

Power Displayed

God's wisdom and power are unfathomable.

In the summer of 1970, I completed the program of Advanced Individual Training as an infantry soldier in the United States Army. At the time, the nation's military forces were fully engaged in the war in Vietnam. Before sending my unit into that conflict, our military leaders gave us a show of the awesomeness of our nation's firepower, a demonstration commonly referred to as "the mad minute." During the demonstration, every weapon in the Army's arsenal was fired—with one exception: no nuclear weapon was detonated. But for a solid sixty seconds, explosions of gunfire shook the earth around us, blinding flashes of fire and light burst into the sky, and the choking smell of gunpowder saturated the air. Then a thundering voice over the sound system emphasized the overwhelming power of our country's military might. The entire display of power was intended to bolster the infantry soldiers' confidence in the equipment and support they would employ in the combat zone.

In February of the following year, my unit participated in a major offensive of the war. The magnitude of American military power once more was on display. As we flew west toward our target area, an endless column of armored vehicles jammed the road below. The sky seemed to be filled with helicopters.

The next month I witnessed an even more impressive demonstration of power. My unit learned late one night that enemy tanks were advancing toward our position. The quickest air support available was an Air Force B-52 strike. These bombers dropped their lethal weapons on pinpointed targets from thirty thousand feet. We could neither see nor hear the planes, but suddenly a terrifying series of flashes illuminated the darkness like lightning strikes. A few seconds later, a long, low rumble of explosions interrupted the stillness of the night, and the ground all around us shook violently. When quiet finally returned, a report came by radio that those feared enemy tanks were no longer a threat to our safety.

As powerful as these displays of military weaponry might have seemed to me at the time, their grandeur vanishes when I think about them in relation to God's power. In this session, we will examine a passage in which God spoke directly and personally to Job about His unfathomable wisdom and power.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

JOB 38:1–41:34

Job's intense suffering began when God permitted Satan to test Job's faith and devotion. Satan quickly orchestrated calamities in which Job lost all of his business (herds and flocks) and workers, all ten of his children, and finally his own health. At the conclusion of this string of disasters, Job sat stunned, broken, and alone in a heap of ashes, trying to alleviate his incessant physical torment by scratching the sores on his body with pottery shards. Yet, even when Job's wife urged him—perhaps in pity—to “curse God and die” (2:9), Job did not sin against God.

A trio of friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—came to Job's side to console him. Their counsel, presented in a series of three rounds of dialogue with Job (chaps. 4–31), focused on convincing Job that his suffering could only be a consequence of grievous hidden sins. Job's healing and restoration would come only if and when Job repented of these sins. Throughout the dialogue, however, Job maintained his innocence and adamantly urged God to come to his aid by speaking up, supporting Job's righteousness, and redeeming him.

When Job's dialogue with the three friends ended, a young observer named Elihu stepped forward to offer an additional speech regarding Job's suffering (chaps. 32–37). Elihu was offended that Job seemed so intent on justifying himself rather than recognizing God's sovereignty. Further, he was angry that the three friends were unable to refute Job's arguments, yet they heaped condemnation on the suffering man (32:2-3). Elihu then delivered a lengthy speech, emphasizing God's incomparable goodness, wisdom, authority, and power. He contended that God in fact spoke to humans in numerous ways, including through the powerful sights and sounds of natural phenomena such as thunder, lightning, rain, and wind (37:1-24).

Finally, God did speak to Job (chaps. 38–41); He did so “from the whirlwind” (38:1). With a litany of rhetorical questions, God proclaimed His sovereign power and Job's—indeed, every human being's—limited knowledge and ability (38:1–39:30). In response to God's first revelation, Job uttered a brief confession of his inability to answer the Lord (40:3-5). God then proceeded with a second speech, using the ancient creatures Behemoth (40:15) and Leviathan (41:1) to emphasize divine power and human weakness (40:6–41:34). God asked Job to show Him how to govern the universe better. This inquiry challenged Job's unsubstantiated criticism of divine justice. The mysteries of nature demonstrated God's qualifications and sovereignty that uniquely qualified Him, and Him alone, to govern the created universe.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CORRECT ME? (Job 40:1-5)

God challenged Job to explain his credentials to correct God, leading Job to admit that he could add nothing more to what he already had said.

VERSES 1-2

The LORD answered Job: Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who argues with God give an answer.

After the three friends and Elihu failed to persuade Job to repent of hidden wickedness, God ended His silence. In a series of rhetorical questions (see 38:1–39:30), God emphasized His sovereign power and wisdom by appealing to the cosmos and asking where Job was when the vast, majestic features of the universe were brought into being.

Then in 40:1-2, **the LORD answered Job**, challenging him on two fronts. First, Did Job think he—a mere human being—had the status and authority to confront **the Almighty** to **correct him**? This question especially points to the assertions Job had made to the three friends that God had not treated him fairly (see 9:17; 10:5-7; 19:6-7; 27:2). The Hebrew verb rendered *answered* signifies a direct response to Job’s accusations. The verb translated **contends** can denote either physical or verbal combat (especially in a legal sense). The Hebrew term behind the divine name *the Almighty* (Hebrew, *Shaddai*) emphasizes God’s self-sufficiency and omnipotence. Thus, God may well have implied that Job’s assertions of being treated unfairly suggested he (Job) was as capable as God to adjudicate Job’s case.

Despite the obvious vast chasm of difference between the all-powerful God and a mere human being, God nonetheless challenged Job—perhaps sarcastically—to present a rebuttal. Job previously had expressed doubt that he would ever be able to lay out his argument before God (see 9:1-3,14-20; 23:1-5; 31:35-37). Here, however, God called on Job to **give an answer** regarding his accusations that God had acted in the wrong.

VERSES 3-4

Then Job answered the LORD: I am so insignificant. How can I answer you? I place my hand over my mouth.

The Lord was speaking to Job “from the whirlwind” (38:1). This whirlwind was no ordinary weather phenomena. It was a theophany, a manifestation

of God’s powerful presence. God’s first speech (38:2–40:2) had shattered Job’s accusation that God treated him unjustly. Now Job was called on to answer God’s first speech. Job’s response emphasized two realities. First, Job admitted the vast difference between God and him: **I am so insignificant** (“I am vile,” KJV; “I am of small account,” ESV; “I am unworthy,” NIV). This Hebrew verb conveys the idea of being very small in every way, particularly in contrast to another—in this case, God. Now that Job knew he was in the close presence of Almighty God and had God’s attention, he humbly admitted that he was unworthy to **answer** God’s speech or to present any case for his own righteousness. To **place a hand over** one’s **mouth** was a gesture of self-censorship.

VERSE 5

I have spoken once, and I will not reply; twice, but now I can add nothing.

The second part of Job’s response to God was an admission that he could **add nothing** to his previous assertions. In fact, verse 5 is written in a literary formula (**spoken once ... twice**) that essentially means “I have already said too much!” Job realized not only that he was unqualified to argue in the presence of God but also that his adamant arguments to the three friends about God’s unfair treatment of him had missed the real point!

Christian readers of the Book of Job can look back at Job’s desire for a Mediator (9:33) and a Redeemer (19:25) and appreciate Job’s humility before God in 40:5. Because all human beings have sinned, we are unworthy to stand before God and claim to be righteous. Our only hope for salvation is to have a qualified Mediator who advocates on our behalf and a Redeemer who forgives our sins and gives us new life. That is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ! First Timothy 2:5 states, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.” Ephesians 1:7 declares that in Christ “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” The One whom Job could only glimpse in faith, we as believers can embrace in faith as our Redeemer and Mediator.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “God” on pages 651–653 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What does God display in all of His dealings with His creation? What do you think is the significance of this for your relationship with God?

QUESTION MY JUSTICE? (Job 40:6-9)

VERSE 6

Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind:

Following Job's brief, chastened response (40:3-5), **the LORD** began to deliver the second part of His speech. The name *the LORD* reflects the Hebrew name sometimes transliterated as *Yahweh* [YAH weh]. This name has been called God's personal name; it is the name God revealed to Moses and the Israelites as His covenant name (see Ex. 3:14-15). It emphasizes both His eternal presence and His power to create something out of nothing.

As in Job 38:1, God chose to speak to Job **from the whirlwind**. The Hebrew term for *whirlwind* is different from the word used in 1:19 to describe the powerful wind that caused Job's oldest son's house to collapse and kill everyone inside. In 38:1 and here in 40:6, the *whirlwind* was the physical means through which God disclosed His presence and uttered His truth.

VERSE 7

Get ready to answer me like a man; When I question you, you will inform me.

The phrase **get ready** can also be translated "gird up" (KJV), "dress," (ESV) or "brace," (NIV). The background of this figure of speech lay in the long tunic, or outer robe, regularly worn by men in the ancient Near East. Such a garment inhibited running or engaging in strenuous kinds of physical labor. To avoid getting entangled and possibly being injured, the man pulled up the lower section of his robe and tucked it into the belt in the front. Thus, the practice of girding up one's robe became a figure of speech for preparing oneself to run or perform strenuous work.

The Hebrew word for **man** in verse 7 is not the general term for a male or mankind in general. Rather, it is a term that emphasized a man's physical strength or skill. It could be used to refer to elite warriors or to a man at his highest level of competence and capability. In other words, God was challenging Job to prepare for a task that would require his best effort.

The second line of the verse specifies the difficult task now confronting Job. God would interrogate Job by asking a series of questions. Job then would be expected to **inform** God of the proper answer. During the discourse with the three friends, Job had occasionally entered into a conversation with God. During these detours into prayer, Job demanded that God answer his questions. However, when God broke His silence and addressed Job, God reversed the expectations. Job became the defendant required to answer God's questions. God challenged Job to demonstrate his ability to respond.

The challenge was designed to show Job that he was not God and therefore could not match God in understanding the complexities of the world, let alone comprehending God's purposes for individuals.

VERSE 8

Would you really challenge my justice? Would you declare me guilty to justify yourself?

Job had previously approached a point in which he accused God of treating him unjustly (9:24). Yet he had stopped short of stating that God was unjust. Job avowed his own innocence but did not blatantly condemn God. Here in 40:8, God took the dispute beyond mere right and wrong by incorporating responsibility into the issue. Did Job really imagine that he was qualified to **challenge** God's **justice** in an effort to vindicate himself? Job lacked the authority to adjudicate the case. Would Job dare to **declare** God **guilty** in order to **justify** himself? That would disclose spiritual arrogance!

Previously, God had told of His loving care for the animals that He created, including lions and ravens (see 38:39-41), mountain goats and deer (see 39:1-3), wild donkeys (see 39:5-6), and wild oxen (see 39:9-12). Even the popular caricatures of the ostrich revealed God's provision for relatively unintelligent creatures (see 39:13-18). God endowed the horse with strength and bravery (see 39:19-25). He enabled birds of prey to soar at great heights and yet see their tiny prey on the ground (39:26-30). God endowed each of these types of creatures with special characteristics that enabled them to not only survive but also flourish. God even provided food for these creatures' helpless offspring.

God's compassion for such creatures is part of His *justice*. The Hebrew word has a much broader meaning than the English translation. The term is a derivative of a verb that essentially means "to exercise the processes of government." The ancient nations did not divide their governments into three distinct branches as the United States does. Hence, the idea of *justice* was not restricted to one judicial branch; it was to be reflected in the government as a whole.

Here the term used has a broad range of meanings. It exceeds just an application of determining who is right and who is wrong. It calls attention to the authority of the one determining who (and what) is right. Ultimately, God's question to Job frames the issue as to whether there had been a miscarriage of justice because God failed to apply His sovereignty properly. Of course, such a conclusion would be absurd. God by His very nature is always completely righteous in governing His creation. No one who is created by God is capable of governing His creation better than He is.

VERSE 9

Do you have an arm like God's? Can you thunder with a voice like his?

In biblical poetry, the **arm** was used to symbolize an instrument of strength. Today, we are often amused by youngsters who flex their biceps to show off how strong they are—at least in their own minds. Here God's *arm* stands for everything He had offered as evidence of His divine government over the universe, from His initial creation to His continued participation in managing it.

God then described His **voice** as **thunder**. Thunder often symbolized both the awesome presence and power of God in Scripture (see Ex. 19:19). When parents raise their voices, small children stop and listen. These two rhetorical questions from God challenged Job to consider the way in which he measured up to what God was like. Was he as powerful as God? Did creation respond to Job's commands as it did to God's voice? The answer to both questions was obvious: No! Therefore, since Job did not even begin to measure up to God's presence and power, he did not have the authority or standing to question God's justice. The message for us today as believers is that we must be careful to avoid viewing God as unfair or unjust.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Job 40:9. What are some experiences that have reminded you most of God's greatness? What experiences have reminded you of His justice? Of His wisdom?

SAVE YOURSELF? (Job 40:10-14)

God challenged Job that if he were truly more knowledgeable and just than God, then he should be able to adorn himself with splendor, put down the wicked, and save himself from calamity.

VERSE 10

Adorn yourself with majesty and splendor, and clothe yourself with honor and glory.

In Job 40:10-13, God challenged Job to do things that only God can do effectively. He dared Job to consider whether he could do a better job than God of governing the universe. God's commands in these verses likely

contain an element of biting sarcasm and thus are intended to demonstrate the irrational nature of Job's accusations. In verse 10, the Lord invited Job first to put on the royal attire of divinity. If Job thought he could assume the management of the universe and thereby judge God's fairness, Job must wear the characteristics and authority of God. He could not hold court dressed as an ordinary man. Just as a king wears a crown and holds a scepter, the ruler of the universe must be clothed in these divine qualities.

The term rendered **majesty** ("glory," NIV) is derived from a verb that means "to rise." As an attribute of God, the term often points to the exaltation produced by God's victories over His enemies. For example, Moses' sister Miriam praised the Lord for His destruction of the elite Egyptian chariot force at the Red Sea. This victory revealed the Lord's exalted status (see Ex. 15:21).

The Hebrew word translated **splendor** ("excellency," KJV; "dignity," ESV) has a similar sense to that of *majesty* in that it denotes a lofty eminence. When applied to God, the term points to His high-ranking position over all creatures—including human beings—in the universe.

VERSE 11

Pour out your raging anger; look on every proud person and humiliate him.

God continued to challenge Job to consider whether he could "do the job" as God. In much popular thought today, God is viewed as an elderly grandfather figure whose sole function is to grant human beings their wishes. Such a picture, however, categorically is not the true biblical revelation of the living God. God can unleash wrathful fury against sin. Here God commands Job to **pour out ... raging anger** ("unleash the fury of your wrath," NIV). These hardly are the instructions of a God who ignores human wickedness.

Others today might suggest that while these words are from the Old Testament, the New Testament reveals an emphasis on God's love. That much is true, of course; yet, the New Testament does not overlook or invalidate the reality of God's wrath against sin. Consider, for example, the incident in which Jesus found merchants using the temple courtyards as a marketplace. He made a whip and drove out of the temple those involved in the abuse of the sacred precincts (see John 2:13-16). God's righteous anger, however, is not an unrestrained outburst of hysterical emotion but rather a consistent response to human sin. God will not tolerate the existence of sin forever. The gospel is the good news that in Jesus' death and resurrection, God has provided a way to overcome our sin problem.

The second half of Job 40:11 builds on the first half of the verse and further illuminates God's activity in human existence. Selfish pride is

indicative of sin (see Lev. 26:18-19). Hence, the phrase **every proud person** refers to anyone willfully clinging to sinful conduct. Proverbs 16:18 states, “Pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall.” The destruction, or fall, is the responsibility of God. God challenged Job to find those guilty of sinful behavior and react appropriately to that behavior. The appropriate response for God was to **humiliate** the sinner. The idea here is not merely to embarrass but to eliminate the offensive conduct. That is possible only as the sinner surrenders completely to God and replaces his self-determination with submission to God’s mercy and forgiveness.

VERSE 12

Look on every proud person and humble him; trample the wicked where they stand.

The first half of verse 12 is similar to the second half of the previous verse. In both verses, the verb rendered **look on** carries the sense of searching the world’s entire population, scrutinizing each individual within that population, and spotting **every proud person**. Again, the term rendered *proud* denotes a person practicing sin. Indeed, the proud are individuals who have elevated self to occupy the throne in their lives. They must be brought down and humbled so that God might occupy His rightful place in their lives. Hence, God challenged Job to **humble** them. The apostle Paul wrote that eventually every creature will one day bow before Jesus the King of kings and acknowledge Him as Lord (see Phil. 2:10-11). Believers will do so willingly and in faith for their salvation; unbelievers will recognize Jesus’ lordship and their unbelief as God’s righteous judgment consigns them to everlasting separation in hell (see Matt. 25:31-46).

God pressed Job harder. He challenged Job to **trample the wicked where they stand**. During the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, a Levite named Korah incited a rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Korah and more than two hundred other leaders were identified as wicked men. Rejecting the leadership of Moses and Aaron was tantamount to rejecting God’s leadership. On that occasion, the earth opened up and consumed those rebellious leaders where they stood. Following this event, a plague struck down nearly fifteen thousand of the wicked rebels’ followers (see Num. 16:1-50). Later readers of Scripture would recall this example of divine judgment. Nonetheless, it serves to illustrate God’s power in judgment against the wicked. Job was neither authorized nor capable of taking such punitive action.

VERSE 13

Hide them together in the dust; imprison them in the grave.

God’s final two challenges to Job are presented in two lines of poetry that reflect synonymous parallelism. In synonymous parallelism, the second line repeats the meaning of the first line by using synonyms. Hence, **hide them together in the dust** and **imprison them in the grave** reflect the same meaning. The two lines complete the “job description” for being God. God’s description of His deity was not comprehensive. It focused on the issues Job raised in his rebuttal to the three friends’ accusations. The debate had spurred Job to new peaks of faith. Sadly, though, Job at times also plummeted to the depths of depression. Therefore, God challenged Job all the more about what was involved in governing the universe.

The phrases *in the dust* and *in the grave* both point to death and the afterlife, including what the New Testament reveals as God’s final judgment (see Rev. 20:11-15). Job possessed at most only a partial understanding of the afterlife. Further revelation would come much later in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, Job understood the separation that death produced. The Hebrew verb rendered *hide* means “to conceal an object so that it cannot be found.” Together with the verb *imprison*, the two lines speak of the permanence of God’s judgment. Thus, God challenged Job to execute irreversible judgment against all of the wicked people on earth. Could Job comply? No, he could not.

VERSE 14

Then I will confess to you that your own right hand can deliver you.

If Job could carry out every detail of God’s challenges, then God was prepared to declare that Job’s **own right hand** could **deliver** him. In biblical thought, the *hand* represented the means by which people implemented actions conceived in the mind. The *right hand* symbolized power and authority.

The truth for Job and for us is that we are not able to deliver ourselves from the curse and ravages of sin. We cannot save ourselves. As Paul wrote, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Humanity” on pages 775–777 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are some similarities between God and humans? What are the major differences? How do these similarities and differences apply to God’s challenges to Job?