

# I HAD HEARD OF YOU, BUT NOW I SEE YOU

*SERIES: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS*

By Steve Zeisler

Orthodox Jews will not pronounce the name of God *YHWH* (which we render Yahweh or Jehovah) when they read it in the Hebrew Bible. They substitute another word. The concern to avoid speaking too familiarly of God has wisdom. The name of God should remain holy.

The culture we live in is wordy to the extreme. Our public media are filled with debate and comment and blather in general. Evangelical worship also tends to be very wordy. We call frequent meetings and produce books and tapes; we explain and propose and direct and pronounce.

In this message we'll consider the following prayer in Job 42:1-6:

**Then Job replied to the LORD:**

**“I know that you can do all things;  
no plan of yours can be thwarted.  
You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’  
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me to know.  
“You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.’  
My ears had heard of you  
but now my eyes have seen you.  
Therefore I despise myself  
and repent in dust and ashes.”**

The distinction Job is making in this prayer, especially in verses 5-6, is not between hearing and seeing, but between knowing about something and knowing someone. It is between having a body of information, and having an encounter with a person that is overwhelming and life changing.

The book of Job is one of the great works of literature. Some of the best poetry ever written is found in this book. It is highly regarded by both those who believe the Bible and those who don't. It is often referenced in philosophy as well as theology courses. It is one of the oldest books in the Bible, and is written without reference to the history or laws of Israel.

The book of Job asks what I consider to be the hardest of all questions: why is suffering often meaningless? Suffering can be ennobling or purposeful. It can also be a punishment for wicked choices. Suffering is bad enough in those cases. But when horrific human suffering seems to be happening to no good purpose, and there is no loving God behind it, and it is just wicked and cruel, it is much more devastating. In such cases we are facing the depths of hell.

The book of Job is unquestionably a strong and insightful work of literature. The speeches in it don't avoid pain, confusion, and mystery. Virtually everyone who speaks tells truth about God, whether it's Job himself or his friends. The problem, of course, is that none of them tell about God comprehensively.

All of the action in this book is found in the opening and closing scenes— descriptions of the loss and restoration of Job's family and fortune. The vast majority of the text consists of speeches and discussion about God. Nevertheless, it is striking that there is very little prayer in the book. No one speaks to God until the very end, when the Lord enters the story and insists that he be answered directly. So the book as a whole illustrates the distinction that we observed in 42:5-6. The book is filled with religious discussion, but it's not until the end that we see Job able to encounter God personally, and that's when his life is given wholeness and hope again.

## **Knowing about God vs. relationship with God**

To illuminate this distinction between awareness of God and relationship with him, let me take you to a couple of other texts. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus talks about how spoken prayers can fail to take the living God seriously. They are merely religious speeches, if you will. Jesus says, "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words" (Matthew 6:6-7). Various religious groups teach mindless chanting and other repetitive prayers, as if by sheer volume the speaker could call God's attention to him or her. But the Lord says that genuine prayer isn't just spiritual words spoken aloud. Jesus' model prayer (the Lord's prayer) is a direct appeal to a personal Father in heaven.

In Romans Paul writes about inarticulate prayer. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will" (8:26-27). There are times when we don't know how to say what needs to be said. The Spirit himself prays with intercession to God that is beyond and above the boundaries of human speech.

So again we see a distinction between information that can be articulated in theological words, and an encounter with God that is life changing and that will eventually make us more quiet than chatty.

The outcome of such an encounter, as Job says, is this:

"Therefore I despise myself  
and repent in dust and ashes."

Unfortunately, this is a poor translation. The word "despise" suggests hatred and rejection. But that's not what the Hebrew word means. It means to recoil from, to pull back. The point Job is making is this: "I'm done paying attention to myself. Having seen the living God for who he is, I am no longer filled with my own concerns. I no longer stew in my own issues." Job is speaking not of worthlessness but of turning from self-absorption. Job repents—he recoils from himself and he chooses the Lord.

Job's prayer is very wise. It has insights that will do us good every day of our lives if we choose to allow them. The concepts are not particularly hard to grasp, but we will understand them even better if we look at the prayer in context. Let's go back and consider the book as a whole.

Job's life was drastically ruined overnight without explanation. He was in desperate circumstances, and three of his friends came to him. After a period of silence they began to speak with Job. They were trying to make sense of tragedy, speaking about God. This is the hearing of the ear.

Eventually, Job and his comforters became competitors. Each speaker not only wanted to solve the problem of suffering, but he wanted to win the debate. Each had something smarter to say than the previous speaker. All of them spoke with beauty and power, but all of them fell short.

So the hearing of the ear in this book is vast. It is filled with information—a work of poetic genius. If the book ended with chapter 37, though, it would teach only of sorrow without hope. But at the crisis point, God begins to speak for himself.

## **The Lord of heaven and earth speaks**

Chapter 38, verses 1-3:

“Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said:

‘Who is this that darkens my counsel  
with words without knowledge?  
Brace yourself like a man;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.’”

Even before we hear what God has to say, note well that he speaks from the storm. In Job's speeches, we repeatedly encounter the fear that God might in fact be cruel or capricious, that he might not be trustworthy. Job asks hard questions. “Perhaps God is a sadist, and what I believed all my life isn't true. Or perhaps, though God is faithful to everyone else, he has no concern for me, because I have somehow done something so evil that I have been cast away.” The fact that God speaks challenges these despairing thoughts.

In short God declares, “Job, I'm listening to what you are saying. (In fact, you are going to have to account for it.) You are not a lost soul. I am speaking to you as the Lord of heaven and earth, and you are absolutely important to me!” He will go on to embrace Job, not withdraw. His promises are true. His character is consistent.

I used to think that God was hammering Job in these final chapters, that he was angry with the faithlessness expressed in their debates. But I heard Earl Palmer preach on this text, and his insights helped me rethink the nature of the words from the storm. God isn't grinding on Job, humiliating him, or frightening him. What he is doing is giving himself away, drawing near to Job. He is stern about it. He's going to ask hard questions. But in the long run God is taking Job under his arm and saying, “Let's you and I have a discussion. I'm going to open your eyes. This is what I am like.” God is displaying his character and his heart to Job. Job will experience shame, and he will repent (in dust and ashes), but he will also realize that God, who has seemed distant and uncaring, is now present and attentive. These words of God are a gift.

Let's observe a few points in this wonderful self-disclosure of the Lord.

## **God opens his heart**

In 38:4-7 God looks back before time, enjoying the insights stored in his great memory.

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.  
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?  
On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone—  
while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy?”

“Where were you,” God is asking, “when I invented physics, when I gave order to the cosmos and decided it should be just so, when I made it beautiful, and called for a chorus of stars, and they sang?” Human language is inadequate to discuss God’s memory of setting in place everything that is. “I delight to remember my angelic choir singing and dancing at the beauty of the creation! I loved the stars’ song!” God is giving Job a gift: a recollection of things that no man has ever seen or can imagine.

In 38:31-33 God refers to his immensity:

“Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades?  
Can you loose the cords of Orion?”

He is speaking about the constellations here. Consider the immensity of the universe as we know it now, measured by modern astronomers. Yet the perspective of Job is surely right—every night God calls the constellations into place. Orion’s belt is Orion’s belt because he intends it to be.

“Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons  
or lead out the Bear with its cubs?  
Do you know the laws of the heavens?  
Can you set up God’s dominion over the earth?”

Again, God is challenging Job, but he is also telling Job about himself. “This is what I am like. I can do these things, and I delight to do them. I like the constellations. I want them there every night, and so they will be.” Job’s eyes grow wider as he perceives the enormity of his God.

Then God speaks of justice in 40:9-12:

“Do you have an arm like God’s,  
and can your voice thunder like his?  
Then adorn yourself with glory and splendor,  
and clothe yourself in honor and majesty.  
Unleash the fury of your wrath,  
look at every proud man and bring him low,  
Look at every proud man and humble him,  
crush the wicked where they stand.”

God is asking, “Can you overturn injustice, Job? Thunder away! Use your voice and your strong right arm! Stop all the wickedness in the world! Judge what deserves to be judged!” And of course Job knows he can do no such

thing. But God declares, “I can! I bring about judgment over and over again in history. The wicked are brought down in my timing. And there is a day coming when my thunderous voice and my strong right arm will bring about absolute justice forever!”

Then there is a series of comments that are references to tenderness and simplicity. Having spoken of the beginning of creation and of the stars, and declaring the justice that will be established at the end of the age, then God says, “I’ve got something else really cool to show you: Ostriches flapping their wings.”

Say what?

“There is a kind of silly exuberance about ostriches, don’t you think?”

Job has never thought of it that way. . . .

“Do you know where the mountain goats give birth? I do! In a remote place that men will never see, the world supply of mountain goats replenishes itself. I think that’s terrific!

“How about the muscles in the belly of a hippopotamus. Have you ever thought about those? The bellies of hippos are really strong. I did a good job making hippos!

“Have you ever given orders to the morning or sent lightning bolts on their way?”

We see God in his size, and we see God in his nearness. He has as much delight in the flight of a falcon and the stamping of horses as he does in the constellations of the heavens. Every bit of it fills him with enthusiasm. “I have done well in all I’ve made. My plans are right. And I haven’t forgotten you or anyone else.”

The longer Job listens, the more he realizes that God is opening his heart and giving himself to Job. He is not growling and commanding and thundering. He is laughing with delight, stopping to muse, as if he were taking Job on a tour of an art gallery.

Twice, Job is told to brace himself and receive these challenges as a man. It’s only human beings who can go on a tour like this, who were made to know God this way. It’s hard for Job to hear “Be a man!” but it’s wonderful too. It’s a great thing to be a human soul. And after all his desperation and withdrawal, Job is now being given back his humanity. What makes us human is the apprehension of God, the privilege of worship.

## **Time to listen and put God first**

How does Job respond to this gift of God’s heart to him? In 40:3-4 we read this:

“Then Job answered the LORD:

‘I am unworthy—how can I reply to you?

I put my hand over my mouth.

I spoke once, but I have no answer—

twice, but I will say no more.’”

He decides to be quiet. It's time for him to listen. There is great wisdom in that. We talk too much, both to each other and even to God. We avoid silence. Very often what you receive if you listen takes time to gain, and we don't like to take the time. But in quiet we might be able to see more evidence of God's handiwork in nature. We might be able to see in human history evidence of God's sovereignty. What is he doing in the lives of people near you? What is he doing even in the awful events on the world's stage this month? What are his purposes? Maybe if we would listen awhile and observe without reacting, ask for a receptive heart to what he would say, we could serve him, thank him, find him in places that we never will otherwise. Job covers his mouth.

Some say that the Beatles' album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* is one of the great accomplishments in music in the latter half of the twentieth century. One song, "She's Leaving Home," is the story of a family disintegrating as a daughter leaves her parents:

"She (We gave her most of our lives)  
is leaving (Sacrificed most of our lives)  
home (We gave her everything money could buy).  
"She's leaving home after living alone  
for so many years.  
Bye, bye." (1)

Well-meaning parents gave their daughter everything money could buy, but they never listened to her. We must listen to people we care about if we would know them, and that is true for God as well.

We've already observed 42:5-6: Job recoils from himself and chooses in repentance to put God first. You may remember the simple chorus:

"Turn your eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in his wonderful face;  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of his glory and grace." (2)

The things that would otherwise command our attention become less and less important, the more we put Jesus first.

In conclusion, we are in no position to demand that God speak to us from the storm: "Lord, I'm willing to stop being merely informed about you. I long to know you as you are." The timing is not ours to call. But we can be receptive listeners inclined toward God. We can refuse to settle for information alone. We can observe history and nature in the expectation that we'll find the One who delights in them. When we suffer, we can turn to God for companionship, rather than, as Job and his friends were so determined to do, discuss and explain suffering. What finally ends the book is the companionship of God, not the explanations of God.

There are some who exalt themselves because of their claim to visions of God. Job experienced exactly the opposite. His apprehension of God made him less and less important. He had fewer expectations of greatness in this life. A greater vision of God leads to a greater self, but the greatness of being truly near to God is greatness that comes from repentance from sin, being less interested in gain and self-justification, and enjoying God as he enjoys himself. God has spent an eternity past and will spend an eternity future delighted in who he is and all that extends from him. What he offers us is the chance to enjoy him as much as he enjoys himself. That is the privilege that Job's prayer points to, which God ultimately intends for all of us. "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12a). I urge upon us the lesson of Job's prayer, to aim to know God as he is.

## Notes

- (1) John Lennon and Paul McCartney, "She's Leaving Home," © 1967 Northern Songs.  
(2) Helen H. Lemmel, *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus*, © 1922 by Singspiration Music.

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