

Last week we began this series on the life of Job, and if you're like me, when we look at this guy's life and all of the horrible stuff he endures, you can't help but think of your own experiences with pain and sorrow. I haven't experienced anything on the level of Job (he lost his great wealth & he lost all of his children in the span of a day), but I'm more familiar with suffering than I'd like to be.

I often say that one of the lowest moments of my life came almost exactly eight years ago when I was let go from a church ministry position I held in North Carolina. It wasn't just that I got fired- it was the fact that I had no idea it was coming so I had taken my youngest daughter with me and she was sitting on my lap as I got the news. Meira had been coming down with a pretty serious illness and I was holding her in my arms as I sat down across from the leadership team of my church. I had no idea that the reason they wanted to meet with me that morning was to let me know that the church had nearly exhausted its funding and would no longer be able to retain my services. I walked back to my car after our meeting feeling like the wind had been knocked out of me. One month of severance was all they could afford, and all that stood between my family and an empty checking account.

Making matters worse, Meira's condition deteriorated and we took her to the hospital where they admitted her for pneumonia. My wife stayed with her that night while I took our other daughter home. Calls began pouring in from friends at church who learned I had been let go. I didn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I prayed for my daughter and for a job. The next day I loaded up Aria to go to the hospital and on the way she complained that she wasn't feeling very good. When we arrived at the hospital, Aria threw up all over the floor of Meira's room and Meira, sick as she was, still managed enough lungpower to cry most of the time we were there. Now Aria is crying too, and Jennifer is holding her while I try to console Meira and we spent the day that way. When it was finally time to leave I walked with Aria in my arms through the halls of the hospital and she threw up again, this time all over my back. With no change of clothes I had to drive the 30 minutes home with my shirt soaked and stinking of bile, my oldest daughter sick and asleep in the back of the car, my youngest daughter in a hospital room with pneumonia, my wife sleeping in a chair next to her bed; jobless, almost penny-less, and with no prospects.

That was a "Job moment" in my life for sure. If we all started to swap "Job moments" in our lives, I bet we could come up with some real beauties. Your tales of woe might be twice as bad mine. But it's tough to out-Job Job.

Our Garden to City 2016 series has us taking in the big picture overview of Scripture and as we do we're learning that it's within God's story that we find the meaning and the purpose in our own stories.

Last week we were in chapter 1, listening in on a heavenly conversation as God spoke words of praise about "(His) servant Job." Unfortunately for Job, that's about the last good thing that's going to happen to him for 40 chapters. God says some nice things about him, and then, quite literally, all hell breaks loose.

God gave Satan the ability to test Job's integrity by taking away everything that he had (Job's wealth, his harvest, and even his children)- we learned of that last week. But if that wasn't enough, it gets even worse. In chapter two God gave Satan the ability to touch Job's health and he is inflicted with a terrible physical suffering- painful boils all cover his body. Even Job's wife has tempted him to "curse God and die."

After that, Job has three friends who come and sit with him for seven days in silence, which seems pretty compassionate. But the compassion of their silence ends after that week. For nearly 30 chapters of this book they sling accusation after accusation at Job. "This suffering must be because of some sin in your life, Job! You need to repent before God."

Some friends, right? Instead of condolences they offer Job long speeches about their rational view of life as a series of causes and effects. If Job is experiencing such terrible pain and sorrow, in the minds of his three friends, it has to be the result of something equally terrible that he has done.

Through all of these accusations, Job declares his innocence and his integrity. He cries. He rages. He is hurting and in despair. Everything about his life is an open wound. Again and again he cries out to God, asking Him to make Himself known. He wonders out loud how God could be so unfair- so distant- so silent. In chapter 23 (vs 3, 8-9), Job says, *“If only I knew where to find God, I would go to His court. I go east, but He is not there. I go west, but I cannot find Him. I do not see Him in the north for He is hidden. I look to the south but He is concealed.”*

Have you ever been there? Have you ever been in that same place? Your life feels like a gaping wound and you’re reaching out to God- calling out to Him in the midst of all that pain- only to be answered with silence? I know I’ve been there.

What are we asking for in those moments? “God, if you’re not going to take this suffering away, then You have to at least explain Your reasons.” We deserve an explanation. That’s what we think, don’t we? And maybe it’s even more than that, we want validation- proof that God is there, that He cares, that this is not just random chance.

It takes nearly 38 chapters, but after all the questioning, and all the raging, and all the hurting, Job hears from God. Be careful what you wish for.

Job 38:1 reads, *“Then the Lord answered Job from the whirlwind.”*

2 *“Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words?*

3 *Brace yourself like a man, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer.*

4 *“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.*

5 *Who determined its dimensions and stretched out the surveying line?*

6 *What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone*

7 *as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?*

8 *“Who kept the sea inside its boundaries as it burst from the womb,*

9 *and as I clothed it with clouds and wrapped it in thick darkness?*

10 *For I locked it behind barred gates, limiting its shores.*

11 *I said, “This far and no farther will you come. Here your proud waves must stop!”*

The chapter goes on from there and God describes in beautiful language the skies, and the heavens, the animals both on land and in the sea. It’s as though God is saying, “Let me amaze you by the complexity and the intricacy of it all! Look at all these things Job. Marvel at them with me. Enjoy them. You cannot control them, but they are under my control.”

God speaks. But it’s not the answer we expect. It’s not an explanation for all the pain Job has had to endure. It’s not an apology for having remained silent for so long. There’s no hint of a heavenly reason for the suffering. God doesn’t even acknowledge Job’s struggle at all. God speaks, and that, in itself is the most significant thing that He do for Job. He exists!

Job’s worst fears were that God had abandoned him. In the silence and isolation of his suffering he had assumed that God had let him down and let him go. Job didn’t know that God’s withdrawal was all part

of the story- a way of demonstrating that faith is not by sight. It's crucial to the story that Job is left in the dark. *Because* he's in the dark we can identify with his struggle completely. He's an example for all of us who are trying to continue to place our trust in God even when our understanding is pitch black.

For all of us whose faith has been tested by the darkness and the seeming absence of God, the great reassurance of chapter 38 is that God speaks. The Lord is present! In fact, He's been present all along, but it's only in this moment that He's chosen to make His presence known. This is the first and greatest reassurance for Job and for us. He's with us- even when He doesn't choose to make His presence known- even when the suffering persists- even in the silence. God speaks. He is present- always has been.

There's a second point to be made. In these verses we see a glimpse of the wisdom of God that is superior to any wisdom of humanity. There is a divine wisdom that is greater than any wisdom of man. God knows things that we do not. He has secrets that we'll never know the meaning of. There is a pattern to the wild order of things that we could never dream. In chapters 38 and 39 God takes Job around with question after question. "Did you know this..." "Could you comprehend that..." The beauty of all God's handiwork is a display of His wisdom.

Often the problem of suffering is thought of this way: If God is all-good He must want to get rid of all the suffering and pain in this world. If God is all-knowing, there isn't any pain or sorrow that He's unaware of. And if God is all-powerful, He must be able to do whatever He wants. Therefore, because suffering exists in the world, the idea of an all-knowing, all-powerful God who is all-good must be a lie. It's a contradiction. God cannot be all three: wise, powerful and good.

But this is exactly what Job is learning from God! If we say that God is wise and good but not powerful, or wise and powerful, but not good, or good and powerful, but not wise our world becomes 'logical'- but it is no longer the world of the living God made known to Job. Our God isn't reasoned into existence or dismissed at the end of an overly simplistic argument toward logic. He is a powerful, wise and good Creator, whose ways are higher than our ways and whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

That's not to say there's no place for the exercise of human logic or reasoning. I'm also not trying to suggest that God's ways are unreasonable or irrational. God's rationality is the basis for all order and rationality in the world. He is the source of our thinking process and we are called to worship Him with our minds. The book of Job is not an invitation for us to abandon reason, it is simply reminding us that we cannot hope to understand God through reason alone.

The living God is someone we encounter. He is not so much a God for discussion or debate as He is a God to be known. There is a freedom in coming to know the Living God that we cannot always presume to understand. When God makes Himself known it is in the graciousness of a personal encounter with Him, and the invitation for us to respond.

After God's finished asking Job questions there comes this very short exchange between He and Job. (Job 40:1-5)

1 Then the Lord said to Job, **2** "Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?"

3 Then Job replied to the Lord, **4** "I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers? I will cover my mouth with my hand. **5** I have said too much already. I have nothing more to say."

Job realizes for the first time that he has overstepped the mark in his protest. He should not have found fault with the Almighty. He should not have insisted on his own understanding. He should not have accused the Lord of injustice. "I will cover my mouth with my hand. I have said too much already. I have

nothing more to say." For once, Job is silenced.

What do you do when you've come face to face with God like this? Job humbles himself before the Lord in silence. This is the Almighty God asking questions Job could never begin to answer. What would you do? This God deserves reverence. He has earned our worship. The apostle Paul describes Him this way in Romans 11: "From Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory for ever and ever."

He's got the whole world in His hands! No matter how dark our circumstances, no matter how great our pain, there is no power that can separate us from God. That's spelled out for us in Romans 8, in terms of the love God has shown us in Jesus. *"And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,[p] neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. 39 No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

God is with us. Always. Never failing. In every season and every place we find ourselves, He is present. (Job said, *"If only I knew where to find God, I would go to His court. I go east, but He is not there. I go west, but I cannot find Him. I do not see Him in the north for He is hidden. I look to the south but He is concealed."* If Job only knew!)

God is with us in the north, when we're at the pinnacle and we're on top of the world. He is with us when we're in the East, here, at home, in the day to day. He's with us in the west, when we're restless and searching, exploring the great unknown. And yes, He is with us in the south, in the low moments, even in the bitterness of pain and sorrow. Oswald Chambers once wrote, "A man up against things feels that he has lost God, while in reality, He has come face to face with Him."

There's something significant about the language in the book of Job that's difficult for us to see in English, but truly stands out in Hebrew. Throughout the book, when Job and his friends refer to God they use the name: El Shaddai- Almighty God. When we hear that name it seems respectful and deferential, and it is, but it's also a rather detached and distant way of referring to God. He is the impersonal God of power. That's how Job is referring to God throughout the book. But in chapter 38, when God speaks for the first time, He is called 'Yahweh'- "I AM." From this point forward when God appears His name is always 'Yahweh- I AM.' It such a subtle little detail, completely unnoticeable in English, and yet it hugely important. Job has been relating to God as an impersonal power in the world- God was a power that he respected but not a God he could relate to. But from the moment God speaks to Job, He is Yahweh- I AM, the God who is. He is a God of personal care, steadfast love, and faithfulness to the people of His covenant.

God tells Job, "This is where your heart will find rest: it's when you find your own place among all the panorama of God's purposes for His world. Can you lift your eyes from the ash heap and see that I AM?"

The ending of the book of Job is pretty phenomenal. Do you know how it all ends? We read about it in chapter 42, **12** *"So the Lord blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than in the beginning. (He restored Job completely)* **13** *He gave Job seven more sons and three more daughters.* **16** *Job lived 140 years after that, living to see four generations of his children and grandchildren.* **17** *Then he died, an old man who had lived a long, full life."*

That's what happened to Job, but what does God want from us? How do we respond, specifically, in seasons of suffering, pain, and sorrow? He is with us and He wants us to find our rest in Him- to find

our peace in Him. He wants us to abide in Him.

I love that word, "Abide." It has three distinct meanings, and all three apply in this context. If we 'abide' by a decision it means we accept it. We comply. If we 'abide' through something, it means that we tolerate it. We endure. If we 'abide' in something it means that we live in it. We stay in it.

In this life we need to learn how to 'abide' in God.

To accept Him in faith, means abiding *by* His decisions and His plans. He is God and we are not. Abiding in God *through* every circumstance we face (both the highs and the lows) means that we endure with Him- we stand with Him.

Abiding *in* God means that we find our life in Him. We make our home in who He is. J

Jesus referred to all of this when He was speaking to his disciples in the upper room in John 15, **4** *"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.*

5 *"Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. 9* *"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love."*

In the moments before Jesus own suffering- in the hours before His own death, what were Jesus' words of encouragement to His followers? "Remain in me." "Abide in me." "Find your rest in my love for you." If we ever needed reassurance that God is for us; If we ever needed Him to prove that He loves us; If there was ever a need for us to know that He hasn't abandoned us, surely the cross shows us the lengths to which our God is willing to extend Himself on our behalf.

Have you suffered? He was our suffering Savior. Have you been in pain? He was bruised for our sinfulness and crushed for our misbehavior. Have you mourned the loss of a loved one? He took the nails and gave up His own life so that we could have life.

Abide in Him. Abide by His direction, for His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Abide through all circumstances, for He has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. Abide in Him, for apart from Him is no life at all and in Him is joy everlasting, strength for today, and hope eternal.