"Will the One Who Contends With the Almighty Correct Him?"

Texts: Job 38:1-42:6: Hebrews 12:18-29

Pliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have had their say. So has Job. So has Elihu. Now Job will get the very thing he has been demanding—an audience before God. But when God speaks to Job, things will be much different from what Job has been expecting. There will be no formal indictment with charges for Job to answer. Nor will the Lord give Job a detailed response to his list of questions nor respond to Job's specious charges that YHWH has not treated him fairly. Instead, God will cross-examine Job through a series of questions designed to teach Job true wisdom. And in the end, Job not only will be much wiser, he will be humbled, while yet at the same time assured of God's favor toward him, even in the midst of his trial by ordeal, which blessedly comes to an end.

We move to the climax to the Book of Job, when God speaks to Job from the midst of a whirlwind. At long last we get an answer to the question which has dominated this entire story so far—why do the righteous suffer? More specifically, why does Job suffer? The answer Job receives from God is not one Job expects nor even necessarily likes. In fact, some would not consider God's words to Job an answer at all. For in Job 38-42 we discover what God means when he says in Isaiah 55:8, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," and in Psalm 145:3 and Isaiah 40:28 when we read that God's "greatness no one can fathom." In our weakness, God condescends to teach Job that God's thoughts, ways and greatness transcend anything humans think or imagine. As a result, Job will be thoroughly humbled and transformed in his thinking before, in his grace, God restores to Job all those things which had been taken from him during his trial by ordeal, which is now blessedly completed.

As the final section of the Book of Job unfolds, we need to notice that God's appearance to Job is an act of grace. Instead of coming to Job in judgment and confronting him with a list of his sins or even rebuking him for his thoughtless questions, God takes him to the school of Wisdom—where the primary entrance requirement is a diploma from the school of suffering, which Job has now graduated. The Lord will teach Job true wisdom through a series of rhetorical questions, a process designed to remind Job that the creator and sustainer of all things has graciously drawn near and speaks to him about the nature of the world and his Lordship over every inch of all of that he has made.

Yes, God is still on his throne despite all that has happened to Job and despite Job's fear that he's been abandoned. Since the God who created all things and rules and governs them now graciously appears to Job from the midst of the storm, Job is instantly assured that everything is okay, despite his present circumstances. Knowing that God is not angry at him, it no longer really matters to Job what will happen, since the very presence of God assures Job that all is well and puts all things—even his suffering—into proper perspective.¹

Lest we forget, God has been graciously preparing Job for this transforming moment all along. Job has come to see that none of his three friends possessed true wisdom. It could be said (and probably should

¹ Andersen, <u>Job</u>, p. 269.

be said) that these three well-intended doofuses (doofi) only darkened the way of understanding. Job's ability to quickly silence them showed that he was on the right track, but his increasing pride and conceit in his effort to vindicate himself showed that he too was not yet ready to receive true wisdom. It was not until the speech from Elihu that Job began to realize that he had gone too far in his demands to be vindicated. It is Elihu, who by humbling Job, actually prepares the way for the Lord to come and speak to Job from the midst of the whirlwind. Given all that Job had been through, without such preparation, he surely would have been overwhelmed by the Lord's approach. Now Job is simultaneously humbled and yet completely assured of God's favor.

We also need to keep in mind the nature of the events revealed in the prologue (chapters 1 and 2). It was the Lord himself who summoned Satan and called his attention to the Lord's righteous servant, Job. So now God comes to Job, also in the form of a challenge, this time through a series of rhetorical questions. The irony in all of this is that God confronts both Job and Satan with his wondrous works. Job himself is that work of divine grace through which God challenges Satan—"see my righteous servant Job? There is no one else like him on all the earth." God's challenge to Job to consider his wondrous works is the means by which God's work of redemption will be perfected in Job. This enables the righteous servant to triumph over the Devil through his trial by ordeal.² In the end, Job will bow his knee before his creator and praise his name. He will not curse God as Satan had predicted. And he will learn true wisdom.

Job's ordeal also prefigures the coming of Jesus Christ, who will be truly righteous and perfectly obedient, who will finally and totally defeat Satan when he too is afflicted with grief at the hands of sinful men and women. Throughout the Book of Job, we find a fundamental truth of redemptive history being set forth in type and shadow–someone must fulfill all righteousness and then offer a full and complete satisfaction for human sin in order to undo the works of the Devil. Job's obedience does so in a very limited and provisional way. But the suffering Job, who struggles to find wisdom, becomes a type of the greater Job, Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God incarnate.

In Job 38:1-40:2, God delivers his first challenge to Job, followed by Job's response in 40:3-5, which, in turn, is immediately followed by a second challenge in Job 40:6-41:24. We now turn to YHWH's first speech to Job beginning in Job 38:1.

The story of Job has been building to this dramatic moment from chapter 4 on. We have heard the three cycles of cruel speeches from Job's friends, who because of their faulty understanding of the principle of divine retribution, accused Job of having sinned. We have also heard Job's heartfelt complaint in chapter 3, along with the responses to his three friends and then the increasingly defiant and self-righteous speeches from Job in chapters 26-31. Finally, Elihu speaks as prophet and, in effect, prepares the way for the coming of the Lord. Then, in Job 37:1-2 Elihu declared, "at this my heart pounds and leaps from its place. Listen! Listen to the roar of his voice, to the rumbling that comes from his mouth," before spending two full chapters (Job 36-37) offering heartfelt praise to God for all of his glorious works. When Elihu comes to the end of his speech, we read in Job 38:1, "Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm." The way has been prepared for the Lord to come. The human quest for wisdom has come to a pitiful end. The Lord instructs Job in the way of wisdom and Job will never be the same.

Whenever there is an appearance of YHWH in the Old Testament (a theophany), it is always accompanied by physical manifestations, in this case a "storm" (NIV) (cf. Psalm 18:7 ff; 50:3; Ezekiel

² Kline, "Job," p. 486.

1:4, 28, Nahum 1:3, Habakkuk 3 and Zechariah 9:14). It is with these images in mind that the author of Hebrews, speaks of God as a consuming fire (cf. Hebrews 12:29). Such upheaval in the natural order not only indicates the presence of the Lord, it illustrates the significance and importance of the divine revelation which was about to follow.³ Let us not forget that it was also a windstorm which took the lives of Job's children, so the reference to the storm is perhaps intended to remind the reader that nothing comes to pass apart from the will of the Lord–even windstorms which take the lives of those we love.

In verses 2-3, the Lord issues a challenge to 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." Since we read in Job 42:7 that Job spoke correctly about the Lord throughout his ordeal, the Lord's rebuke of Job is based on the fact that Job spoke of things he did not know. Job spoke in ignorance about the plans (counsel) of God. The creature has no right whatsoever to criticize the Creator, especially when the creature can only speak from ignorance about the mysterious ways of the sovereign God.

The Lord's command for Job to brace himself like a man is an image taken directly from the ancient sport of belt-wrestling in which the winner was able to either remove his opponent's belt, or else give his opponent such a massive wedgie that they were forced into submission. This was not only an athletic image (the idea of a contest or fete of strength), but grabbing someone's belt was also the means of subduing them in a court of law or upon capture. As a sign of ordeal, the implication is clear—Job's trial by ordeal is about to be resolved. YHWH will subdue Job, not to punish him, but as a means of ending the ordeal by teaching Job that which he has been seeking—true wisdom.

We need to be clear that this contest is not merely about God's power or sheer strength. The issue is not that God is bigger than Job and like a bully can do whatever he wants. God does not belittle Job, given his greatness and Job's contrasting finitude. Job is not crushed nor consumed by God's greatness. But he is humbled. There is a big difference. The contest between God and Job centers in the revelation of divine wisdom, not in power for power's sake. God's wisdom is presented as that of a skilled craftsman. God's wisdom is displayed on earth, in the heavens, and in the animal kingdom as seen in the mention of creatures who are beyond human control, but who are God's pets. While Job is not consumed by God's greatness, Job does become fully aware of how truly great God is and how sinful and weak men and women truly are. God will now give to Job the very thing he lacks—wisdom. Such wisdom enables Job to accept the ways and purposes of God, whatever they may be, even in the midst of suffering.

Because the ordeal centers in a test of wisdom, the Lord asks Job a series of questions designed to show Job his spatial and temporal limitations. Job will live out the average span of a human life. He can only be in one place at a time and can only understand a small fraction of what he observes. His inherent sinfulness causes him to see things in a self-centered and distorted way. Job, in other words, is a sinful

³ Kline, "Job," p. 486.

⁴ Kline, "Job," p. 486.

⁵ Kline, "Job," p. 487; Andersen, <u>Job</u>, pp. 268-272.

⁶ Andersen, <u>Job</u>, p. 273.

⁷ Kline, "Job," p. 487.

human. But God is not bound by space or by time. He is perfectly Holy, just and righteous in all his doings. Reminding Job of this is the point of this series of questions—which are surely not intended to offer a scientific explanation of origins,⁸ but which are designed to point out that Job was nowhere to be found when God created the heavens and the earth. "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?" Job was nonexistent when God created the earth. God is without beginning or end and predates the earth by countless (endless) ages.

The same thing holds true of the sea (v. 8–11). "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'?" Even the seas with all their storm and tempest obey their creator—men and women are helpless to control the ocean. Furthermore YHWH sets the day and night in place, as we see in verses 12-15. "Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place, that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it? The earth takes shape like clay under a seal; its features stand out like those of a garment. The wicked are denied their light, and their upraised arm is broken." Job must rise with the sun and sleep when it sets. But the Lord creates both the day and the night and has never slumbered, nor ever been sleepy.

The limits of human existence become clear in verses 16-18 when the Lord says to Job. "Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this." No, Job does not know any of these things. He is bound to one place. He will live and die at a particular time. Not so with the LORD, who does all of the things which he now asks Job in verses 19-21. "What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years!" In the creation account, God separates the light from the darkness. But Job was nowhere to be seen when God did this. It is important to notice that God is not ridiculing Job, although it is easy take these words as such. As one writer reminds us, it is not unkind nor sarcastic when God reminds a creature of his limitations, "to let God be God". God is not showing Job up. But he is reminding Job of the difference between a creature and the Creator and understanding this Creator-creature distinction is the beginning of wisdom.

Now the student (Job) is taken beyond day and night to the weather and to the heavenly bodies. As we learn in the creation account, the God who rules over heaven and earth rules them because he has created them. Yet Job has no control over these things whatsoever. Beginning in verse 22, the Lord asks Job, "Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle? What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth? Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass? Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the

⁸ Andersen, <u>Job</u>, p. 274.

⁹ Andersen, <u>Job</u>, p. 277.

heavens when the waters become hard as stone, when the surface of the deep is frozen? `Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God's dominion over the earth? `Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, 'Here we are'? Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens when the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth stick together?" No, Job cannot speak to lightening and Job has not hung the constellations in space. Lightening is the Lord's servant. The Lord spoke and the constellations came to be.

At the end of chapter 38 and continuing on throughout chapter 39, the focus shifts to the animal kingdom. Job is not in any sense able to govern or rule the creatures God has made. While man was given dominion over the animals in Eden, this dominion was lost after the fall of the human race into sin. The point is that Job cannot possibly know the extent of animal activity, nor can he in any sense control the ways of creatures. Job has not set their boundaries nor established their domains. In Job 38:39, we read, "Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn? Do you count the months till they bear? Do you know the time they give birth? They crouch down and bring forth their young; their labor pains are ended. Their young thrive and grow strong in the wilds; they leave and do not return. Who let the wild donkey go free? Who untied his ropes? I gave him the wasteland as his home, the salt flats as his habitat. He laughs at the commotion in the town; he does not hear a driver's shout. He ranges the hills for his pasture and searches for any green thing. `Will the wild ox consent to serve you? Will he stay by your manger at night? Can you hold him to the furrow with a harness? Will he till the valleys behind you? Will you rely on him for his great strength? Will you leave your heavy work to him? Can you trust him to bring in your grain and gather it to your threshing floor?" Job can control none of the creatures. God ordains their every move.

How much less can Job control the birds of the air. "The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully, but they cannot compare with the pinions and feathers of the stork. She lays her eggs on the ground and lets them warm in the sand, unmindful that a foot may crush them, that some wild animal may trample them. She treats her young harshly, as if they were not hers; she cares not that her labor was in vain, for God did not endow her with wisdom or give her a share of good sense. Yet when she spreads her feathers to run, she laughs at horse and rider." As far as the horses go, Job is no match for their great strength-especially those strong animals used by armies. "Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Do you make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud snorting? He paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength, and charges into the fray. He laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; he does not shy away from the sword. The quiver rattles against his side, along with the flashing spear and lance. In frenzied excitement he eats up the ground; he cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds. At the blast of the trumpet he snorts, 'Aha!' He catches the scent of battle from afar, the shout of commanders and the battle cry." In verse 26, the final scene shifts to the raptors of the sky. "Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom and spread his wings toward the south? Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high? He dwells on a cliff and stays there at night; a rocky crag is his stronghold. From there he seeks out his food; his eyes detect it from afar. His young ones feast on blood, and where the slain are, there is he."

Tob has been subdued—the first "fall" in the belt-wrestling ordeal is about to be decided.

The time has come for Job to admit defeat. Thus in verses 1-2 of Job 40, we read, "*The LORD said*"

to Job: `Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" Job has no choice but to cry "uncle." Job's wisdom is no match for the wisdom of God. What follows in verses 3-5, then, is that Job will no longer dispute with God as he had done throughout the latter stages of the dialogue with his friends, nor will Job demand to approach God as a prince, as he had done in the closing words of his final speech. Job has lost the contest. He is humbled but also assured. We read, "Then Job answered the LORD: `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."

Job has not yet learned all that he needs to learn. He has lost the first fall in the belt-ordeal, but the match (which apparently includes two falls, not one) is not yet over. Job is ordered to take up the challenge again, to put his belt back on and to go one more round with YHWH. Job's initial submission to YHWH is the beginning of true repentance, but Job must now fully recognize the unreasonableness and the sinfulness of criticizing his Creator. In verses 6-7, the challenge is renewed. "Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: 'Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me." We can only imagine Job's reaction to the news that the contest is not yet over.

Throughout the opening verses of chapter 40, the focus is on God's sovereign work in redemption, often depicted throughout the Old Testament as YHWH's outstretched hand. Job has no reason whatsoever to complain about how God does things. Yet in an eery way Job's increasingly self-centered demand to be vindicated amounts to a kind of self-deification, the inevitable result of human sinfulness. Because of human sin, God's purposes, which are always good and true, even if we cannot see nor understand why, must somehow become subservient to the desires of sinful humans. This is Job's great failure. In verses 8-14, the LORD says to Job, "Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God's, and can your voice thunder like his? Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor, and clothe yourself in honor and majesty. Unleash the fury of your wrath, look at every proud man and bring him low, look at every proud man and humble him, crush the wicked where they stand. Bury them all in the dust together; shroud their faces in the grave. Then I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you." If Job can do what God can do, then the Lord will worship him! Elihu was right—Job sought to justify himself rather than God. No, only God can justify himself, because only God is without sin. Job, the sinner, has no right to question the holy God.

YHWH's second challenge moves in a different direction. How would Job fare against certain members of the animal kingdom? Beginning in verse 15, YHWH asks Job, "Look at the behemoth, [the Hippo] which I made along with you and which feeds on grass like an ox. What strength he has in his loins, what power in the muscles of his belly! His tail sways like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are close-knit. His bones are tubes of bronze, his limbs like rods of iron. He ranks first among the works of God, yet his Maker can approach him with his sword. The hills bring him their produce, and all the wild animals play nearby. Under the lotus plants he lies, hidden among the reeds in the marsh. The lotuses conceal him in their shadow; the poplars by the stream surround him. When the river rages, he is not alarmed; he is secure, though the Jordan should surge against his mouth. Can anyone capture him by the eyes, or trap him and pierce his nose?" Job has no chance in a belt wrestling contest against the Hippo—it was common in the ancient world to depict animals in such contests with humans— and yet

¹⁰ Kline, "Job," p. 487.

¹¹ Kline, "Job," p. 488.

YHWH controls his every move.¹²

The same holds true for Leviathan, probably the crocodile. According to Job 41:1 and following, Job is asked, "can you pull in the leviathan with a fishhook or tie down his tongue with a rope? Can you put a cord through his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook? Will he keep begging you for mercy? Will he speak to you with gentle words? Will he make an agreement with you for you to take him as your slave for life? Can you make a pet of him like a bird or put him on a leash for your girls? Will traders barter for him? Will they divide him up among the merchants? Can you fill his hide with harpoons or his head with fishing spears? If you lay a hand on him, you will remember the struggle and never do it again! Any hope of subduing him is false; the mere sight of him is overpowering. No one is fierce enough to rouse him. Who then is able to stand against me? Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me"—even the crocodile, who does the will of YHWH, not Job.

The crocodile is legendary in Job's day. "I will not fail to speak of his limbs, his strength and his graceful form. Who can strip off his outer coat? Who would approach him with a bridle? Who dares open the doors of his mouth, ringed about with his fearsome teeth? His back has rows of shields tightly sealed together; each is so close to the next that no air can pass between. They are joined fast to one another; they cling together and cannot be parted. His snorting throws out flashes of light; his eyes are like the rays of dawn. Firebrands stream from his mouth; sparks of fire shoot out. Smoke pours from his nostrils as from a boiling pot over a fire of reeds. His breath sets coals ablaze, and flames dart from his mouth. Strength resides in his neck; dismay goes before him. The folds of his flesh are tightly joined; they are firm and immovable. His chest is hard as rock, hard as a lower millstone. When he rises up, the mighty are terrified; they retreat before his thrashing. The sword that reaches him has no effect, nor does the spear or the dart or the javelin. Iron he treats like straw and bronze like rotten wood. Arrows do not make him flee; slingstones are like chaff to him. A club seems to him but a piece of straw; he laughs at the rattling of the lance. His undersides are jagged potsherds, leaving a trail in the mud like a threshing sledge. He makes the depths churn like a boiling caldron and stirs up the sea like a pot of ointment. Behind him he leaves a glistening wake; one would think the deep had white hair. Nothing on earth is his equal-a creature without fear. He looks down on all that are haughty; he is king over all that are proud."

In Job 40:8, YHWH asked Job—Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Now we see that God's mighty power and glorious works point Job beyond God's works, to God himself. God alone is good. His perfect righteousness is displayed in the heavens, on the earth and in the creatures. If God can do all of this and more, and since Job is bound by time and space as well as guilty for his own sins as well as Adam's, then surely he can now see the obvious—Job has no right to question the Almighty or his ways. Once understanding this to be the case, we can say that Job has learned true wisdom. And true wisdom tells Job that God is just in all his ways—even when Job does not understand, nor necessarily like, the things that God is doing. The God who created and sustains all things is surely mysterious to us. And yet, from the consideration of his works, we know that he is good.

It should be clear that Job's reply to YHWH's second challenge is quite the opposite of his heartfelt lament of chapter 3. Having gained the wisdom he needed, Job now freely acknowledges his sins in going too far in his effort to justify himself, rather that giving glory and honor to God, no matter what his circumstances.

¹² Kline, "Job," p. 488.

What makes the words of Job 42:1-6 all the more amazing is that Job is still suffering and has not yet received the explanation for the nature of his trial by ordeal! God has not given Job the answer to his question "why?" which Job was certainly expecting. The answer we are given is that God's ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not ours. Do we hang constellations in space? Do we control the earth's creatures? To people without faith in Jesus Christ, this is not an answer. To people who know that Christ died for their sins and was raised for their justification, this is the perfect answer! If the righteous one suffered to save us from our sins, then who are we to question God or to act as though God knows nothing of our pain? Jesus Christ is the man of sorrows! Like us in every way, yet without sin.

As a man who trusted in the God of the promise, Job shows himself to be everything the Lord has said of him-upright and blameless. Job is a justified sinner, and a faithful servant of the covenant. Despite having lost everything, and going through such horrible suffering, Job refuses to curse God. Now, having gained true wisdom and being assured of God's favor, Job humbly repents of his sins. We read in the first six verses of Job 42: "Then Job replied to the LORD: \lambda know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." God has been with Job throughout his entire ordeal. Once God spoke from the storm, Job knows that to be true. He should have never doubted it, nor demanded his own vindication, even though he had the legal right to do so. Job knows that nothing can thwart God's will. Job did not know of what he spoke. Now he knows to keep silent. There is nothing left to say. For God in his grace has appeared to Job and reminded him of the wisdom of all God's ways. All of this has been too wonderful for Job to grasp. He knows that God can do all things and his ways are always righteous. There is only one response. "I despise myself. I repent in dust and ashes."

It is a fact of Scripture that there is no way that a true believer can encounter the living God without being undone by the guilt of their sin. At no time did God ever tell Job why he as suffered. Yet Job has his answer. For when God appears to Job from the midst of the storm, Job knows that God is with him, and for Job, that is enough.¹³ For even as Job repents and despises his own actions, God is preparing to restore him beyond Job's wildest expectations. For as we will see next week, God always keeps his promises. Job's story, just as ours, must have a happy ending! Why? Because of the cross and the empty tomb. The Lord has taken away and the Lord will restore! Blessed be the name of the Lord!

¹³ Kline, "Job," p. 489.