

God responds to Job's questions

As a child, I first heard the statement: "She always has to be sicker than anyone else!" I also heard a cousin described as "blessed with bad luck." As an adult, I understand there are individuals whose identity is defined by their suffering. But I have also learned that suffering, whether physical or emotional, can nourish depression, affect our health, and cause us to withdraw from friends and abandon spiritual hope.



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Job's staggering losses and his friends' shallow spiritual advice deepened his despair. As Job increasingly focused on his suffering, God seemed far away, even indifferent. Job wanted answers, because, like all of us, answers can justify the whys of life and make us feel better. Or, so we believe.

Then God shows up. At last! Now we're getting somewhere. Get out your Bible, pen and notepad because God will give us the answers, justify the tragedies and make all the hurt go away.

The beginning is powerful: "The Lord answered Job from the whirlwind" (v. 1, Common English Bible). But, instead of certitudes, God confronts Job with questions that powerfully define the chasm between what we can know in this world and the mind of the God who is greater than creation and time. In Job 3:3, Job told one of his friends, "I want to speak to the Almighty." Job wants God to explain his suffering, but he also wants to prove his friends' disturbing religious ideas wrong.

Biblical accounts of God appearing to individuals never conform to human expectations.

Consider Moses' experience in Exodus 3:1-6 and Elijah in 1 Kings 19:9-13.

God responds to Job with two speeches (38:2-40:2 and 40:7-41:6) with a barrage of questions, but never a direct answer. God confronts Job for his "darkening counsel with words lacking in knowledge" (v. 2). "Counsel" carries two meanings — advice giving or a design plan for something significant. Job does not qualify for either. God continues by asking Job where he was when God created the world. Obviously, Job was not present.

Read beyond what sounds like sarcasm to the majesty and beauty of God's words describing creation and Job's contrasting insignificance. There is a subtle note in how God addresses Job, designating Job as a warrior (*geber*) and not just a man (*adam*). God respects and understands Job's despair, anger and fear.

God's questions emphasize Job's small status and ignorance compared to the intricacies and beauty of creation celebrated by the songs of morning stars and shouts of divine beings (v. 7). God reminds Job that there are greater mysteries and dangers than personal suffering. What does he see behind closed doors (vv. 8-10), a powerful image of unknown darkness and danger? (Psalm 114:3; Isaiah 27:1; Psalm 74:14) Has Job traveled the road to the dwelling places of light and darkness? (vv. 19-20) How do Job's years of life compare to eternity? (v. 21) Faced with the enormity of creation and eternity, Job cannot begin to process God's knowledge and power.

God's voice out of a whirlwind represents a force beyond human understanding and control. We learn some wonderful truths from

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this unique encounter. Job has felt abandoned by God, left to suffer alone. But the text reveals that God heard every word Job and his friends spoke. Tragedy and evil are not evidence of God's indifference, but a call to seek God and hold on to him until the storm is past.

That warrior image God attaches to Job (v. 3) signifies respect. God is not angered by nor afraid of your questions. God loves you. But you must never forget there are things you will not understand, questions that will not be answered to your satisfaction in this world.

God is sovereign. You are not God. God planned and created the world, filled with marvels and tragedy. Sunlight is essential to life, yet it can scorch the ground and cause skin cancer. Crops cannot grow without rain, but rain can cause flooding and death. God's words to Job speak of the limits placed on creation (vv. 8-10).

Loving and serving God can be challenging and circumstances can be confusing. Our questions seldom find easy answers. Would we do better if we could return to Eden where all seemed so perfect and easy? How would you handle the enticement of the forbidden fruit with Satan's sales pitch of unlimited possibilities? We didn't do very well the first time!

God went looking for Adam and Eve in the garden, and God continues to come looking for us wherever we are and whatever our suffering. God is not angered or surprised by our questions.

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.