

How the Book of Job Answers the Questions Raised by the Coronavirus

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I was as sick as I have ever been. The sore throat made it hard to breathe. The pain in my stomach from gastritis made it hard to eat. The combination of the two made it hard to believe. I had moved to Nairobi after graduating college to serve in a Kenyan church, but I was too sick to leave my apartment. I languished in illness and loneliness and wondered, *Why, God?*

Feeling an affinity for its title character, I read through the book of Job. I was shocked by what I encountered. I had read the book before, I'm sure, but I had lacked the life experience for it to mean much to me. Now, it bowled me over. The theological and existential questions it raised confounded me—and, I realized, they were precisely the ones I was struggling with, and have continued to ever since.

As the church, nation, and humanity face the coronavirus, the questions the book of Job wrestles with have a new relevance. The answers it offers to those questions can help us respond to this challenge with faith.

1. Will I Be Protected from Suffering?

A dark fog of anxiety now envelops our nation. The uncertainty of our individual and collective futures overwhelms us. But, in fact, this virus has simply stripped away the false security we find in our health and finances. We've suddenly discovered that these things are not as reliable as we once thought.

Job is introduced as “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil” (1:1). This high praise of Job's piety is reaffirmed twice by God himself (1:8; 2:3). And yet, Job's strength may also be his weakness. After describing Job's unmatched wealth in sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys, the narrator recounts how Job would “continually” rise early in the morning to offer

sacrifices on behalf of each of his ten children in the off chance that any have sinned (1:5). Maybe the narrator is trying to convey just how pious Job is—he even offers sacrifices for the *possible* sins of *others*! But it certainly seems like something isn't quite right in the way Job approaches his relationship with God; anxiety outweighs faith, and fear is divorced from trust. Job seems to think that by offering sufficient sacrifices he can protect himself and those he loves from suffering.

Satan, true to his role as accuser, points out this apparent chink in Job's armor to God. He questions whether Job's faith will survive the suffering he has been so determined to avoid through his sacrifices and substantial livestock nest egg. "Does Job fear God for no reason?" he asks. If God removes the protective "hedge" of blessing in which he has ensconced Job's life, Satan predicts he will curse God to his face (1:9-11). However, God, with confidence in his servant, allows the Satan to carry out this test. Ironically, then, Job suffers, not for unrighteousness or even in spite of his righteousness, but precisely for his righteousness.

This is horrifying. The narrative opening of Job in chapters 1-2 acknowledges our basic yearning to find protection from suffering; even righteous and wealthy Job feels it. It then undercuts our hope of avoiding suffering; even righteous and wealthy Job experiences it. And God allows it to happen. So, the book's answer to the question on all of our minds right now, "Will I be protected from suffering?" is a resounding, "I wouldn't count on it." As Jesus declares, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33).

2. How Should I Respond to God?

If we bring to Job the anxiety-ridden question, "Will I be protected from suffering?" this book will terrify us. However, by forcing us, like Job, to move on from worrying about this question, which we ultimately have no control over, it actually frees us up to answer a more important question that we can control, "How should I respond to God in the midst of suffering?"

Once again, the book refuses to offer the expected feel-good answer. Sure, Job initially responds to God with admirable piety: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of

the Lord be praised” (1:21) and “Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” (2:10). This is the most we often hear from Job in the church (when we hear from him at all). But he has more to say. A lot more. And it’s not pleasant. Job curses the day of his birth (3:1-26); he lashes out at the friends who have come to console him, calling them “worthless physicians” (13:4) and “miserable comforters” (16:2); he complains about his isolation from friends and family (19:13-19); he even appears to accuse God of injustice (e.g., 10:3) and vicious attacks (e.g., 16:12-14). He laments, for example,

What is mankind that you make so much of them, that you give them so much attention, that you examine them every morning and test them every moment? Will you never look away from me, or let me alone even for an instant? (7:17-19)

We like the stoic martyr of faith we encounter in the first couple chapters of the book. But this Job, who rails on chapter after chapter, makes us uncomfortable. His friends feel the same way. They do all they can to encourage him to calm down, speak to God more respectfully, and repent of his sin. But Job refuses. Something is not right in the world, he insists, and God better do something about it.

Shockingly, at the end of the book, God declares that it is Job, and not the friends, who has spoken what is right about him (42:7). God doesn’t justify this verdict, but the rest of the Old Testament does. The heroes of Israelite faith frequently question God’s justice in their current experience, not from a lack of trust in God, but precisely because they believe that God is good, powerful, and loving enough to do what is just. When God contemplates destroying Sodom, Abraham advocates for the deliverance of any righteous people in the city, asking, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen 18:25 NRSV). Moses, similarly, dissuades God from wiping out Israel after the sin of the golden calf by reminding him of his promises to their forefathers, his mighty acts on their behalf, and how the Egyptians would respond (Exod 32:11-13). Jacob physically wrestles with God, refusing to let go until God blesses him, thereby earning the name Israel, defined as “he who struggles with God” (Gen 32:26-28). The Israelites, through their psalmists and prophets, consistently live up to this name, struggling with God, but never letting him go, because of their faith in his justice, goodness, and power. And God repeatedly responds favorably to their protests (e.g., Gen 18:26-32;

32:28; Exod 32:14; Job 42:7). In Jesus' parable of the unjust judge, a widow's persistent pleading convinces the judge to intervene on her behalf, and Jesus concludes, "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?...However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:7-8). This indicates that God's chosen ones may encounter injustice and that they may express their faith through pleading with God to rectify injustice rather than submissively accepting it.

Job's complaints should be understood in this same tradition of defiant faith. His lament about God's constant attention mentioned above is built on his faith in the God presented in Psalm 8:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. (Ps 8:3-5)

Like the arguments of those other heroes of Israelite faith, Job's parody of these words is intended to remind God of who he has revealed himself to be—just, good, powerful, and committed to his people. Job's parody pleads with God to be mindful of him, not to torment him, but to glorify him. In faith, he knows he has nowhere else to turn. As Goethe writes in *Tasso*, "At last the sailor lays firm hold, Upon the rock on which he had been dashed."

This global pandemic is like nothing any of us have ever experienced before. It has the potential to transform our understanding of how we relate to God in the midst of suffering. Job's pious submission in the book's first chapters is easy to endorse when we consider suffering from the outside. However, the spread of this virus, leaving illness, death, and financial devastation in its wake, has drawn many into suffering and looks to continue to do so for some time. This type of intense and sustained affliction can forge together faith and protest into a stronger theological alloy. Job, these other Old Testament exemplars of faith, and Jesus' persistent widow all encourage us to express our faith in God by crying out to him to demonstrate his revealed character by ending the ravages of this pandemic, to be mindful of mankind and care for human beings once again.

3. How Should I Respond to Others?

Some readers may have theological objections ready to fling at the protesting response to suffering the book of Job advocates. Through its presentation of Job's friends, the book anticipates and repudiates these objections. These friends start out well. For seven days, they sit with Job in silence, sharing in his mourning. But the ineptness of their responses to Job's laments increases with their inaptness. They preach profound theological truths about divine sovereignty and justice, God's punishment of the wicked and deliverance of the righteous—all this to a man that God has allowed to suffer *because of* his righteousness. As Job doggedly declares the injustice of his situation, the friends turn on him, eventually berating him, "Is not your wickedness great?" (Job 22:5).

Why this change of heart? The friends become enemies because they are just as terrified of suffering as Job was at the beginning of the book. As Job says, "Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid" (6:21). They simply can't believe that Job is genuinely righteous, because if that is true, they could share his fate. They want to find some distinction between themselves and Job that can protect them from his suffering. If he is suffering because he is wicked, then their righteousness will keep them safe. But if he is just as righteous as they are, then what assurance do they have? This is why blaming the victim is so disturbingly instinctive.

This is also why when I hear that someone younger than me has died of Covid-19, I am relieved to hear that they had some underlying condition that I don't have. I may mourn their loss, but I also want to keep it at a distance, to put them in a different category than myself. By encouraging us to enter into Job's suffering, by making clear that we are not better than him, by judging the friends' efforts to distance themselves from him, the book of Job breaks down these imaginary walls separating us from the suffering of others. Addressing this temptation, Jennifer Lyell recently wrote on Twitter, "Imagine that all the effects of Covid were only happening to you: physical deterioration, uncertainty as to if you'll live, finances devastated, you lose your job & nearly all relationships" (@jenlyell).

4. How Can I Endure Isolation?

Though Job has lost his vast wealth and his health, his complaints are primarily focused on his loss of relationships. We might even say that he predominantly struggles with social distancing. Most poignantly, he complains in 19:13-19:

He [God] has alienated my family from me; my acquaintances are completely estranged from me. My relatives have gone away; my closest friends have forgotten me. My guests and my female servants count me a foreigner; they look on me as on a stranger. I summon my servant, but he does not answer, though I beg him with my own mouth. My breath is offensive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own family. Even the little boys scorn me; when I appear, they ridicule me. All my intimate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me.

We can feel his pain right now. The most heart-wrenching stories of this pandemic are those of the afflicted dying alone. But as we begin to wear masks in public to protect others from potential “offense” in our breath or even to self-isolate from our families while we battle this “loathsome” virus, other aspects of Job’s lament have a new resonance.

Job, then, encourages us to recognize the importance of relationships in the midst of suffering, and the special challenges that the necessary response to this pandemic imposes upon us all. By acknowledging rather than ignoring these challenges, we can take steps, however insufficient, to address them. How can we communicate our continuing connection with others when we must remain physically separate? Some of the most heartwarming stories of this pandemic involve efforts to overcome this particular aspect of the suffering it imposes—the man who sings at his wife’s nursing home window, the young cancer survivor greeted by a street lined with cars full of cheering friends and neighbors, and the Italians singing from their balconies (see John Krasinski’s [“Some Good News”](#) on YouTube). This global challenge has reminded us all of something the church has always known: there is something irreplaceably important about being together. This is why churches have struggled to obey stay-at-home orders. It’s also why so many stream their own worship services even if there are more slickly produced ones available online already; the livestream provides some approximation, however small, of community.

5. Where Is God?

For Job, however, this social distance is not as difficult as the distance he feels from God. He complains more consistently and insistently about this than anything else. It's not that he doesn't sense God's presence—as we saw above, he finds God's attention oppressive—but his only experience of God is judgment and wrath; he lacks intimacy with the Almighty. As he says, “Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy?” (13:24). He dreams of the time of renewal in which, he says to God, “You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made” (14:15; 23:8-9).

Job reminds us that, as important as our relationships with our neighbors truly are, distance from God is even more painful. Indeed, the biblical testimony is that this distance is the ultimate source of all our suffering. From the Garden to the grave, disobedience has created this separation between us and a holy God. And if it affects righteous Job, none of us can hope to escape it. In times of suffering, we can feel, as Job did, that God has turned against us, become our enemy. But righteous Job's affliction reminds us to be wary about attributing individual suffering to divine wrath.

The easy way to solve the theological conundrums raised by this book is to collapse the sin which has left the world broken and Job's experience of that brokenness into one another; to argue that Job's experience of godforsakenness is the result of his sin. Certainly, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23) and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23), but the book explicitly forestalls this explanation of Job's suffering by establishing, from God's own mouth, the reality of Job's righteousness at both the beginning and the end (1:8; 2:3; 42:7). If we want to interpret the book the way it presents Job's experience to us, we can't simply conclude that, as a sinner, Job is actually receiving less than he deserves (as one of the friends says in 11:6). The book doesn't allow us to solve the problem of Job's suffering with pat answers from systematic theology. The friends' attempts to do so are declared a failure. Theological explanations for suffering, as valuable as they may be in the proper context, can be another form of distancing ourselves from the suffering of others. As Job asks

his friends, “Will you speak wickedly on God’s behalf?” (Job 13:7).

We can’t always draw a straight line from suffering back to sin. Jesus makes this clear. When his disciples ask if a man’s blindness was caused by his sin or that of his parents, Jesus responds, “Neither...but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:2-3). But, Jesus suggests, we can draw a line forward from suffering to God’s glory. It may be a long line, as Job’s is, and it is rarely straight. It’s likely to go through suffering rather than around it. None of us is as righteous as Job is declared to be, so there are surely sins of which we should repent. This pandemic, like every experience of suffering in this sin-soaked world, may encourage us to do just that. But the book of Job reminds us that when God feels distant, our sin may not be the cause. Even the righteous suffer. Will our response glorify God?

By laying before us Job’s raw experience of divine distance, his own “dark night of the soul,” the book encourages us to enter the injustice Job feels, to identify with it, to be prepared for it when we experience it ourselves. Following Job’s example, glorifying God as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death means taking one’s experience of godforsakenness directly to its source: God himself. It doesn’t mean giving up on God’s goodness or power, but it may mean holding God to those standards of his own character, as mentioned above, and grappling in the darkness, as Jacob did, until the sun begins to rise. The friends’ failure resulted from having a vision of God so small that they felt the need to fight Job to defend it; Job’s victory resulted from having a vision of God so large he was willing to fight God himself to defend it. And, even if we’re not in that darkness ourselves, reading this book trains our souls to lament, to step into the darkness that surrounds us. Systematic explanations for suffering tend to distance us from pain; lament draws us into it.

6. What Does Suffering Tell Us about the Nature of God?

In addition to the positive divine verdict on Job’s speech at the end of the book, the other endorsement of Job’s combative response to God’s distance is its effectiveness. The distant God finally appears. And yet, what he says is hardly what we expect, or, likely, what Job anticipated. He doesn’t

explain the reasons behind Job's suffering. The wager with the Satan is never mentioned. He doesn't address Job's afflictions at all, at least not directly. Instead, God unleashes a barrage of rhetorical questions at Job intended to convey God's complete and intimate engagement with creation, from creating the cosmos (38:4-11) to caring for baby ravens (38:41) and controlling the mighty Behemoth (40:15-24) and Leviathan (41:1-34). Some understand God's speeches as an evasive change of subject, others as an attempt to bully Job into submission, and still others as an effort to put Job's suffering in perspective. There's some truth to each of these interpretations, but each misses the larger message God is communicating.

Though two speeches, the message of the divine speeches is divided into three parts. In the first (38:4-38), God establishes himself as the creator of the cosmos, as his first question indicates: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" The second and third parts then build on this to present the dynamics of God's relationship with his creation. In the second part (38:39-39:30), God describes his care for his creation. He asks, for example, "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?" (38:39-40) and "Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?" (38:41). God clearly expects Job to agree that this provision, even for dangerous and unclean animals, is God's doing. To convey his loving care for his creation, God repeatedly depicts himself performing maternal actions, providing food for young ravens, playing midwife to mountain goats (39:1-4), even implying that he broods over the ostrich egg when its mother forsakes it (39:13-18). He also emphasizes several times that these animals provide no direct human benefit. The wild donkey and wild oxen cannot be tamed or trusted (39:5-12). The hawk and the eagle scorn human command (39:26-30). Even the warhorse, the only animal in the list that has been brought into the human sphere, God declares to have given its strength, which the beast only employs in battle for its own pleasure (39:19-25). In the third part (40:1-41:34), God asserts his sovereign control over his creation. He introduces Job to the Behemoth and the Leviathan in all their terrifying grandeur. No human can hope to tame or even

survive an encounter with these creatures. They are embodiments of the human fear of chaos, of the unknown, which cannot be slain with sword or spear or restrained with rope or chain. By describing them to Job, God acknowledges the very real threat of fear. But God is not intimidated by these terrors. He created them. He can put Leviathan on a leash if he likes (41:5).

What is God's purpose in these speeches? Yes, God does direct Job's attention away from his specific situation, but not to evade responsibility for it or provide a perspective that minimizes its importance. God also declares his power and sovereignty, his Godness, in contrast to Job's limitations, his humanness, but not to strong-arm him into silence. God guides Job's gaze from his suffering to creation *in order to* address his suffering. God's strength is intended to silence Job through consolation not intimidation.

After establishing himself as the creator in part one, God invites Job, in part two, to consider his meticulous care for aspects of that creation, which Job himself likely doesn't value. If God is good enough to care for these creatures, surely he cares for Job. Jesus makes a similar argument: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care... So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matt 10:29, 31).

Then, in part three, he turns from arguing from the lesser to the greater to arguing from the greater to the lesser. If God is powerful enough to control Behemoth and Leviathan, then surely Job's situation is not beyond God's sovereign control. God, then, addresses Job's suffering by describing his relationship to the breadth of the creation in which Job suffers. He humbles Job while encouraging him. He puts his suffering in perspective without minimizing it. In so doing, he speaks to Job's suffering comprehensively in a way that provides hope to anyone else who suffers. No one is too insignificant for God's care and no suffering is too mighty to exceed his power.

This is how Job understands God's speech. He responds, "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (42:2). He acknowledges the limitations of his knowledge (42:3), and how God's revelation has expanded it, such that the God of whom he had only heard he has now

seen (42:5). “Therefore,” he says, “I lay aside my complaint, and am consoled on dust and ashes” (42:6; my translation; the object of the first verb in the sentence is missing in Hebrew and the second verb is translated “console” every other time it appears in the book.)

Can the divine speeches provide us with similar consolation in the midst of this pandemic? This virus is both much smaller and far bigger than any of us. God, the speeches would have us believe, created this virus; he has the power to control it, even eradicate it. No one who suffers from the virus is too insignificant for God’s care; none of the suffering we face is too powerful for his control.

And yet, people are suffering. Job suffers. Some baby ravens starve and some ostrich eggs never hatch. The divine speeches don’t attempt to explain why a good and powerful God allows evil to exist, why God created Behemoth and Leviathan in the first place (see 40:15). But that’s also part of what makes the divine speeches so masterfully applicable to any sufferer. God redirects our question from why God allows suffering to persist, the answer to which is different in each situation and beyond our comprehension in most. Instead he directs our attention to whom we must trust in every situation, and why this God can sustain our hopes. Therefore, the book of Job supports N. T. Wright’s recent [advocation](#) of lament rather than searching for explanations, but not his conclusion that sometimes the Christian must wait without hope. The knowledge we may hear of God may not sustain us when we face suffering, while the experience of seeing God can. Job seems to understand this. He is consoled while still on the ash heap, still suffering without explanation.

7. Will Things Ever Get Back to Normal?

But God does not leave Job on the ash heap. The epilogue describes Job’s restored relationship with God and his community, which reinforces that the loss of both was the focus of Job’s affliction. After approving Job’s speech (42:7), God blesses Job with twice as much as he lost, as well as with ten new children, including three daughters of incomparable beauty. Job also receives fellowship, comfort, and gifts from his friends and family. The book ends with Job dying “old and full of days” (42:17).

Verse 11 has a special resonance right now: “All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had

known him before came and ate with him in his house.” The extroverts among us have likely indulged this daydream more than once in recent weeks. The new intensity of our longing for community joins other new and sometimes surprising desires for so many other aspects of normal life pre-quarantine (handshakes with new acquaintances, browsing the grocery store, going to the office). When will life get back to normal? Job teaches us, however, that persevering through suffering can create a new and better normal. This is what we should hope for. Job had heard of God, but now he has seen him. After his life is restored, there’s no mention of him offering preemptive sacrifices for his children. Anxiety has been replaced with joyful generosity, as Job transcends cultural expectations to offer his three daughters an inheritance with their brothers.

Some find this happy ending disappointingly trite, but it is perfectly appropriate for the good and sovereign God to make everything right in the end. We don’t know when that end will come in the current crisis, or in any of the personal crises we may face. Job had to wait a long time, and so may we. But the hope of the book of Job, as of the Christian faith, is that the God who allows our suffering will also eventually end it, that if we emulate “the endurance of Job,” we will see “how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11). As Job declares, even in the midst of his despair, “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth” (19:25).