



Several years ago, an ABC News story featured the work of Julie Exline, a psychologist at Case Western Reserve University. Her area of expertise is a bit unusual, as she studies anger, and, specifically, anger at God. Exline’s work discovered that a good many people are mad at God. They are mad because they believe he allows bad things to happen, such as babies starving in third world countries. She says that *anywhere between one third and two thirds of people we’ve surveyed in the United States admit they sometimes feel angry at God in response to some current thing they are suffering with, such as a cancer diagnosis.* She goes on to describe anger toward God as one of several *spiritual struggles* that humans deal with throughout their lives. And spiritual struggles like anger towards God *are like a fork in the road for people. It can be a turning point. You have a choice. Are you going to disengage from the relationship, deciding that a loving God couldn't do this, and stop believing in Him? Others might suppress their anger and sweep it under the rug. And still others could work things out in their relationship, with another person or with God.*

<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/angry-god-thirds-americans-blame-god-problems-survey/story?id=12540557>)

This morning we conclude our series of messages on the book of Job. I don’t think it’s been an easy study, going through Job’s story. There aren’t a lot of encouraging passages in the book and it’s unnerving to read the anguished words of Job. Once Job loses everything he has, he keeps pleading for an audience with God. He wants to plead his case. Job finally gets his opportunity, and let’s read part of God’s response.

Job 38:1-12; 40:1-5 –

- 1 *Then the Lord spoke to 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'?
12 Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place?"

1 The Lord said to Job:

2 "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!"

3 Then Job answered the Lord:

4 "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth.

5 I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more."

What do you make of God's response to Job? On the surface, it doesn't sound very comforting, does it? It comes across as though God is scolding Job, doesn't it? Poor Job. We really have to feel for the guy. His life was going extremely well, so well that he was undoubtedly the envy of all, and then it fell totally apart. His friends come to see him, which probably encouraged him when they arrived, but it turned out they weren't any help, because they didn't come to comfort Job, encourage Job, or to offer their help; instead, they came to criticize and condemn Job and to tell him his suffering was his fault, claiming that no one suffers unless they have done something to deserve it. Could things have been any worse for Job? Unfortunately, yes. Job expressed his wish for an audience with God, but when he gets that opportunity it doesn't turn out quite like he had hoped. Job believed he had a legitimate complaint about what had happened to him and believed God needs to hear him express that complaint. But when God does speak with him, Job is quite humbled by the response, and says, basically, *I'm going to keep quiet. I've not opening my mouth again.*

I think it's true that most people have pondered the question of why God seems to allow some very difficult things to happen in our world. What I find very interesting about the story of Job is that his primary interest is not in understanding the larger question of suffering; it doesn't seem that he is all that interested even in an answer to his own suffering. Job's greatest interest is in gaining an audience with God in order to plead his case that he believes he has been mistreated. Job lived a righteous life and believed such a life should have brought him blessing and not suffering. It wasn't so much that Job wanted an answer for suffering in general, but an answer to what he thought was the unjust suffering he faced in his life.

This is one of the difficulties we face in suffering – its perceived unfairness. But what the story of Job teaches us, I think, is that there is no guarantee against unfair and unjust suffering. In fact, Jesus reminds us that God *causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous* (Matthew 5:45). What the book of Job brings to our attention, then, is the question of how we understand God. So as we complete our study of Job this morning let us consider briefly three things about the nature of God that we learn from Job's story.

1. *There is a good deal of mystery to God.*

St. Augustine said *we are talking about God. What wonder is it that you do not understand? If you do understand, then it is not God.* I don't know that I would go so far as to say we can't understand anything about God, but I think Augustine had a point. There are times, I believe, when we are far too confident in some of our assertions about God. There are certainly things we can know about God, but the answer God gives to Job clearly teaches us that we don't have God figured out to the extent we think we do.

God very pointedly asks Job *"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. 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?"* (38:2-5). We do not have the capacity to understand the full nature

of God. When we consider the eternal God who created the infinite universe in which we live, how could we understand the fullness of who God is? I think we can understand enough about God, but there is much that is so far beyond our comprehension. Now, I'm going to offer what may be the worst sermon illustration ever, at least according to my family it is, but I'll use it anyway. Our family has three cats. One of the cats – Midnight – has been with us for 18 or more years. The other two – Alex and Campbell – we rescued 7 or 8 years ago when they were abandoned in the church parking lot. None of the three like our vacuum cleaner. When the vacuum cleaner is turned on they scatter, running as though it is some terrible machine that is coming for them. I could pick the cats up, one by one, and hold them, stroke them, and tell them that the vacuum cleaner is not going to hurt them. I could tell them it will not catch them by their tails and, in fact, it is not even interested in them. I could do all that, but the result will be the same – when the vacuum comes on they will still run for the hills and go into hiding. They will do this because they cannot understand language and they cannot understand something that is as simple and as basic to us as a vacuum cleaner. They simply do not have the intellectual capacity to understand. As advanced as we humans are, there is still a limit to our intellectual capacity, in terms of what we can and cannot understand. Even if God were to descend from heaven in all of his glory and explain to us about suffering and the mysteries of the universe, there is still much we would not understand, because our minds are limited in what we can comprehend. God basically says this in the book of Exodus, where we read the story of Moses. When Moses flees Egypt and settles in the land of Midian, God eventually speaks to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-14). One of the fascinating elements of the story is the desire of Moses to know the name of God. *Suppose I go to the Israelites, he says, and say to them, "the God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "what is his name?" Then what shall I tell them?* God will not give a name to Moses, instead simply answering *I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I am has sent me to you* (Exodus 3:13-14). I think that answer tells us several things about God, one being that he has a sense of humor. Imagine Moses, before the people, and the people ask, *who is this God that sent you Moses?* And Moses answers *I am. You are, ask the people?* *No, replies Moses, I am.* It's almost like Abbott and Costello's *whose on first* routine. But it also tells us that God is saying to Moses, and also to Job, that *you are not going to get every answer about me that you desire. You are going to have to live with some measure of mystery. I know you want all the answers, but not all the answers will be forthcoming.* That is not a comforting thought, but it is the reality.

I think we have to accept the fact that just because we live in a knowledge/information-based, scientific age, there are some things we just can't know, and in spite of our advanced intellectual capacities, we can neither know or understand all the ways of God. I've decided I'm okay with that. I say *I don't know* a lot more than I used to when people ask me questions. I've decided to not presume I will have every answer to every question in this life. If you can't live with some mystery about God you will find faith to be very difficult.

2. *God is not a transactional God.*

Clearly, Job misunderstood God, in terms of what he expected God to do for him. Job saw his relationship with God as being transactional, that is, Job did something for God – he lived a righteous life – so God should do something for him, such as give him a life of blessing, comfort, and ease. But God doesn't work on a transactional basis; there is no *quid pro quo* (Latin for *something for something*). This is part of the answer that Job receives when he finally is given his audience with God, where God clearly reminds Job that he is now owed anything. It's hard for us to escape transactional thinking, as we have a tendency to believe that God is busy doling out rewards and punishments based on what we have done or have not done. The book of Job "flattens out" humanity; that is, the ground on which we all stand is level in terms of suffering. You might be a better person than me (and granted, being better than me is a fairly low bar) but does that get you further with God? No. We're the same – we call that

grace. We are also the same when it comes to suffering. No one is immune; not the rich, the poor, the powerful, or the weak. Everyone suffers and no one is immune to its effects.

The language of church – not the language of faith, but of church, and they are sometimes different – can be revealing. In church we sometimes use phrases such as *being fed*, *being ministered to*, *getting something out of the worship service* or *getting something out of church*. That is church language; it is not language of the kingdom. Such language reveals the expectation and the assumption that God is our servant rather than the truth that we are God’s servants. We are not the objects of worship, although the temptation always exists to make ourselves the objects of worship. We are not called here for what we can receive but are called here for what we can give. The reality is that we often make ourselves the object of worship, such as when we ask questions such as *what am I getting out of this*, rather than *what am I offering to God because of this worship?* We are not called here for how we can be ministered to but are called here in order to learn about how we can minister to and serve others. When God is the object of our worship, and not ourselves, when we are not here to receive but to give, when we are here not to be ministered to but to minister, we will actually receive those things in abundance, because it is in giving that we receive.

3. *Suffering teaches us to be like God.*

The central tenet of Christianity is the Incarnation – the belief that God became a man in the person of Jesus. As the gospel of John reminds us, *the word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14). We are to model the Incarnation in the lives of others by entering into their suffering and in doing so we demonstrate the type of love that God demonstrates to us. Our suffering ought to make us more compassionate and tenderhearted to others when they suffer. We are to be like God in that we are to emulate the Incarnation. That God became a person in Jesus is the central truth of the Bible. God became like us in order to demonstrate in a powerful way his love for us, and asks us to be like him in becoming present in the lives of others.

And we should also, I think, be very careful about the claim that God is not doing enough about the suffering in the world. That is the claim we continually hear from skeptics, that if God exists, he ought to be doing more about the suffering in the world. I believe only the person who is doing everything – and I mean everything – they can do about suffering has the right to ask that question of God. I don’t ask God *why don’t you do more about the suffering in the world?* I believe it’s more appropriate to ask that question of myself – *Dave, why aren’t you doing more about the suffering in the world?* I don’t generally ask it of others, because I don’t know what they are doing to ease the suffering of others, but I will admit that when someone who is living in a 20,000 square foot house, has a garage full of luxury cars, stacks of money in the bank, lives a lavish lifestyle and claims God ought to be doing more, well, I think they should look in a mirror and ask why they aren’t doing more. Considering the suffering in the world, I do know this – God is not the author of warfare, he is not the author of hunger, God is not the author of hatred, or of any of the other ills in the world. God is the author of the solution to those problems – love – and is the one who asks us to practice that love in order to ease the sufferings of our neighbors.



As difficult as I find the book of Job to read, I find a great deal of hope there. As difficult as life can be, there is always hope. I received an email from an organization some time ago. As I was reading it, and looking at a couple of the pictures in it, a theological message jumped out of it to me. The two pictures come from Patagonia National Park in the nation of Chile. A wildfire erupted and swept through 7,400 acres of land. The first picture is one taken before the fire. It is a beautiful place. The second picture is taken after the fire, and you can easily see the devastation. What's fascinating about the second picture is the new, green growth in the front center. It is a single bit of green in the midst of the charred landscape. I think that picture is very representative of Job's life, and sometimes of your life, or mine. There's a lot of bleakness and loss, but there is still life. There is always life. Always. This is the great gift and hope of God – life. And that is the message of the book of Job, I believe. There is always life. Where God is, there is life.

I heard Erwin McManus speak recently (Erwin is the founding pastor of Mosaic Church in Los Angeles), and I think it might have been the most powerful and moving sermon I have ever heard, and I've heard a lot of sermons. Two things he said really stuck with me, and they won't sound nearly as powerful when I say them, as they will be separated from the context of his message, but I believe they are great words to hear. He said that *God does not give us a life without pain, but he gives us a way through the pain*. He went on to say that *your faith doesn't make your life easier; it makes you stronger*. I really love those words.

I want to leave you with this to think about – how is God going to get you through your pain? We are all like Job to some extent. We all have pain, but here is how God will get you through that pain – God has given you faith and it has made you strong! Be strong! Be faithful! And know, always, that God is faithful to you!