

February 20, 2022

OUR SOVEREIGN, GOOD, AND SAVING GOD

Job 38-41

(6 of 7 in a series through Job)

In C. S. Lewis's work, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Lucy, the little girl who has wandered into the land of talking animals, called Narnia, finds out that the king (who represents Christ in the story) is a lion. And in her mind, talking to a beaver is one thing, but the idea of meeting a Lion provokes fear in her heart. And so she brings up her nervousness in a conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, as Lucy begins,

"Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver, "don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

It was hard for me not to think of that conversation as I studied on our text this week. For chapter after chapter—in the midst of his suffering—Job has been demanding a hearing with God. He's demanded that God show up and speak. Then in chapter 38 God does show up, and he begins speaking. And by the time God is through speaking, Job responds, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:3, 5-6). Clearly Job is overwhelmed. He's realized that the God of all creation isn't one before whom we make demands. He's been humbled. But I think he's also heard and seen something we might miss as we read these chapters—the utter goodness of God. Like Lucy in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Job sees that God isn't safe. He can't be tamed. But he *is* good.

And I want us to see these things as well this morning. Specifically I want us to see God's power and wisdom in creating and governing all things and God's goodness in one day fully and finally dealing with evil. And my hope is that as we see these things we'll find ourselves strengthened in our commitment to trust our sovereign, good, and saving Lord as we walk through times of suffering in our own lives. We'll start, then, by seeing God's power and wisdom in creating and governing all things.

God's power and wisdom in creating and governing all things

Now, in order to understand the Lord's response to Job, we need to understand the nature of Job's complaint against God. And basically it comes down to Job thinking that God has done wrong—acted unjustly—in allowing the suffering that has come into Job's life. In Job's mind, he isn't deserving of what has happened because he's pursued righteousness, and so his demand is that he gets a hearing with God in which God will give an account for what he's done.

Well, as God begins to speak to Job out of the whirlwind in chapter 38 he doesn't appear as one who is embarrassed or ashamed by what he's done. Far from it. Rather, the Lord notes that Job is speaking out of a place of ignorance, saying to Job, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (38:2). That is, Job has spoken in ignorance. Then, the Lord notes that the way this is actually going to go is that he will put Job in the dock and force him to answer questions. The Lord declares, "Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me" (38:3) Perhaps we might think of it in terms of a trial, and Job has just testified as a supposed expert witness that God has acted unjustly. And now God comes to cross-examine Job's testimony to see if he really is an expert witness on the nature of governing the world.¹

So the Lord begins to ask Job a series of questions about how creation itself worked. He says in 38:4-7, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid the cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

Clearly the answer is that Job wasn't around at creation. He is only a part of creation itself, and God alone is creator. Job could only answer, "I don't know. Only you know. For you alone are God." And already we begin to feel the foolishness of thinking that we could dare call God to give an account to us of how he governs the world. There is an infinite difference between him as the creator and us as his creatures.

But the Lord doesn't stop at the act of creation. He forces Job to consider the vast expanse of creation. The Lord asks, "Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all of this" (38:16-18). Similarly, just as he plunged the depths of the earth, the Lord directs Job to consider the highest heavens of well, noting the constellations. The Lord says, "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season, or can you guide the Bear with its children? Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth?" (38:31-33). Just as there was no way for Job to even explore the depth of the sea or the height of the heavens, there was certainly no way for him to control them. If the constellations were dependent on Job leading them out to shine each night, they simply would not be.

¹ Anthony Selvaggio uses this illustration in *Considering Job: Reconciling Sovereignty & Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Heritage Books, 2021), 138.

The Lord mentions the same concerning the workings of the earth, noting the complexities even of the weather. He asks, "Can you lift up your voice to the clouds that a flood of waters may cover you? Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go and say to you, 'Here we are?'" (38:34-35). Weather is one of the elements that makes us most desperate. Farmers need rain but not too much rain, and yet they can do nothing about it. Only God is the creator and ruler of these things.

And if Job doesn't already feel small enough in light of God's questioning, the Lord moves on to the governing of animals. Now, this might be an area that you might think Job has a chance to prove his ability. I mean, he wasn't at creation, can't explore the sea or the heavens, and by no means can control the weather. But animals? No doubt he's tamed an animal or two, but our thoughts are quickly destroyed as the Lord begins his questioning of Job in chapter 39. He asks Job when the mountain goats give birth, who charted a place for the wild donkey to roam, who can make the wild ox serve him, who has made the ostrich act so crazy, and who gave the horse its might, before ending by asking Job if he knows how the hawk and eagle flies. And once more, in each case, the answer is, "I don't know. Only you know, O Lord."

And this is the Lord's point. If Job is going to have the audacity to suggest that God should be governing the world differently then surely Job is some expert on creating the world and governing every aspect of that creation toward its right end, right? But he isn't. The Lord knows it. Job knows it. And so the Lord concludes his first round of questions by saying in 40:1-2, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it." But Job has no answer. Rather, he responds, "Behold, I am of small account what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further" (40:4-5).

As we reflect on this, let's think of this two ways. First, Job is put in his place. As he rightly notes, he is not the all-wise God who governs the universe perfectly. Only God is the all-wise creator and ruler. Consequently we are reminded that we never need to try to be wiser than God. We should not put ourselves in a place of judgment over him nor disobey his commands because we think we know a better path. He is God and we are not. But that leads us to the second way to think of God's answer to Job. God is implying in his questioning of Job that he (as God) did indeed create the world, controls the weather, feeds the animals, governs and seas and heavens, and on and on. And if we look at the world around us, we can see that he does it with wisdom. We've only known this world as fallen. We're only known life on this side of the curse that came in Genesis 3. And yet note how gloriously the Lord manages the earth. He lifts water out of the rivers and seas in order to transport it and drop it on land in the form of rain. He causes the sunrise to come up and set each day in an array of beauty. He enables the smallest of bugs and largest of animals to feed themselves and survive and multiply. It's incredible to stop and consider his wisdom as he governs this world in all of its details. Therefore, it would be foolish of us not to trust him in his governance of our lives as well. Isn't this Jesus' point when he points us to consider the lilies and birds? Instead of standing in judgment over God and thinking

we're wiser than him, we would do well to trust the one who is the almighty creator and ruler of all things, no matter what's going on in our lives.

But what we've seen so far is only part of the Lord's answer. After Job answers the Lord by saying that he's got nothing more to say, the Lord calls Job to ready himself for more, saying again, "Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me" (40:7). And it's in this last response from the Lord that the Lord reminds us that he will one day put an end to suffering, Satan, sin, and death.

God's plan to put an end to suffering, Satan, sin, and death

As the Lord begins his questioning in these last two chapters, he once again notes that Job has charged God with being unjust. He asks Job, "Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right? (40:8). But you'll note that his questioning changes a bit from what we saw in chapters 38-39. In 40:9-13, the Lord begins to question where Job has the ability to bring judgment against evil. He asks, "Have you an arm like God and can you thunder with a voice like his?" Then he continues, telling Job to ready himself to pour out judgment, adding, "Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor. Pour out the overflowings of your anger, and look on everyone who is proud and abase him. Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low and tread down the wicked where they stand. Hide them all in the dust together; bind their faces in the world below."

Now, once again, Job has to acknowledge his inability. He is in no place to bring judgment against the evil of the world. The reason this is important is because salvation requires judgment. Bringing salvation to God's people means bringing his wrath against every evil that stands against them. But Job can't do this; only God can. That's why God declares that if Job can do this, "Then will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you" (40:14).

But just as God's questions to Job in chapters 38-39 highlighted God's own ability, so it is now. If chapters 38-39 note God's wisdom and creating and governing all things, chapters 40-41 will serve to show God's intention to bring salvation to its ultimate end—meaning that he will one day put an end to every enemy, including suffering, Satan, sin, and death.

The way that God illustrates this message to Job is by speaking of two creatures, but these aren't just any creatures. The first one he notes in 40:15-24 is named "Behemoth." This could be understood as a land animal, but the word itself is in the plural in Hebrew though it's speaking of one animal. This can be done to convey something of the majesty or impressiveness of this great creature, so that one commentator suggests that we should see this Behemoth as something like "The Superbeast."²

What makes this more convincing that the Lord isn't just speaking of another animal in addition

² Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 410.

to the list he's mentioned in chapter 39 is that there simply no animal that matches the description. We're told in 40:15 that he eats grass like an ox, meaning insatiably. He has strength in his loins, his limbs are like iron, and he dwells on the land while over moving through the turbulent river with ease. This description has led some to say this is a hippopotamus. But verse 17 seems to shatter this idea because he's described as having a "tail stiff like a cedar," which simply isn't anything like a hippo. More likely, I believe, is he's a creature the Lord is picturing to represent an evil opponent that must be dealt with.

What points us in that direction, ultimately, is how the Lord speaks in 40:19. Concerning Behemoth, he says, "He is the first of the works of God," which means that he is the preeminent one, the greatest of the beasts, though he's just a creature (i.e. one of the "works of God"). Yet just at this point where you might think the Lord is simply declaring how he marvels at his creative work, in the second half of verse 19 he adds, "Let him who made him bring near his sword!"

Instead of the Lord continuing simply to marvel at this creator, he speaks of the creator (himself!) bringing his sword near this creature—obviously to slay him. If we conclude this is merely a hippo we have to wonder why the Lord hates hippos so much. But, again, I think it's a representative of an enemy—maybe death itself—with the Lord declaring that he will slay this great enemy.

Similarly, in chapter 41, the Lord pictures the same reality with a creature named Leviathan. Now, we've already seen this creature in the book of Job. In the third chapter, as Job lamented, he wanted the day of his birth to be removed, and at one point he proclaimed, "Let those curse it who curse the day, who are ready to rouse up Leviathan" (3:8). And I noted at that point that men would speak of this mythological creature who would try to undo God's creation, coming out of the sea and devouring the sun itself. Job—in his despair—was saying that he really wishes that could happen.

Then, as we see the recurrence of this creature in chapter 41, I think he functions the same way, representing the enemy of God. He is described as one who can't be tamed or killed, who has sharp teeth, shield of plates on his back that can't be pierced, and folds of flesh that are hard as stone. And once again some have suggested this is a crocodile. But note how the Lord speaks of Leviathan in 41:18-21. He says, "His sneezings flash forth light, and his eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn. Out of his mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap forth. Out of his nostrils comes forth smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes." Now, I'll admit, I've not seen a ton of crocodiles in my day, but I've never seen a fire-breathing crocodile. Again, more likely is that the text is picturing Leviathan as this mythical creature who represents evil. And the Lord describes him in terrifying ways.

Remember how in chapters 38-39 the Lord kept asking Job if he'd created the world or governed everything in it? The point was not only to expose that Job didn't create the world and had no understanding of how much of the world worked, but to highlight that God *did* create the world, *did* understand everything going on with the world, and *is* the ruler of all things. Now the text

didn't explicitly stress God's ability, but by God exposing Job's inability the reader is supposed to understand it. Well, the same thing is true here with Leviathan. As the Lord speaks of this sea creature, he questions whether Job is able to tame and slay this great monster. He says, for example, "Can you put a rope in his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook? . . . Can you fill his skin with harpoons or his head with fishing spears? Lay your hands on him; remember the battle—you will not do it again! (41:2, 7-8). The Lord is saying that he can *and will* slay Leviathan.

But why then does God spend the last part of the chapter (41:12-34) praising the might of this creature? Well, I think I can explain. In the church where I grew up we would have this one service a year—I can't remember if it was a Sunday or Wednesday evening—where we would take turns requesting hymns to sing. But because time was limited, we would only sing the first verse of each song requested. And one night someone requested, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." That seemed like a fine request until we wrapped up our one verse. We sang it earlier in the service, but as a reminder, here is how verse 1 ends: "For still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great and armed with cruel hate; on earth is not his equal." I remember thinking as a kid. Wait, did we just sing a verse praising the power of the devil? And then quit?

But obviously the reason Luther wrote that hymn exalting the might of the devil in verse 1 is because it serves to highlight the Lord's might as the one who conquers our enemy in the following verses. So it is here. We see this, for example, in 41:10, as the Lord says, "No one is so fierce that he dares to stir him up." Then he adds, "Who then is he who can stand before me?" The Lord will slay our great enemy one day. Isaiah 27 confirms this. In Isaiah 27 the prophet speaks of a vision of the Lord bringing about a new creation where Jerusalem fills the whole world with fruit. But that chapter that speaks of that glorious day begins with these words: "In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea" (Is 27:1).

Isaiah was telling the people of Israel that evil would not be the last word. He'll slay their enemy and bring redemption. Well, I think that's what God is saying to Job now. He has certainly reminded Job that he is the wise creator and ruler of all things, and that means that Job should trust his all-powerful, all-wise Lord. But he's also reminding him that one day he'll deal with evil. He's telling his servant that evil won't have the last word. One day the Lord will return and there'll be no more suffering, no more sin, no more Satan, and no more death. This means that Job should trust in the goodness of God as well. And the reason we know can is because Jesus came and dealt a fatal blow to all of his enemies by his own death. Through his death he destroyed the one who holds the power of death. And death wasn't the last word for him. He walked out of the tomb alive so that we might know that the sovereign, wise, almighty God is good, and we can trust him. And is there any other place we'd want to be than resting in his hands as we trust our Father who loves us so? Let us then proclaim our trust in him now as we come to the table. Amen.