cause and effect. Job, you must have done something really bad for God to allow these things to happen to you. You need to repent of it and ask for forgiveness. Then God will relent.

Job pleads innocence. "If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say. Would he oppose me with great power? No, he would not press charges against me....I would be delivered forever from my judge." (Job 23:3-7) If God would hear my case, I would be vindicated. He would see how unjust he has been with me and my life. Give me a hearing, God, and I will come out on top.

Enter our verses for today. "Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm." (verse 1) God is giving Job what he asked for. Will God oppose Job? Will he press charges? Will he hear Job out?

God does not yield the floor to Job so that he could plead his case. Instead, the LORD says: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me." (verses 1-2) The LORD tells Job to man up to these ideas of justice and fairness. You think you know how your life should work? You think that I have no clue as to what I am doing? You think you have the right to question me? Then answer me honestly, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone— while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?" I was there at creation, Job. I set this all up according to my plan, as a master builder lays out and executes his building plans. Do you, the created, know better than your creator? Surely you know, as you claim to know what is right and fair and how the world should work.

Or take a look at the sea, those uncontrollable waters. “Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?’” Who did that, Job? Do you control the uncontrollable? Do you mark out its boundaries and limits? You think you have all the answers. You think you know better than I do. Do you? Were you there when the world was established and all of nature set in an orderly, controlled way?

Job thought that he had a legitimate case. God had no reason to pour out all this grief and devastation and suffering upon him. There was no great, grievous sin meriting this punishment. Yet, when the LORD came out of the storm he turned Job from plaintiff to defendant. You want to be treated as an equal? Well, man up to your ideas of fairness and justice! I have questions for you that I want you to answer since you think you know better how the world should work!

Why? Why does God not hear Job out and answer him? Why does God not just give Job some insight into why he is doing what he is doing? Why deny Job’s request and bombard him with questions instead?

Do we have a similar case against the LORD? God, this person is so good. I need them in my life, and you give them cancer? Who do you think you are to put a death sentence on someone like that, to make them go through the chemo and the treatments? God, you want all people to be saved. You said so yourself. So, why, after all the prayers I have offered to you, you still do not bring this person to faith? This is a good thing, God. How can you deny this request? God, I work hard. I am faithful at my job. I have asked you for guidance. Yet, I keep getting passed over for promotion after promotion. Why God? Why do you hold me back? You let the suck-ups who don’t really know anything and who are lazy get ahead. Why would you allow this, God? LORD, we have questions, good, legitimate questions, but you do not give us answers. I don’t think that’s right. If you really heard me out, God, you would have to answer my questions. You would see that what you do to me is unfair and unjust!

What if the Bible were just a collection of FAQs (frequently asked questions)? What would the value be if God only answered the “why”? I suppose that we would have answers to our burning questions. But God purposefully does not give us that. The LORD never explains to Job why he allowed Satan to bring all those afflictions into Job’s life. The LORD never explains to us the reason for us not getting the promotion, the reason for allowing that person to have cancer, the reason why that person does not come to faith.

Instead, the LORD plies us with questions because his questions cause us to explore our thinking. Were you there? Were you there when the LORD planned everything out? Were you part of the planning process to determine exactly how the world will spin, how gravity would operate, how this world would be optimal for sustaining life for millennia after millennia? Were you there to put limits on the sea and tell it exactly how to operate in order to support life on the earth? Were you on the committee talking about and detailing how this promised offspring of the woman would crush the head of the serpent? Do you know better than the LORD? Is your knowledge and your wisdom greater than his? Do you know all the mysteries of the universe, time, and everything so that you can advise God on how things should work? If you want to bring your case before the LORD, then man up to it. “Brace yourself like a man.” (verse 3) Tell the LORD how you know better if you truly believe that you do know better.

Once the LORD challenges us as adults, telling us to answer him, we resign ourselves to the fact that we don’t know everything, and as much as we want things to be a certain way, we are not the ultimate authority. Like Job, when I man up to answer God’s questions, I am left speechless, no longer having a case against the Almighty.

God may not give you all the answers, but that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t take notice of your life or care about what is happening to you. Look at our gospel reading. Here the disciples are, on the Sea of Galilee, about half of them are experienced fishermen. Out of nowhere, a furious squall comes up and nearly swamps the boat. Jesus is sleeping in the stern, and the panicked disciples wake him up, shouting, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” The disciples are shouting at the very one who set the boundaries of the sea, who made its borders, who controls the uncontrollable. No man has ever been able to control the seas, but Jesus, with one command, makes the uncontrollable sea instantly calm. He gives the disciples questions to ponder, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Mark 4:40)

The LORD does not give us rationale to all the things that he does and allows and he doesn’t answer every question we pose to him. The fact of the matter is, he doesn’t have to. Job didn’t need to plead his case to God. The LORD knew what had happened, and he knew exactly why it happened, and he allowed it to happen. Instead, what Job needed to hear was that the LORD purposefully plans and carries out what he is going to do, knowing exactly what he is doing, having the very big picture in mind, and having control over the uncontrollable.

Instead of answers, the LORD reminds us who he is. He is the Almighty, everlasting God. He is the one who orders creation for sustaining our lives. He is the one who reigns in nature so that it doesn’t overtake us. He is the one who takes the uncontrollable problem of sin in our lives and saves us from it. If the LORD controls things that we can’t even fully understand, we can trust him to know what’s best in what he allows into our lives. When things are happening to us that seem unfair and unjust and we think that

we have a case against the LORD, we need to step back and ask, “Where was I when he laid the earth’s foundation? Where was I when the LORD set limits on the untamable, uncontrollable sea?” Since I don’t know better than him, I will trust him to control the uncontrollable.

The LORD answers us out of the storm to ply us with questions, causing us to remember that he set things up that go way beyond our understanding and way beyond our capabilities. He knows the big picture. He knows exactly what he is doing. Instead of spending my time building up an argument against him, the LORD leads me to realize that I don’t have all the answers and that I don’t actually need all the answers. What I need to know is that God is always with me, that he is always in control, even when the storms of life hit me hard and I feel like I am going to drown. He controls the uncontrollable. He knows what he is doing, even if I don’t. I don’t need to present my case against God; I need the LORD to be the LORD, the very one who set this amazing world in motion. He is in control, and that is enough for me. As he told us: “Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10) Amen.

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