

Job 38:1-40:5

(In this message I have really been helped by 'Job' a commentary by Dr. James A. Wharton. The insight into 'answers' from God comes largely from him, though I checked it out and think it is more solid than even he suggests. I also appreciate Wharton's perspective on Job's response to the grand speech from God)

Over the last month we have gotten to know Job. Job is the man in the Bible who lived all out for God. His life was blessed. Then, it was all taken away. He does not know why.

Three friends came to be with him. They sat with Job for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word.

Finally Job burst out with a great gut-wrenching lament. He said he wished he had never been born. That was too much for his friends.

They challenge Job to examine his conscience. Surely there was something he had done and God was punishing him.

Eliphaz drops this verbal bomb on Job:

'Call now, is there anyone who will answer you?'

Is there anyone who will answer Job's pain with healing?

Is there anyone who will answer Job's losses with rescue?

Is there anyone who will answer Job's shame with affirmation?

Is there anyone who will answer you?

The question haunts us when troubles have piled up and we are tired and discouraged. Is there anyone up there? Do our prayers just bounce back off the ceiling, back at us?

It is Job's nagging question too.

Listen: 9:16 'If I called and He answered me, I could not believe that he was listening to my voice.'

12:4 'I am a joke to my friends. I am the one who called on God and he answered him; (Now) the just and blameless man is a joke'.

13:3 'But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue with God'.

19:7 'Behold, I cry, violence! But I get no answer.'

23:3-5 'Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, That I might come to His seat! I would present my case before Him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn the words which He would answer, and perceive what He would say to me.'

31:35 'Oh that I had one to hear me! Behold, here is my signature; Let the Almighty answer me!

Job wants an answer.

'Answer' is an ordinary word. It means the same thing in English as in Hebrew.

'Answer' is what we expect when we ask a question. And, Job has lots of questions about what has happened to him and why.

But 'answer' is also a response with action.

A boxer 'answers the bell' by getting up and fighting.

A woman wrote in the Edmonton Journal on Friday of suffering from metastatic cancer, needing a drug to stay alive for her husband and four year old daughter. The drug is not covered by Alberta Health. She wants an answer. What she wants of course, is a reply with action.

James Wharton reminds us that in the Psalms, when God answers the prayers of his people it is always with action. God answers with help, rescue, God answers by delivering his people and showing that they were not foolish to trust.

Here are two great examples:

¹ May the LORD **answer** you when you are in distress;
may the name of the God of Jacob protect you.

⁶ Now this I know:

The LORD gives victory to his anointed.

He **answers** him from his heavenly sanctuary
with the victorious power of his right hand. **Psalm 20**

⁴ I sought the LORD, and he **answered** me;

he delivered me from all my fears.

⁵ Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.

⁶ This poor man called, and the LORD heard him;

he saved him out of all his troubles.

⁷ The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him,
and he delivers them. **Psalm 34**

All along, Job has been looking, hoping, counting on an answer from the Lord.

Job wants what we want. Some sign that someone up there is paying attention. Some sign that we matter, some sign that the Lord is going to do something to help us. Not just a philosophical answer about why bad things happen to good people.

Job cries out for every innocent sufferer who wants an answer from God.

Let's listen now: (read Job 38:1-40:5)

The Lord answered Job:

It is so easy to skip past that phrase and think of the angry speech as the answer. But we now realize that 'the Lord answered' is really significant. And any interpretation must be faithful to the whole book of Job. We know that Job is faithful and that the Lord approves of and loves him. (1:8, 2:3) If we have read ahead, we will know already that the Lord says that Job has 'spoken rightly' of God but the friends have not. (see 42:7)

If this phrase is not God's affirmation and vindication of Job, I think is the only place in the Old Testament where an answer from the Lord is **not** a response of gracious love and rescue. (I think I checked them all).

This makes all the difference for how we hear the speeches of God that bring us to the rest of the book.

Job has 'kept the faith' all the way to the end, even though he has been put to the test of confronting God as his enemy. Job has proved that he really does 'serve God for nothing'. If 38:1 is God's 'yes' to Job, then all the angry speeches of God are addressed to a **vindicated** Job, one who has been granted God's complete approval. And, the words of submission and repentance that we hear from Job come from Job who has had the unimaginable experience of being vindicated in a direct encounter with Almighty God.

But why, if 38:1 is God's answer of 'yes' to Job and the beginning of his rescue, why would the Lord identify Job as one who, 'darkens my counsel by words without knowledge?'

I wonder if it could be a reference to the challenge of the accuser to the Lord that started the whole test. This test has been a terrible trial for the Lord who loves Job too. Job has had to live the suffering of being 100% human being. Has God had to live the suffering of being 100% God? Is there something about Job's suffering, something about human suffering, something about our suffering that the Lord is just not able to explain to us? Is the 'barrier' of a relationship by faith difficult for God too?

God's majestic speeches do not answer the questions Job's suffering has raised. Instead, Job is left in awe before the living presence of God. Job now gets it that God is God and Job is not.

“I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?

I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more.”

If you take God’s answer as the angry speech from 38:2-40:2, it is a kind of smack down of Job. But then Job’s crying about injustice and suffering are just static in the ears of a God who is so far above us, and so far beyond us that he cannot be bothered by our little troubles and our little lives.

But, if the fact of God’s answer to Job is an unconditional ‘yes’ to Job’s life of self-less integrity, then Job’s answer has two sources:

1. The unimaginable wonder of a direct encounter with God in all of God’s transcendent glory. (cf the Mt of Transfiguration)
2. And, for someone like Job, who has lived for the Lord, and loved the Lord, and served the Lord in good times and in pain, the wonder is that this magnificent, majestic God should take him seriously, should hear him, should listen to him, should answer him, standing by him, with him, for him, to vindicate his fragile life of integrity toward God and people. Job has lived by faith, just as we do. He has lived by faith as all innocent sufferers do. Three weeks ago now, as faithful Christian believers gathered at a church in Baghdad to worship, Al-

Qaeda attacked.

They took about 120 worshipers hostage, beat and killed three priests, and detonated explosives moments before Iraqi security forces stormed the church in a rescue attempt. At least 64 people, mostly worshippers—including a 3-year-old— were massacred and an estimated 300 wounded.

Al-Qaeda's Iraq splinter group, the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) who was responsible for the attack, just issued this statement:

"All Christian centers, organizations and institutions, leaders and followers, are legitimate targets for the mujahedeen wherever they can reach them." (Open Doors.org)

What kind of answer are these, our brothers and sisters longing for?

The wonder of God's answer and of experiencing God silences even someone as outspoken as Job.

We too live by faith. We live by faith that no matter what happens to us, no matter if we can ever see or understand a reason for our suffering, that we are children of God. That God has poured out his love on us in Jesus Christ, the answer. We live by faith toward the day when we shall see him and fall to our knees in his presence. (1 John 3:1-2)

May the Lord be gracious to you.

May the Lord be gracious to me.

And all God's people said, Amen.