

Is God Always Anything?

The Book of Job; Isa 43:14-21; 1 John 1:1-5

Brent A. Strawn

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

“Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: . . . ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.’” (Job 38:1, 4)

Introduction

I sometimes tell my students who are beginning their preaching careers to start with something easy when preaching. Some easy text. And short, too. Short and easy. That would be a good idea. But professors often seem completely incapable of following their own advice! And so it is that I have chosen a very difficult text: Job. And not just one little part, but *the whole book* of Job.

Now don’t worry, I’m not going to read the whole book to you. But if I’m going to preach on Job, you might wonder what gives with those Old and New Testament readings. Here’s what gives: when we read those well-beloved portions of scripture together, they seem to pose a question: Is God always anything? That is, is God always one thing consistently, whether it is light, as 1 John says, or something else? Or does God, at least on occasion, change God’s mind, forgetting the old ways and doing new things as Isaiah asserts? Which is it, consistency or changeability? One, both, neither? And how might we decide?

Enter the Book of Job.

Job’s Predicament (1:1-2:13)

This question—“Is God Always Anything?” —is just one of many that arises from the Book of Job. And I think Job gives us an answer or two. Now I’m sure you are already quite familiar with Job. In fact, I have no doubt that many of you feel intimately acquainted with him for whatever reason—for a whole host of reasons! “Know him?” some of you might be saying right now, “I *am* him! I *am* Job. Or at least it feels like it.” It really does feel like it sometimes, doesn’t it? And that’s what makes this material so crucial—crucial for our theologies and crucial for our souls.

The story begins with a nice guy in a nice place with all the nice trappings: nice wife, nice kids—though they party a bit much—and lots of nice stuff. But then something strange happens: we are suddenly ushered into the divine throne room and catch a glimpse of what goes on there. In come the heavenly beings, and with them comes one called “the Satan,” which means “the accuser,” since that is his job. Unfortunately for Job, God is quite proud of him and brags to the Satan about Job: “Have you considered my servant Job?” God asks. “There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil” (1:8).

Then the Satan answers God: “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? . . . But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face” (1:9-11). God takes this challenge; the wager is set. It’s a bet of cosmic proportions. Heaven and earth will strain to see if Job really serves God “for nothing.” He has

been blessed and supported and loved and nurtured. Take it away, though, and will he still be faithful? Or will he curse God and call it quits? That's the gist of the opening chapters.

And so the story begins. In one day, Job loses all his material possessions—oxen, donkeys, sheep, and camels—and he loses his loved ones—all but four messengers and all of his ten children, dead. And, amazingly, we come to find out that without all this—without all of the trappings, the hedge of protection, even without his children and servants—Job is still able to say, “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:21). Such words! Almost unfathomable in the face of such tragedy. Unfortunately for Job, the tragedy has only just begun.

Back in God's throne room, the heavenly beings file in, and wouldn't you know it, the Satan is back too. God won the first round, but the accuser wants double-or-nothing: “All that people have they will give to save their lives,” he says. “But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face” (2:4-5). Then, of course, Job is afflicted with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. All he can do is sit on the ash heap and scrape his blisters with a piece of broken pottery. But still he persists, despite the discouraging words of his wife that he should curse God and die. “Should we accept only good from God and not accept evil?” he asks her (2:10).

Well, that's Job's story—up to this point at least. That's his predicament. And it is certainly a tragic one: once rich, he is now impoverished; once a father of many children, he is now bereaved; once a husband, he is now estranged from his wife; once healthy, he is now a portrait of sickness and suffering. But it's actually *worse* than all that. You see, Job didn't have the benefit of seeing God's throne room like we have. He knows of no “Satan” figure and doesn't know that his situation is the result of an elaborate cosmic wager on whether or not he will prove faithful in the end. On the one hand, maybe it's better that Job didn't know that! But on the other hand, this also makes his predicament much worse because Job only knows of God. All there is, then, is Job's painful encounter with the one ultimately responsible for his very great suffering: God.

Oh, there is something else: Job's friends. Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite “met together to go and console and comfort” Job (2:11). When they find him, they don't recognize him, so twisted is he from his pain. “They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights,” the Scripture says, “and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (2:13).

Job, Job's Friends, and Their Answers (3:1-37:24)

Finally someone speaks out of the silence. It is Job. And his voice is both less and more confident than it had been in the preceding chapters. It is less confident in that Job wishes he were dead, wishes he had never been born, is uncertain about the character and quality of the God whom he has served with such uprightness and blamelessness. But Job's voice is more confident in that he is certain that his suffering is undeserved. He *has*, truly and in fact, served this God with uprightness and blamelessness. How then could this have happened?

Then Job's friends break their silence. They have an answer for Job. He won't like it, but they have it all figured out. They tell him that he is absolutely right—this

shouldn't have happened to an innocent, upright, and blameless chap like Job. That's the whole point—it did happen, and that is proof that Job is not so innocent, upright, blameless, perfect, sanctified, you name it. On the contrary, he is guilty, sinful, perverse, ignorant, arrogant, you name it. That's the answer. That is why Job suffers.

In theological terms we call this type of thinking retribution theology. It means that you always get what you've got coming. If you do good, good things will happen to you. If you do bad, bad things will happen to you. It's as simple and un-complex as that. This is the way God works, the friends say: "Since you got the bad end of the deal, it means, logically, necessarily, inescapably, that you were the bad start of the deal. God is just, God is fair, God rewards according to one's deeds. *Always*. There is no use complaining about that. Give up, give in, repent, and everything will be all right again. Of course, the sheep and the children and the servants are all still dead, but no matter. You suffer, Job, because you *deserve* to suffer."

Several fascinating things happen in this dialogue between Job and his friends. The first is that Job actually agrees. His friends are right. This *is* the way God works. But they are wrong too, Job avows. He is, despite what they say, innocent, completely and totally. That's what makes their theology, which sounds so right and good, in actuality so utterly wrong and horrible. You see, it is not applicable here. Here, we have a good man, a good Job, at the start. But instead of a good end to the story, there is a tragic one. This system, this retribution theology that the friends espouse just doesn't work. God may work this way sometimes, but certainly *not always*. "I am innocent!" Job maintains. The friends disagree. They become more and more hostile in their condemnation of Job, and Job becomes more and more adamant about his innocence and the injustice of his situation. And it goes on like this for 33 chapters.

In the middle of this maelstrom, another fascinating thing happens. Since his friends refuse to listen, Job decides to take his case to the One that is responsible in the first place. He complains to God. And with such pathos! And with such honesty! And with such boldness, if not arrogance! Listen to what he says:

If I summoned [God] and he answered me, I do not believe that he would listen to my voice. For he crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause; he will not let me catch my breath, but fills me with bitterness....he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks the calamity of the innocent....He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me....I was at ease, and he broke me in two; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he set me up as his target....He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy; he pours out my gall on the ground." (9:16-20, 22-24; 16:7a, 9, 11-14)

Who among us would dare say such things—of God no less?! But that is what Job says. In such pain, all he can end with is simply, plaintively, "Where then is my hope? Who will see my hope?" (17:15).

All the while the friends are getting more and more nervous. They smell heresy here! It won't do to have such talk in church! And friendship and compassion get thrown to the wind in their attempt to justify God and God's ways. Their systematic theology—if we might call it that—is inflexible, absolutely rigid, completely settled.

There is no room for a Job in it. And there is definitely no room for this Job.

Then comes the most fascinating part of all. At the end of the book, as you know, God finally comes on the scene to survey the situation and to have a word with those involved. God speaks primarily to Job; there is only one comment to the friends, and it is directed to Eliphaz. Listen to what God says to him: “My wrath burns against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (42:7, 9).

Now wait a minute. Let me get this straight. Those things Job said about God, about the universe, about everything—all that anger, that pain, that suffering speech—that was *right*? And all those things that the friends said about God always rewarding the just and always punishing the unjust—that was not right? That was wrong?

The Book of Job seems to be telling us that just when you feel like you have God all figured out and just when you are ready to box God up into a nice little package of theology, religion, spirituality, whatever—watch out! God may just end up bursting out. God may end up freer than our systems allow! God may end up saying and showing that our little finite minds and our little finite theologies are not equipped to deal ultimately and exhaustively with the Infinite. Indeed, it may be that some of our talk of God will end up being wrong: “You have not spoken right of me as my servant Job has.”

You see, Job’s God, *our God*, is not subject to our whims, our pleasures, our every desire, not even our every prayer. Job’s God, *our God*, is God. No less! Our theologies—even our best constructed, best informed, and most well-meaning ones—are not God. That is what Job’s friends learn, and they learn it from God’s own mouth.

Job’s God and God’s Answer (Job 38:1-42:17)

But they end up getting off easy. Job learns what they learn too, but he learns more because God has more to say to him. Job finally gets what he has wanted, begged for, demanded: audience with Almighty God. But it ain’t all it’s cracked up to be!

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Prepare yourself...I will question you, and you shall inform me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!” (38:1-4)

Now hold on. The Scripture says that God *answered* Job. *This* is supposed to be an answer? It’s no answer at all. Instead, all Job gets for all his eloquence, for all his suffering, for all his pain-full theology is the question: “Where were you, boy, when I laid the foundation of the earth?”

Job can say nothing. How could he? How could he respond to this odd, this uncontrollable, this radically free God? This God who is God—no less!? All Job can say is, “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 recant, and repent of dust and ashes” (42:3b, 5).

Maybe when everything is said and done, then, Job’s innocence and uprightness

and all that doesn't really matter, at least not in the face of the question "Where were you?" That question views Job's suffering on a cosmic scale, and from that perspective, as tragic and significant as Job's suffering is, it just isn't that tragic or significant. Job says it himself: "I am of small account; what could I (possibly) say to you?" (40:4). And yet this overwhelming, almighty God is the same God who says, "Job, my servant, spoke right of me." And this is the same God who comes to Job in his suffering, exactly where he needed God most and where he has longed to see God most and where he has begged for God to meet him most. This God of the universe, this God of the whirlwind and of the cosmic perspective, this God who asks, "Where were you?"—this is the God who nevertheless, despite all that, still shows up at the ash heap where Job scrapes his latest blister with a piece of broken pottery.

Conclusion

When you stop and think about that, it is absolutely stunning. But before we get caught up in it, I think we should ponder God's question to Job further. For as harsh as that question seems, we mustn't shirk it, because it is of critical importance for people like us—people who faithfully attend church—who go to camp meetings even!—committed Christian folks who know our way around a hymnal and a Bible and thus presumably know something about God and can speak about God knowingly and wisely. We—our type—we have God down, don't we? We know what God would say on subject x, y, or z! That's our job!

But where were *we* when God laid the foundation of the earth? Oh, I know, I know, I know: when the pressure is on, we can always defer to our forebears who certainly knew more than we do! We have traditions, don't we, and doctrine and theologians and denominations! But the question won't die: Where were *you*, Martin Luther? Where were *you*, John Calvin? And, perish the thought, you good Methodists among the Kinfolk, Where were *you*, Mr. Wesley?

But most humbling of all, the question hits close to home: Where were *you*, Brent? "Uhh, me? Umm, nowhere." Could any answer be more obvious? I wasn't there! You weren't there! Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and all the others weren't there! But could any question be harder to hear? It bespeaks our limitations, our finitude, our lack of knowledge about all that God might be and all that God might be up to in this world. It warns us that we ought to be careful with our theology—let it not be too precise, too rigid, too settled. For there is seldom room for a Job in a theology like that. And God might just break out of a theology like that. God may just end up appearing in a whirlwind asking, "Where were you?"

And that is no small question. For you see, in the final analysis, this is not just a *theological* question; it is also a *pastoral* question, even for those of us who are not ordained. Don't forget that these well-meaning but ill-informed friends (every one of them un-ordained) who came and sat down next to Job came to comfort him and console him in his time of need. But they did nothing of the sort. They placed their system of belief above their compassion for their friend, and in their concern to be true to the system, they betrayed him. His words were more than they could bear, too irreverent they thought. He must be crushed somehow. Or at least corrected. But it is *their* words that are finally and ultimately condemned, not by Job or by the harsh facts of life, but by God's own lips. And, in the end, it is Job who becomes their pastor, interceding on their behalf for their forgiveness as he offers sacrifices

for them and prays for them.

So too for us, I think, when we encounter the many Jobs that will cross our paths. Some will only think they are Job; some will really be Job. But it doesn't matter—the effect is the same: Job is always with us, and Job always wants an answer.¹ Ultimately, only God can provide that answer. So the question is whether or not we will rush in after Job's friends giving *their* answers, saying things like:

“God wanted this—wanted your brother to die this way.”

“That atrocity overseas happened to get those people's attention.”

“You probably lost your job because you aren't right with God.”

“Look, I'm really sorry about your cancer, but it happened so that God would bring good of it.”

“Those people deserve everything they get.”

Those are words worthy of Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They are not worthy, however, of Job, not the book and not the man. And they are not worthy of Job's God. And so, they are not worthy to speak to the Job you will be staring in the eyes sooner or later, scraping his or her latest sore with a piece of broken pottery.

So, is God always anything? It would seem that the Book of Job says no, at least on some points. God has the freedom and ability to break out and do new things (like Isaiah says), to act in new ways, to not be confined by systems or ideologies, well-meaning or not. And that means we can't be too quick in presuming that we know *what* God is doing in someone's life and *why* God is doing it or even *if* God is doing it, especially if we are talking about someone's suffering. So, no, God isn't always anything, if that anything in any way limits the freedom of God to be God. But that just shows that God is always something in the Book of Job and that is that God is always God. No less!

And there is something else to be said about this God who is always God: this God is with us when we suffer, when we sit on the ash heap. And that's why we know that God is light; in God there is no darkness—not even one bit. We know this, not from our own experience, for if we are honest, truly honest, we must admit that we don't always experience God that way. But we know of God's goodness nevertheless, not only from the First Epistle of St. John or because the God of the whirlwind shows up at the ash heap in the Book of Job. We also know of God's goodness because of the pathos of the one who suffered not only with us, but for us, our Lord Jesus Christ. And if he has suffered, then we can too—whether it be as bad as, worse than, or less than his servant Job. And when we suffer, maybe God will meet us there, too. For God met Christ in his suffering at the ash heap of Golgotha. And God also met us in Christ's suffering, just as God met Job in his.

Note

1 Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.: A Play in Verse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 12-13.