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Better THAN ANSWERS

by Bill Love

This week we have, in these plenary sessions, pondered together the story of Job. I have been deeply moved by the stories Jim McGuiggan and Mike Cope told about their own family experiences. Without self-pity they have shared with us, seasoning their stories with humor about themselves.

We know that it took more than a sense of humor to get them through. Humor is the little red wagon the Father gives his children to make life more interesting. We take one another for delightful rides in our little red wagons. In a pinch we use them to haul the rocks out of the lawn or weeds out of the garden. But when a tornado reduces the house to matchsticks, . . . even if we can find the red wagon, it's not adequate to pick up the pieces.

Recovery from disaster takes heavier equipment; it takes faith. Faith and humor are both gifts from the Father, but faith is stronger. The book of Job is about faith. It's not mainly about patience, about the problem of suffering, or the nature of God. In the first chapter the theme is struck when Satan asks God, "Will a man serve God for nothing?" What does it mean to believe? What is faith after all? What is faith's ultimate load capacity?

If "every good gift comes down from the Father," then the loss of precious gifts sends us to the Giver for an explanation. At first we may talk with our friends and loved ones, with people of faith, and share our pain with our small group at church. But we never really find the answers there.

And we human beings insist on answers. Archibald MacLeish wrote a play based on Job entitled *J. B.* The Satan character comments to the God character that J. B. and his wife's effort to make sense of their tragedy is "a childish hypothesis of course—a pair of tongs to take the toad by—recognition that it is a toad." Life is sometimes a toad. We must take hold of it somehow. We want answers.

Please pray with me. Father, as we look once more at Job's story, please instruct us, correct us, and most of all make us know your abiding presence in our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Job Went Through the Stages

The pain began out on the periphery and drove deep into the inner sanctum of Job's soul. He lost it all. First, the cattle, sheep, and camels. Then his servants. His children were next. He lost his wife's support. His friends deeply empathized; they sat seven days grieving with Job. That was their best work. When they began talking, Job lost his supportive fellowship.

Finally, Job took his case to a higher court. All along God had been the backdrop of Job's life. From the first, his complaint was ultimately against God. He cursed the day he was born. He cried out about the unfairness of it all. Job resented God's allowing the comfort of the wicked. He wanted God off his back. "Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle?" Sometimes he acknowledged the goodness of God. "You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit." In these contradictory statements we see Job's quandary. If he could just quit believing in God, he would have his answer. If he could just quit believing in the goodness of God, he would have his answer. As it was, God only knew what the answer was.

In chapter 23 Job begins longing to take his case before God himself. More and more, he jettisons his friends and their wise answers as his mind is propelled upward toward his Maker. "If I could just get him to come take a seat on the witness stand, we would straighten this whole thing out!"

God Granted Job Half His Wish

In chapter 38 God came, but not as Job had asked. He appeared, but not as a witness to be cross-examined, not as Job's equal, not under obligation to explain himself. He would come as God and nothing less.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me."

God then leveled a withering barrage of questions at his questioner. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Who shut the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb? Have you commanded the morning since your days began? Where is the way to the dwelling of light? The point of the interrogatory was stated in chapter 40.

And the Lord said to Job: "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond."

Then Job answered the Lord: "See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further."

But the interrogation continued. God spoke again out of the whirlwind. "Gird up your loins like a man: I will question you, and you declare to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be justified?" He asked Job about the beasts, Behemoth and Leviathan. Could any human being stand before such creatures, much less control them?

Then Job answered the Lord: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. [You said to me:] 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore 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 eyes see you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

What Can We Make Of Job's Story?

Why did God appear so brutally? Neither Job nor we find in God's words any answer for the problem: why do

the righteous suffer? Most disturbing of all: what kind of God is this? Through Hosea, God spoke with the tenderness of a father for his child. Why did he appear so brutally to Job?

As important as those issues are, they are the wrong questions to ask of Job's story. The story is addressed neither to the problem of suffering nor to the nature of God. As we said, the theme of the writing is found in Satan's question to God, "Will a man serve God for nothing?" The story is about *the nature of faith*. Satan said that faith is a deal, nothing more. "Of course Job loves you; what's not to love? You've given him everything." If the matter was to be settled, God could not appear to Job with any kind of payoff. He could not come as a father takes his suffering child in his arms. He could not come with answers to relieve Job's intellectual agony. The question was whether Job would serve God *for nothing*.

We meet here on the campus of a great university. The whole enterprise is dedicated to asking and answering important questions. Our Restoration tradition is devoted to a rational understanding of the faith, getting the answers right. Like Job, when we suffer we want answers. Flannery O'Connor was right when she said that mystery is an insult to the modern mind. We do not want mystery, we want answers.

So what does Job's story say to us? It says that human understanding has its limits. The brightest minds often come to a Jobian intellectual dead end. One night in a state of depression, toward the end of his life, the renowned mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell went to his study window to look out over his estate. Fog had blanketed the house, turning the window into a mirror. "Is this the final answer?" he asked. "One sees his own reflection, nothing more?" He was out of answers.

Of course, someone might say, Russell was not a believer. He continually attacked Christianity as intellectually untenable. But brilliant believers also run out of answers. Most of us can quote the famous "Serenity Prayer": "God, grant me the courage to change what can be changed, the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference." As a young minister in New England, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that prayer for a Sunday evening service. As an old man, after a stroke caused him partial paralysis and cost him control of some bodily functions, he complained to his doctor. He continued to receive letters about the prayer every week. It grieved him that he could neither change his situation, accept it, nor find enough wisdom to give him peace. His doctor assured him, "Doc-

tor Niebuhr, we all preach better than we practice.”

Millions have been blessed by the writings of C. S. Lewis. He was one of the greatest popular apologists for Christianity in all our history. But when he lost his wife, he was devastated. It wasn't that the answers of former years were untrue; he just couldn't give those answers as easily as before. He wrote only one book after her death.

What Are Our Deals With God?

Was Satan right? Is faith nothing more than a deal we make with God? We want to believe that our trust in God is not tied to material things. Loss of money and possessions would not overturn our faith. But what about the deeper satisfactions of life: success and happiness? Life is hard, often unfair. Is there not a minister here who has served faithfully for years without ever being invited to speak on a lecture program? Do we not secretly have questions for God?

Going deeper, what about our home lives? Divorce, death of a child, Alzheimer's—when these tragedies impact us, do we not wish to discuss the matter with God? Life is hard, often unfair. Is there not a woman here who has longed to be a mother and remains childless?

Deeper still are our cherished beliefs. What if, late in life, we have to face new truth that challenges all we have ever believed? That wasn't our understanding with God, was it?

Here is the most disturbing question of all. What about those priceless treasures of faith: forgiveness, fellowship, and the hope of reunion in heaven? Could we, would we serve God without these gifts of his love?

The truth is, we all have our deals with God. We just don't know it until the storms come. Job is about faith and how it fares in the storms of life. After all was said and done, did Job pass the test? Yes, for all his ups and downs, he never quit speaking to God. True faith is more than a deal we make with God.

How The Story Ends

After his encounter with God, what was life like for Job? I don't mean after the restoration of all his goods and God's confirmation of Job over against his friends. I mean right after his encounter with God, while he was still on the ash heap.

Did God leave Job a quivering mass of nerves and

blood? Of what did Job “repent”? Of being human? Of crying out? Of questioning? In the text, the verb “repent” has no object. Job probably repented of challenging God as God, of stepping across the line to tell God how to run his universe.

I believe Job's encounter with God left him spiritually healthier than he had ever been. I can't imagine Job ever again having such endless arguments with his wise friends about the mysteries of God. Dr. Rushford might persuade Job to speak on these lectures, but Job would not *need* to speak, if you know what I mean. Job was different because he had encountered God himself. Before, this God was rumor, a tradition, the fount of all wisdom. But now, however painful the experience, God had spoken to him out of the whirlwind. He knew God personally.

Bernard of Clairvaux said there are three stages of love: love of self (self-centered love), love of God for self, and love of God for himself alone. Job had come to love God for himself alone.

She suffered long with her husband's illness and death. Afterward, she told me it was Job's story that gave her strength to endure it all. I called Nelda just before coming here to ask exactly what it was about Job that gave her comfort. “I went to my knees,” she said, “confessing that God is my Maker, confessing that I did not understand, but thanking him for his presence and his love and leaving it all with him.”

On the cross Jesus cried out, “My God, why . . . ?” But those were not his last words. At the end he said, “Into thy hands I commit my spirit.” Not answers—the relationship was the thing. Jurgen Moltmann observed that it is not *what* we experience in life that matters, it's *who* we experience that matters.

The psalmist did not say, “Though I walk through the valley of shadow I will fear no evil, for I know the answers.” He said, “Though I walk through the valley of shadow I will fear no evil, for *thou art with me. . .*” That is better than answers.

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