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# Job's Sanctuary Experience and Mine

By John Mark Hicks

Author's note: This material, in one form or another, is derived from my book *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1999).

We live in a fallen world filled with sin, despair, and death. Yet it is God's world, and he is sovereign over it (Ps 115:3). The combination of these two ideas—fallenness and sovereignty—generates some important questions. How can a good God be sovereign over a fallen world? Why does he not intervene? Why does he permit this fallenness? In the light of innocent suffering, how can God be just? How long must people of faith endure this fallenness? These questions fill the prayers of God's people as they suffer under the weight of the world's darkness. They are prayers of lament. They are prayers of faith, because they express the questions of faith to the God in whom faith trusts. They ask God the questions that only he can answer.

Prayer does not function simply as vehicle for lament, but it is the cry of faith that expects an answer from God, just as Job did. It calls upon God to hear and answer. It hopes for a sympathetic ear and a resolution to the despair of lament. However, like Job, we often receive not the answer we seek but the answer we need. What Job wanted was an explanation; what he got was the comforting, reassuring presence of God. Our laments ask real questions, but they do not always receive the answers we seek. Instead, God offers himself in communion and, in

the power of the Holy Spirit, creates hope, comfort, and peace in the midst of our lament (Rom 15:13).

## My Introduction to Lament

On May 22, 1977, I married. I was young—only nineteen—and I was incredibly naive about the world's evil and pain. I had not experienced the pain of personal suffering, nor had my understanding of God been radically challenged. God, I thought, does not send suffering—only good. Those who live before him faithfully can expect good things from a good God—only blessings. My innocence had not yet been shattered. I had grown up in faith and had never doubted who my God was or what he could do. My vision of God was bound up with my expectations of him. I had him in a box that I could inspect. I was comfortable with my God. My life's plan was fairly set, and I knew exactly where God fit into it.

In 1980, however, I was ushered into the world of suffering. On April 30, 1980, Sheila, my wife of less than three years, died suddenly and unexpectedly at home. She was recovering from back surgery; ten days after the surgery, a blood clot stopped her heart.

In response, I studied the Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes intensely. I reread the narratives of God's story. It was as if I had never read that literature before—and, in a very real sense, I had not. Before my suffering I had never been able to empathize with Job. Before my suffering I had never been able to understand the intense emotions of the

## Faithful lament was a new category for me. How can lament, with its accusations, bewilderment, doubt, tears, and frustrations, express faith?

Psalms. Now, I too had suffered, and my suffering opened up the possibilities of an empathetic reading of scripture. This renewed reading opened up a world I had never known existed. Indeed, I can remember believing at one point that such a world could not exist. I remember thinking that there is no reason for mourning and despair. God has dispelled all fears in this world through Jesus Christ. We should always rejoice and never lament. However, through an empathetic reading of the Psalms, Job, and other parts of scripture, I entered a new world, the world of faithful lament.<sup>1</sup>

Faithful lament was a new category for me. How can lament, with its accusations, bewilderment, doubt, tears, and frustrations, express faith? Prior to my own personal suffering, lament was unknown to me. I had not recognized it in scripture. I had not seen it in my community of faith—or, more probably, I had not noticed it. Christianity was a faith of joy, celebration, and hopeful anticipation. My worldview was dominated by a triumphalism. It was a progressive view of life. We would set the world aright. We would establish the perfect church or, at least, restore a true one. There was no room for lament (and little room for failure).

But my own suffering forced me to lament, because the suffering believer who continues to believe can only lament. Lament, with all its confusion, desperation, and doubt, expresses the sufferer's faith. Lament does not disown God; it appeals to him. It calls upon God to do something, to intervene, to help, to rescue, to act on behalf of his faithful ones. It cries, "My God!" This cry fills the book of Psalms, and it fills the speeches of Job. Job learned to lament, and his book is filled with examples of those prayers (e.g., 7:7–21; 9:17–24; 10:2–17; 16:7–14; 19:7–12). Indeed, Westermann has categorized the book of Job as a dramatic lament.<sup>2</sup>

I learned to lament through my own experiences and by meditating on the Psalms and Job. Lament is a famil-

iar prayer to me. My first wife died in 1980, my brother-in-law and father in 1994, and my son, Joshua, is terminally ill. The passages of scripture that give expression to lament became my prayers as I personally appropriated them and gave voice to them. Biblical lament became my lament.

### God Answers Job

Throughout the discussion with his friends, Job constantly addresses the friends first and then turns his address to God. His speeches are full of complaint and accusation. The three friends answer Job until they conclude that Job is too full of arrogance to be won by argument (32:1). From chapters 4 to 26 the friends attempt to answer Job's questions. They are answering, but God is not. God's silence disconcerts and disillusions Job. Does not God see his anguish?

Job has no illusions that if God speaks he somehow will be able to escape the misery of his present life. But he wants a word from God, even if it is a word that condemns. Job simply wants to know something, even if it is not what he wants to hear. He wants to know the charges against him (10:2; 13:23). He wants to understand the seeming moral chaos of the universe where the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer (21:7–26; 24:1–12). If God judges the wicked and charges them with evil, "Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?" (24:1).<sup>3</sup>

Job challenges God, "Let the Almighty answer me" (31:35). Will God speak? Will he explain? If he does not, how can the righteous make sense of the prosperity of the wicked, the suffering of the righteous, and the chaotic state of the moral universe?

No doubt, to the shock and surprise of all the participants, God does speak. He comes to Job out of the whirlwind, out of the storm (38:1; 40:6). God is no longer silent, but does he answer? He speaks, but does he explain? That God speaks is one surprise; what he says is yet another.

### *Yahweh's First Speech*

The text records two separate speeches by God (38:1–40:2; 40:6–41:34) and gives two corresponding responses by Job (40:3–5; 42:1–6). Each speech has the same pattern. First, God approaches Job with a challenge (38:1–3; 40:6–14). Second, God poses a series of questions to Job about the order and design of the world (38:4–39:30; 40:15–41:34). Third, God closes with a summary challenge (40:1–2).

How does God view Job? Does he regard him as a boisterous, self-righteous sinner who must be crushed by God's power, or as an ignorant sufferer whose misery has pushed him to the brink of rivalry with God? I think he

sees Job in the latter perspective. God confronts Job, but in mercy and grace, not in wrath or anger. He confronts him with tough questions out of tough love, but Job is also God's servant, and God graciously appears to him. God sides with Job over against the friends (42:7).

God's answer is no answer. It does not answer the questions Job has been asking. It does not answer the *why* questions. Why is life given to those in misery (3:20)? God does not answer. Why has God made Job his target (7:20)? Why has God hidden his face from Job and counted him as an enemy (13:24)? God does not answer. Why do the wicked prosper (21:7)? God does not answer. Why does not God set a time for judgment (24:1)? God does not answer. God provides no explanation for his moral government of the world or why these tragedies have befallen Job. Rather, God engages Job in a personal dialogue about two significant points. The first speech concerns God's transcendent wisdom and care; the second concerns God's sovereignty over his creation, particularly over evil.

The first speech (38:1–40:2) is a series of questions about God's role as transcendent creator in contrast to Job's finitude and ignorance. Job has spoken about things he does not know, and so God questions him about his role in the universe. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" (38:4). God poses question after question that reflects his role as Creator and Sovereign Lord of the cosmos. In creation, he controlled the chaotic waters and set their boundaries (38:8–11). And with question after question he prods Job to reflect on his own limitations. "Tell me, if you know all this" (38:18). The questions force Job to confess his own ignorance and his finite role in the cosmos—a confession he has already made in the dialogues (9:5–13; 26:5–14).

But these questions also point to God's wisdom and care. They are not simply questions about power. Their function is to remind Job of God's care and wisdom. The questions are not arbitrary; they move from God's creative work when he laid the foundations of the world (38:4–7) and controlled the chaotic waters (38:8–11) to his transcendence over the chaos of the wicked and death (38:12–21), his control over the waters (snow, rain, rivers) of the earth (38:22–30, 34–38), and his regulation of the stars and seasons (38:31–33). The questions then transition to the animal kingdom and God's management of his living creation. The questions are not just about knowledge; they are also about care. God does ask if Job "knows" (e.g., 39:1), but he also asks whether Job can manage this creation and care for it the way God does. Does Job hunt for the lion (38:39), feed the young ravens (38:41), give the wild donkey his home (39:6), use the wild ox in his

service (39:9–12), care for the ostrich even though she has no sense (39:13–18), and give the horse his strength (39:19)? God asks, "Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom?" (39:26); "Does the eagle soar at your command?" (39:27). God manages his creation with wisdom and care through his power. God's creation is not the playground of his power but the nursery of his care. The world is not out of control; God is managing it quite nicely.

#### *Yahweh's Second Speech*

The second speech (40:6–41:34) is a series of questions about God's control over the evil, chaotic forces in the world. God challenges Job to manage this chaos better than he does. "Do you have an arm like God's?" (40:9). If so, then "unleash the fury of your wrath, look at every proud man and bring him low" (40:11) and "crush the wicked where they stand" (40:12). If you can manage evil in the world better than I, then "I myself will admit to you that your own right hand can save you" (40:14).

The animals "behemoth" (40:15) and "leviathan" (41:1) represent the evil and the chaos in the world.<sup>4</sup> The former is a large land animal, but the latter is some kind of sea creature. The language here is highly poetic and serves the point about God's management of chaos and evil. Job cannot "crush the wicked" or bring low the proud, but God can. God controls even the behemoth, which no one else can capture (40:19, 24). God controls the leviathan, which no one else can handle (41:1–10). No other creatures can control these animals. The behemoth is the "first" among God's works (40:19), and the leviathan has no equal and "is king over all that are proud" (41:33–34). Evil reigns in the world. Chaos fills the earth. But God is still in control, and everything belongs to him (41:11, quoted in Rom 11:35).

But how are these answers to Job's questions? In one sense they are not answers. They do not specifically address the particulars of Job's situation. God does not tell Job about the heavenly wager described in the prologue (Job 1–2). The speeches do not address the issue of distributive justice and moral balance. God does not explain why the wicked prosper while Job suffers. The speeches do not address Job's specific questions about suffering and justice. Rather, they address something more fundamental. They address the critical issue that was raised in the prologue and assumed through the dialogues: trust in God's management of the world. Do we believe God is wisely managing his creation? This is what Job doubts, and this is what gives rise to the questions and accusations of his laments.

When evil surrounds us and chaos fills our lives, then we begin to doubt God's sovereignty (Is God really in control?) or his goodness (Does God really care?). We wonder whether God knows what he is doing or whether he can do anything at all. This occasions lament. We believe in God, just as Job did, but the chaos of our lives creates doubt, despair, and disappointment. So we, like Job, complain, question, and accuse.

God's answer is, I am in control, I care, and I know what I am doing. If I controlled the chaotic waters in creation, can I not manage the chaos of your life? If my care feeds the lions and the ravens, will I not care for you? If I can tame the leviathan that crushes the proud, can I not crush the chaos and evil in your life? God's answer is his transcendence, but it is not a naked transcendence. It is not a sheer assertion of power. Rather, it is a loving, caring transcendence that manages the chaos of the world for benevolent purposes.

### God Encounters Job

Job sees an answer in God's answer. It is not the answer he seeks, but it is sufficient for his needs. He confesses God's transcendence and his own ignorance. Indeed, he offers God his praise. He confesses that there are things "too wonderful" for him to know or understand (42:3). The world is incomprehensible to him, but it is not to God. While God's providence (counsel) is unknown to him, he knows that no plan of God "can be thwarted" (42:2). Job's response is praise. He confesses the wonder of God's providence and the inscrutability of his designs. Job's lament turns to praise. He no longer questions or doubts, but he praises God. Through his encounter with God, he transitions from complaint to praise.

Does Job "repent" and thus repudiate all that he has said in his laments? Does Job now retract all his questions? I do not think so. While the standard translation of Job 42:6 is something like the NIV, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes," I do not think this is the best rendering. The Hebrew term translated "repent" means to change one's mind or reverse a decision about something (Exod 32:12, 14; Jer 18:8, 10; Amos 7:3, 6).<sup>5</sup> It does not necessarily mean to feel remorse about sin or to confess guilt. Indeed, Job does not confess sin or regret. In fact, God judges that what Job has said is correct (42:7). Instead of repenting of some sin, he changes his mind—he changes from lament to praise. He changes his approach to God. He gives up his lament. Job is saying, "I am comforted," or, "I will no longer lament." He will give up his "dust and ashes." He will give up the "dust" of mourning (2:12) and the ashes of his tragic lament (2:8).

## When God comes near, when he engages Job by his presence and by his revela- tion of himself, then Job is comforted.

Job is comforted by his encounter with God.<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew term in 42:6 occurs seven times in Job (2:11; 7:13; 16:2; 21:34; 29:25; 42:6; 42:11). In every instance, unless 42:6 is the exception, it refers to comfort or consolation. In fact, Job's three friends visit him for the purpose of offering comfort (2:11), but they are miserable comforters (16:2; 21:34). In the midst of his tragedy Job can find no comfort, even in his nightly sleep (7:13). Job finds no comfort until he encounters God, and only then are his friends and family a comfort to him (42:11).

This parallels what happens in the lament psalms. In response to a divine encounter or a salvation oracle, the lamenter confesses, "Now I know ..." (cf. Pss 20:6; 56:9; 140:12; 41:11; 135:5). Westermann has called this the "*waw* adversative" ("but" in English) in individual laments (cf. Ps 13:5).<sup>7</sup> The psalmist once lamented, but now he praises God in the light of his encounter with God. If the book of Job is a dramatic lament, then the divine speeches are the "salvation oracle," and God encounters Job so that "now" Job sees God and submits to his presence. Now, Job turns from lament to praise:

42:5 contains the 'solution' to the 'problem' of Job. There is no other. God has answered Job. God has met Job. Insofar as Job attests to this, he attests to the reality of God in its wholeness. Now he knows God, and no longer just one aspect of God's activity.<sup>8</sup>

When God comes near, when he engages Job by his presence and by his revelation of himself, then Job is comforted. Job ceases his lament. Job learns to praise God again. The difference is the experience of God himself. While previously Job had only "heard" of God, now he has seen him (42:5). Job is comforted by the presence of God, and he "repents of his dust and ashes," that is, he ceases his mourning, and his heart turns to praise. Job has a "sanctuary experience" of God, and Job is moved by God's presence to transition from lament to praise.

What is missing from the divine speeches is exactly what Job demanded. There is no list of charges. There is no indictment. There is no explanation of the suffering. There is no reasoned explanation of the seeming chaotic state of moral justice in the world. There is no defense of God's justice. How can Job find in Yahweh's speeches his answer? How can we find in God's speeches our answer?

If there is no answer to our questions in the speeches, perhaps the problem is not the divine answer but the human questions. Or, more precisely, perhaps the divine answer is intended to underline the finite and limited character of the human questions. Perhaps God displays his knowledge in order that we might sense our ignorance.

Herein lies the answer. Human misery will always raise questions. It cannot help but do so. The emotional and spiritual lows of suffering will ask the questions. The intensity of suffering will bear the fruit of prolonged agony. It will ask, *Why?* It will wonder, *Where is God?* It will question, *Does he really care?* God does not condemn the questions. He does not even condemn the answers we often vent in the midst of suffering. God is patient with his people. But the answer lies in recognizing the distinction between God and humanity, between our questions and his character. The answer of God to Job is, *I understand your questions, Job, but you must recognize your finitude; I understand your frustration, but you must recognize my faithfulness and care.* God's answer to Job is his overwhelming, but comforting, presence. Now Job "sees" God, and this is enough.

Throughout our questions, throughout our doubts and our pointed accusations, we must recognize that our questions are spoken within our finitude. We speak from the bottom of the bowl. We cannot see the full range of life and its meaning. We do not have the perspective from which to judge all events. Our finitude is delimiting. Our ignorance is debilitating. What must shine through, as it does in the words of Job, is an underlying trust in the goodness and faithfulness of God despite the outer circumstances. This is where we must bow before the transcendence of God. Job encountered the transcendent God and bowed in humble submission before him as he confessed his own limitations. He encountered the living God and worshiped him. So must we.

### Conclusion

From the first day Joshua saw a school bus, he wanted to ride one. He wanted to be like his older sister. She rode the bus, and so would he! Whenever a bus came into view, he would immediately spot it and would always respond, "I wanna ride!" Finally, his day came. He was starting kindergarten, and he would get to ride the bus to school. He

was overjoyed at the idea of both school and the bus. Every morning I would take him out to wait for the bus at a place near my office. When he saw it coming, he would jump and scream for joy. He knew he was going to ride. It was "my bus," as he would say.

But one day, for some reason, he did not want to get on the bus. I took him by the hand and gently led him up to the steps of the bus, and he got on. But he was whining, hesitant, and reluctant. I thought perhaps he was just having a bad day, but as the bus drove away, I learned why he did not want to ride. I heard words that tore my heart. It was as if a knife had been stuck into my gut and twisted. His schoolmates were ridiculing my son. They were mocking his crying and calling him names. They ridiculed his need for diapers and recalled his full use of them the previous day. As the bus drove off, I could hear the mockery, and I could see my son stumble down the aisle as he looked for a seat.

I was incensed, and the anger grew inside me. All morning I wanted to take some of those older kids aside

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and heap some abuse of my own on them. Let them see how it feels! Let them know what it's like to be hurt, ridiculed, and be mocked. Maybe I should talk to the bus driver, or to the school principal, to the teachers, or even to the parents! My helplessness increased my frustration.

I was hurt because they had ridiculed my son! Who were they, anyway? They didn't know Joshua or understand his problems or why he is the way he is. They didn't know that he suffers from a genetic defect, a metabolic disorder. If only they knew, they would be ashamed—but maybe they wouldn't even then. I was angry, frustrated, hurt, and helpless.

Finally, I took this anger and hurt to God in prayer. I went to my office and poured my heart before God. I held nothing back. I complained bitterly, and then I complained some more. There was plenty to complain about. Why was my son born with this defect? Why should others be permitted to inflict pain upon the innocent? Why had not God answered our prayers for a healthy son? Why could not

Joshua ever fulfill the dreams we had for him and honor the name we gave him as a leader among God's people? Why had not the Sovereign God of the universe blessed him with health?

Somewhere, however, in the middle of that complaint, in the middle of that intense lament, I became aware that my complaint had been heard. I did not hear a voice or a whisper. I did not have a vision or feel the wind blow across my face. Rather, I sensed God's presence, and I came to understand his own pain. In the middle of my lament over my own son, I became existentially aware that God understood. God empathized with me. It was as if God said to me, "I understand—they treated my son that way, too." In that moment God provided a comfort that I cannot explain but I still experience in my heart.

Now, only now, do I have some sense of the emotional, personal, and intense pain that a father has when his son is ridiculed. Only now can I begin to appreciate the pain of my heavenly Father as he watched his son be ridiculed. In that moment of prayerful communion, the death of Jesus became more than a historical fact—it became real to me in a deeply emotional and religious moment. It was an experience that cut across my pain and led me into an awareness of God's presence. It was a "sanctuary experience" (cf. Ps 73:17).

My prayer that morning turned from complaint to praise. It turned from anger to joy. Oh, I was still angry and frustrated, but my anger and frustration were overcome by a sense of awe, reverence, and wonder—an awareness of God's comforting presence. God understands. He knows the pain of a father who mourns over his son.

In that moment of prayer—a moment of communion—God engaged me and reassured me of his love and empathy. God comforted me. My lament turned to praise, not because I received an answer to my *why* questions, but because God gave me the answer I needed. He came near to me in the power of the Holy Spirit and created hope, peace, and joy in my heart by his own hand (Rom 15:13). In lament we enter the sanctuary of God through prayer, and God answers with his comforting hand. We

do not always receive the answers we seek, but do we receive the very thing we need—God's presence.

Job's experience was my experience. Now he had not only "heard" of God; he had also "seen" him. The sanctuary reorients our vision of the world. The people of God question their God, and God answers them by the gift of his presence.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 2d ed., trans. K. R. Crim and R. N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); "The Role of Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28 (1974): 20–38; Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); and André Resner Jr., "Lament: Faith's Response to Loss," *Restoration Quarterly* 32 (1990): 129–42.

<sup>2</sup> Claus Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job: A Form-Critical Analysis*, trans. Charles A. Muenchow (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 1–15.

<sup>3</sup> Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>4</sup> See Elmer B. Smick, "Another Look at the Mythological Elements in the Book of Job," *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (1978): 213–28; and J. C. L. Gibson, "On Evil in the Book of Job," in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical & Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, JSOTSup 67 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 399–419.

<sup>5</sup> This is defended by Dale Patrick, "Job's Address of God," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentlichwissenschaft* 91 (1979): 279–81. See his earlier article "The Translation of Job XLII 6," *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976): 369–71; and Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 583. The best discussion of this viewpoint in the context of Job is Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987), 82–87.

<sup>6</sup> David Wolfers translates 42:6 as "I am comforted." David Wolfers, *Deep Things Out of Darkness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 461.

<sup>7</sup> Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 71ff. See also Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 57–58.

<sup>8</sup> Westermann, *The Structure of the Book of Job*, 128.