

LOOKING FOR GOD

A Reader's Guide to the Book of Job

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INTRODUCTION

WHY IS IT GOOD TO READ THE BOOK OF JOB?

The Book of Job is about a man who goes through intense suffering.

We know that there is much suffering in the community today. There are physical and mental illnesses, and road accidents; there is marriage breakdown and domestic violence; there is abortion, and child abuse; there is stress, and coping with change; there are the difficulties of unemployment, poverty, and the debilitating aspects of welfare dependency; there is drug abuse, and crime; there is death and its aftermath. To say nothing of the ethnic strife and war that has plagued our times. It is good to know that the Bible is fully aware of human suffering, and leaves none of its depths untouched. It is worth knowing what the Bible has to say about suffering—and the Book of Job is a good place to go.

The church also is no less affected by suffering. There are many hurting people in the church, and the church itself suffers from demoralisation, clergy stress, pressures on families, and financial shortages. In every church there are those going through some kind of trauma, or those who have been through trauma, with its mark still left on their lives, and there are people living in difficult situations. If we do not know what the Bible has to say on the subject, we would certainly be helped by knowing it.

In each of our own personal lives, it may be that we are experiencing, or may have experienced, some kind of suffering. In 1993, my wife and I had a very nasty road accident, where the car was wrecked and we could have been killed, but we were mercifully spared from lasting injury. It was good for us to know the kingdom, or sovereign ruling, of God in that situation—that every bit of what happened to us there was part of the action of God in His unrelenting love, in all that He is doing in His kingdom and in His universe. Perhaps something of that will come through to us as we read the Book of Job.

Once we have read it, however, we may find that it is not so much about suffering as it is about God, and how knowing God leaves the matter of suffering far behind. That is why we have called this Guide *Looking for God*. In all his sufferings, this was the one thing Job was determined to be doing, in a way none of the others in the Book were.

The first purpose of this Guide is to get us to read the Book of Job. Have we ever done that? Right through? I suggest we do that now, before we start. Really, there is nothing I can add to what it says. My job is simply to present to you what the Scripture says, from a position of one who seeks to live within the Scriptures—as one who has received what the Bible says, and is living under it and in it, and is passing it on to others. I am not the only one who can do that—it would be good for us all to be like that. So I encourage us to read the Book of Job for ourselves, preferably more than once. Read it right through to get the overall picture of what is happening, and how it is set out. In this guide we will be taking sections of it in a different order from how they occur in the Book. Then, when we have finished, we will need to read it again, to get the whole sweep of it, so that it enters into our soul, and becomes a part of us, and our life is related to what happens in the Book of Job.

HOW ARE WE TO READ THE BOOK OF JOB?

How are we to read any of the Scriptures? If we are just looking for information, or answers to philosophical questions, then we are likely to be disappointed. There is plenty of information, and there are plenty of answers, in the Bible. But that is not why we go to the Word of God. Some may approach the Book of Job, and many have done so, as a treatise on the problem of suffering and evil, as a philosophical problem: Why do good people suffer? Why do evil people go unpunished? These are important questions, and we are tempted to do that ourselves—to treat the Book of Job in that way and so engage in hefty intellectual debate over the problems of evil and suffering. We must resist that temptation. I might be tempted to read up all the commentaries on the Book of Job, and then myself make the final pronouncement on what it actually says on this topic. That temptation is not hard for me to resist, because I have not read all the commentaries on the Book of Job, and so I cannot yet give you the final pronouncement on what it says! It is interesting that when we start to read the commentaries that have been written on the Book of Job, many of them end up being diametrically opposed to each other! So that way may not get us very far.

The Book of Job, like the rest of the Bible, is not an information handbook or a philosophical treatise. What is it, then? It is part of the Word of God to us. And, like the rest of the Word of God, it is not a book about God, but an encounter with God Himself. It is a revelation of God. It is God revealing Himself. And to receive a revelation, we have to be in that revelation. An encounter with someone is not something you can ever be detached from. It is like falling in love with someone—this is not something we can stand back from and observe as an interesting phenomenon! It is something that happens to you, and you are a part of it: here is this person—how wonderful to be with him or her, and to be part of this relationship! So it is in an encounter with God.

So our ability to understand the Book of Job will not depend on the strength of our intellect, but on the state of our heart. I heard of a young girl, about ten years old, whose mother died of cancer. All the family were naturally upset. This little girl went off to her room, and stayed there for a long time. She came out very much at peace—she had taken into her room her Good News Bible, and had read through the Book of Job, and had understood every word, and it had been a great comfort to her.

Another case, more sobering perhaps: I heard of a person who had read the Book of Job at some time of trouble, and had understood it at the time, but once the trouble was over could not remember what the Book of Job meant, and on re-reading it could not make any sense of it at all. So it seems that we can have a certain state of heart that enables us to encounter God in a time of trouble and receive revelation at that time, but we can then lose or go back on that, or perhaps come to think that we do not need God as much once our troubles are over, and so the Scriptures correspondingly come to mean little to us. For the time being, the meaning is obscured from us—hidden from us by God Himself—until we discover our need once more.

Would God do that? Why would God hide from us something of what is in his Word? Because He knows we need it so much. If we do not want it, He will withhold it, and expose us to the dread consequences of that, to bring us to a place where we know we cannot live without it. If we do not want to receive it, God will make it so that we get into a position where we cannot *not* receive it. That is the way the whole Bible works. Jesus said the same about his parables. He told his parables so that everyone could understand (Mark 4:33)—everybody likes stories—but he said that if your heart is hard, if you do not have ‘ears to hear’, then the parable will withhold its meaning from you (Mark 4:11–12).

That could happen to us. Let us pray that the Book of Job will not be obscured for us, but that our hearts will be humble and open to receive the revelation, the encounter with God, in His word.

DATE AND AUTHORSHIP

We do not know when the Book of Job was written, or who wrote it. About all we can say is that it was part of the sacred literature of ancient Israel from well before the time of Christ. There has been much theory and speculation as to when and who and why, but we will not go into any of that here. We may read it up in the various commentaries if we are interested. Our concern is with what the book of Job actually says.

So let us begin to read it!

One

THE MAN JOB

1:1 There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

We begin to meet this very interesting man called Job (pronunciation: rhymes with 'probe'). Job lived in the land of Uz, wherever that might be—perhaps somewhere east or north-east of Israel. Although Job appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, Job himself is not an Israelite. He is one to whom God revealed Himself outside of Israel.

BLAMELESS AND UPRIGHT

Job was 'blameless and upright', and he was 'one who feared God and turned away from evil'. Note the order in which these occur. Being 'blameless and upright' comes before being 'one who feared God and turned away from evil'. How does a person get to be 'blameless and upright'? We might say, 'By always doing right and never doing wrong'. But who has ever done that?¹ Only one,² and it was not Job. Job later freely admits that he has sinned (see 7:20–21; 10:15; 13:26; 19:4). Yet Job is 'blameless and upright'. This is not just the opinion of the writer of this book. Twice God Himself declares Job to be 'a blameless and upright man' (1:8; 2:3). How did Job come to be that way? The only way the Bible knows that to be possible is by being forgiven and justified by God Himself, as we come into a faith-relationship with God (see Genesis 15:6; Isaiah 26:2; Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:16–17; 3:23–26). We will see that Job was a justified sinner, in a faith-relationship with God that was all-important to him.

Fear of God follows from being forgiven by God: 'with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared' (Psalm 130:4 *NIV*). What does it mean when the Bible says we 'fear God'? It does not mean we are dead scared of Him—though there is an element of that! It means that we consider that God is real, that He is true to Himself, and that He means business, and that we are in relationship with God, and so that makes a difference to how we conduct our lives. It certainly made a difference to Job. We are told that in his fear of God he turned away from evil.

Those who do not fear God in this way are likely not to care so much how they live. Where there is 'no fear of God' (Genesis 20:11), people live as if they did not care about the consequences—as if God would not do anything to judge them if they lived evil or immoral lives. Job feared God: he respected the truth that God is concerned about good and evil. Job knew that he was answerable to God, and that God was capable of acting in judgement. Job knew the goodness of God, and how good it is to live in keeping with that goodness of God.

RICHLY BLESSED BY GOD

Job was a man mightily blessed:

1:2 There were born to him seven sons and three daughters. 3 He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.

¹ The wise king Solomon said: 'there is no one who does not sin' (1 Kings 8:46).

² The apostle John, who knew Jesus as well as anyone, said of Jesus: 'in him there is no sin' (1 John 3:5).

Job had seven sons and three daughters—ten children altogether, a great family. Not only that, he also had 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and very many servants, so that he was the greatest—that is, the richest, the wealthiest, the most well-off—of all the people of the east. He was richly blessed by God. All of these things are a gift from God—our children, our possessions, and the responsibilities that we have. But there is always a temptation when we are richly blessed to become self-sufficient and secure, trusting in all of that, saying, ‘Well, I’m set up now—I’m right!’ How many of us spend all our lives just trying to get to a position of wealth and security? Job was already there. But that did not mean that he then renounced his faith in God. He saw all these things as a gift from God, and his faith in God remained strong.

JOB AND HIS FAMILY

We now hear something of Job’s family story:

1:4 His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. 5 And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, ‘It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.’ This is what Job always did.

Job’s concern in this relationship with God was not just with himself, but it extended also to his family—he was a fine father of his children. He had seven sons, and every year each of his sons on his special day, whatever that might have been—perhaps his birthday—would invite the rest of the family, particularly remembering to include the three sisters—all would come along, and they would have a feast. It would go for several days—they knew how to have feasts in those days! Then at the end of the time, Job would send and ‘sanctify’ them. That is, he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings, according to the number of them all, so that each of them had a burnt offering to God. For Job said, ‘It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts’—you can get a bit lax, perhaps, after several days of eating and drinking. Job thought: We will make sure that as a family we are right with God, and if anything has been amiss, we will see that it is forgiven and put right according to the way God has set out—through sacrifice. And so he prayed for his family, and he cared for them in that way, for their relationship with God. Thus Job did continually.

JOB AND THE FRIENDSHIP OF GOD

It would be good now to turn to Chapter 29. This gives us another insight into Job and into his character before the sufferings came upon him. These words were spoken while he was in his sufferings, but thinking back to the time before.

29:1 Job again took up his discourse and said:
2 ‘Oh, that I were as in the months of old,
as in the days when God watched over me;
3 when his lamp shone over my head,
and by his light I walked through darkness;
4 when I was in my prime,
when the friendship of God was upon my tent;
5 when the Almighty was still with me,
when my children were around me;
6 when my steps were washed with milk,
and the rock poured out for me streams of oil!

- 7 When I went out to the gate of the city,
 when I took my seat in the square,
8 the young men saw me and withdrew,
 and the aged rose up and stood;
9 the nobles refrained from talking,
 and laid their hands on their mouths;
10 the voices of princes were hushed,
 and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths.
11 When the ear heard, it commended me,
 and when the eye saw, it approved;
12 because I delivered the poor who cried,
 and the orphan who had no helper.
13 The blessing of the wretched came upon me,
 and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.
14 I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
 my justice was like a robe and a turban.
15 I was eyes to the blind,
 and feet to the lame.
16 I was a father to the needy,
 and I championed the cause of the stranger.
17 I broke the fangs of the unrighteous,
 and made them drop their prey from their teeth.
18 Then I thought, 'I shall die in my nest,
 and I shall multiply my days like the phoenix;
19 my roots spread out to the waters,
 with the dew all night on my branches;
20 my glory was fresh with me,
 and my bow ever new in my hand.
- 21 'They listened to me, and waited,
 and kept silence for my counsel.
22 After I spoke they did not speak again,
 and my word dropped upon them like dew.
23 They waited for me as for the rain;
 they opened their mouths as for the spring rain.
24 I smiled on them when they had no confidence;
 and the light of my countenance they did not extinguish.
25 I chose their way, and sat as chief,
 and I lived like a king among his troops,
 like one who comforts mourners.'

What a wonderful picture of a great man! Job here is not blowing his own trumpet. He is not trying to build himself up. We are going to see that Job is a very direct, honest, and straightforward person, who sees what is, and says it as it is. So he is not boasting here. He is simply saying what his situation was before his suffering came. Let us look at some of those things.

He is very conscious in those days of God watching over him—God's lamp shining on his head—and that he walked his life by the light of God, by the guidance of God through the darkness. His whole life was trustful towards God.

By the time this book opens he is not a young man. He has already been in his prime—literally, his ‘autumn days’. So he is a man of great maturity. Autumn for me, in Adelaide, South Australia, is the best time of the year: there are those lovely days that just go on and on, ‘until they think warm days will never cease’—Keats’s ‘Ode to Autumn’ is one of my favourite poems. A sense of maturity and richness and ripeness and fullness is there, that comes with autumn—that was Job. He was very conscious, in that time, of the friendship God had with him, of family closeness with God: ‘the Almighty was with me . . . my children about me.’ He would have said that with some wistfulness, because, as we shall see, by the time he said this, he had lost all his children.

‘When my steps were washed with milk’: what would it feel like to be walking through fresh creamy milk? A silky, smooth path, perhaps, with all things going well for you. Or it may just be a way of saying there was plenty of milk coming from the cows and goats—a sign of rich prosperity. As is also, ‘the rock poured out for me streams of oil’: referring not to oil from under the ground but to olive oil—meaning he had olive orchards which produced abundantly, and out of this rocky ground there were great harvests. This is poetic picture-language, as when the Bible refers to the promised land as ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’ (Exodus 3:8). He may have been speaking metaphorically of his own personal life at that time—that he experienced it as a time of rich blessing.

Then there was the position he held in the community. The ‘gate of the city’ was where the elders of the city sat. It was like the main city square, where the leaders of the community, the respected older men, would sit around together and consider all the matters that needed their attention, that were brought to them there. A combination what we call now the town hall, the law courts, and the centre of business and commerce, where matters of civic importance were decided, judgements were made, and policies were settled. When Job took up his rightful position in this setting, the younger men were very respectful, because of his experience and what he had to offer, and even the older people, the aged ones, rose and stood as a mark of respect for Job. A great man. The princes—the rulers—would refrain from talking and lay their hands on their mouths when Job was present: no one tried to shout Job down or pull rank on him. The nobles had nothing to say when Job was there. Rather, they would have said: Here is someone who has something to say, who knows what he is talking about, who is worth listening to, so let’s be quiet and hear what he’s got to say. Certainly there was no way they could criticise or find fault with him. No matter who they were—younger, older, rulers, nobles—this is what they would have said.

Then we hear some of the things that Job did—his good works in the community, for which he received great respect and approval. Not that that’s why he did them—he was simply carrying out what is normal justice and care in the terms that God would have it. Though not of the people of Israel (he may have been an Edomite, or of some other nation) he lived in keeping with the universal law of God with humanity that was to be given to Israel. He ‘delivered the poor who cried’: people who felt that they were hard done by would come to the city elders at the gate and present their case—‘I have been ripped off by this rich merchant’, or ‘I have had my field stolen by some farmer’—and Job would always uphold the just cause of the poor. And the orphans, the people who had no one to stand up for them—he would become their family, and take up their cause. When people were on really hard times, ‘about to perish’, Job was willing to help them out from all that he had—and we have seen that he was very rich. The widow, who had no husband to care for her, with no social security, could be sure that, with someone like Job there, she would be looked after in the city.

‘Righteousness . . . clothed me; my justice . . . like a robe and a turban’: it wasn’t something that Job came to from outside; it was the way he lived—Job’s whole life was

characterised by this justice, this righteousness of God. It was part and parcel of his being, in his conduct towards people, and to those in need.

‘Blind . . . lame’: there were no hospitals in those days: it was up to the community to care for those with sickness and disability—and that happened with Job. ‘The cause of the stranger’: Job did not just care for his friends, but even if it was someone he did not know or had never met before, he would go looking for those in need in order to make sure that they were helped. Where he came across unrighteousness, where stronger people were taking advantage of weaker people, he would change that situation: ‘I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made him drop his prey from his teeth’—You get your hands off that poor widow: that is not just, what you are doing, and I will protect her from you.

This was Job’s life at that time. So Job would have thought: This is wonderful—I’ve been richly blessed by God, I’ve been given a wonderful home, and a wonderful community, I have a wonderful life—and this is how I will be for the rest of my days. No doubt he had a right to think that. That is not how it turned out. But we sense the blessing that he felt at that time. Long days, roots spreading out to the waters, rich provision. Dew all night on the branches—always being kept fresh, and not getting tired. His glory (his innermost being) fresh within him, his bow ever ready, new in his hand, ready for the battle every morning—whatever was going to come up, Job could face it, and it would be good.

As we have heard, after Job had spoken in the assembly of the elders, there was nothing more to say—it had all been said. People who listened received his word, and it was a blessing to them. The kind of advice and knowledge of life that he had to share left people open-mouthed and looking for more, to drink it in. He had a way of bucking people up when their self-esteem was low. His attentions made a difference to them, and they never felt put down by him—he always had a smile and a word of strong encouragement for them. And so he had leadership in the community: he set directions, his presence was a commanding one, and he knew how to lift people securely out of the doldrums.

That was Job, and his position in the community. See the strength, sureness, depth and maturity of this man’s faith in God, and the way that showed in his life, both through his prayer and religious practices and the concern he had for the members of his family to be right with God; and also in the way his goodness was manifested in the community: in his care for the poor, and in the qualities of leadership, counselling and wise advice that he gave and was looked to for. It is well for us to note this here before we begin, so that later we may not be hasty in our judgement of this great man when he is under intense pressure, but may be sensible enough also to lay our hands on our mouths.

Job thought that he might continue to live in this way for the rest of his days. But that was not to be.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we marvel that a human being can have such a relationship with You as we see Job having here: in friendship with You, as You watch over us, Your light shining on us as we walk with You by faith through the darkness, knowing and living in Your righteousness and justice. Thank you for Your gift of faith; thank You for Your mercy on us sinners: Your forgiveness and justification of us that is ours in Jesus Christ Your beloved Son. Thank You for Your great goodness and blessing that flows from that into us and into the lives of others, as we live again in the way You created us to be. Thank You for all that comes from Your hand: our families, our wealth and possessions, our belonging in community with each other. Yet, Father, should all these things be taken from us, may our delight and joy above all be in You, our Lord and our God, our Saviour and our Redeemer. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Two

THE TRIAL

1:6 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them.

The scene changes. 'The heavenly beings' (literally 'sons of God') refers to the angelic creatures. We are talking about the heavenly realm here, unseen to us.

WHO IS SATAN?

It is interesting that Satan should be among the heavenly angelic beings, but that is where he had his origin, as we shall see. Who is Satan? His name means simply 'adversary'—he is the adversary of God and of humankind. He does not appear often in Scripture, thankfully, but when he does he is always the adversary. In the garden of Eden—he is not mentioned there by name, but the Book of Revelation identifies him as: 'that ancient serpent, called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Revelation 12:9)—he deceived Eve, against the commandment of God, into eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which she did, and gave to her husband to eat—and so sin entered into the world, and also the judgement of death. That was the work, in part, of Satan—not taking away the responsibility of humankind for their sin, but it was Satan that beguiled us into that. He was opposed to God, so he tempted the man and the woman away from faith in God to be as he is—opposed to God. The thrust of his temptation there in the garden of Eden was, 'You shall be as God.' That is how Satan had set himself up—as God. He had not accepted that he was created by God as a son of God, as an angelic being. He looked at his beauty, and he said, 'All of this is from me, and I should be God—I could do a better job of being God than God could.' He wasn't God, he never will be, and he never could be, because he is not God—he is created by God. This is part of his deception. He has set himself up, not just as the alternative to God, but as the substitute for God. He wants to displace God from His throne. So wherever he sees the glory of God—and where does he see it more than in the man and particularly in the woman—he will attack that, and seek to turn it against God, and to make it to be with himself in his opposition to God. That is what Satan did in the Garden of Eden—that is what he must do if he is opposed to God and is to try and keep that up. Continually Satan is confronted with the kingdom of God—the fact and the truth of God's sovereign rule—and so he must build up everything he can to counteract that and seek to oppose it. So Satan is intent on detracting from God, and detracting from God's holy sovereign righteousness. He has a compulsive need to somehow prove God wrong, and deficient, in order to justify his own rebellion and his consequent attempt to put himself in God's place.

We know what that is all about. If there is someone in authority over us whom we don't like being there, and whom we have decided to go against, then we justify that rebellion by saying that person isn't worthy to hold that position anyway—they shouldn't be there. And we find all sorts of reasons why that is so. Maybe your children have decided not to do something you've told them to, and they justify that by saying: But you're a silly old parent anyway, and you wouldn't know what you're talking about. That is what Satan is trying to do with God. That is what he must do, if he is going to justify himself in the position he has taken.

Satan here appears among 'the sons of God'. Although elsewhere this is used of us as human beings, here it is used of the angels. That tells us what Satan is. He is one of the

angelic beings. He is an angel, but he is a fallen angel. It is important that we see that Satan has been created by God, just as we are. He was given from God all the beauty and powers of an angel. God has not taken those powers back from Satan, but Satan now uses them all in direct opposition to God. We are going to see how foolish and misled that is. There are a couple of passages that give us insight into the fall of Satan, and are often used in that way. Both these passages in fact are prophecies that relate to earthly human rulers. Ezekiel 28 is a prophecy regarding the king of Tyre, and Isaiah 14 is about the king of Babylon. But both these passages set forth the principles and dynamics of the fall into sin of human beings and of angels, and their rebellion against God. So this can be very instructive, as we seek to consider what Satan is, and what he is about.

Thus says the Lord GOD:
You were the signet of perfection,
full of wisdom
and perfect in beauty.
You were in Eden, the garden of God;
every precious stone was your covering,
carnelian, chrysolite, and moonstone,
beryl, onyx, and jasper,
sapphire, turquoise, and emerald;
and worked in gold were your settings
and your engravings.
On the day that you were created
they were prepared.
With an anointed cherub as guardian I placed you;
you were on the holy mountain of God;
you walked among the stones of fire.
You were blameless in your ways
from the day that you were created,
until iniquity was found in you.
In the abundance of your trade
you were filled with violence, and you sinned;
so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God,
and the guardian cherub drove you out
from among the stones of fire.
Your heart was proud because of your beauty;
you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour.
I cast you to the ground;
I exposed you before kings,
to feast their eyes on you.
By the multitude of your iniquities,
in the unrighteousness of your trade,
you profaned your sanctuaries.
So I brought out fire from within you;
it consumed you,
and I turned you to ashes on the earth
in the sight of all who saw you. (Ezekiel 28:12–19)

‘You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created’: that blamelessness, and all his wisdom and beauty, were the gift of God. ‘Until iniquity was found in you’: where did the iniquity come from? Not from God, but from within the creature. ‘Your heart was proud because of your beauty’: see what happens there? We take the gifts of God, and claim them as coming from ourselves and not from God. We take pride in them as being of ourselves—that was Satan’s sin. Great beauty, and great power, but taken to himself from God. Iniquity was found in this being: God brought that fire out from within him, so that its full out-

working could be apparent, and in that action the being is consumed and reduced to ashes, and we see the final doom of a creature that persists in going that way. That tells us something about how God's holy love and His wrath operates on the pride of fallen creatures.

The other passage is Isaiah 14. This relates to the king of Babylon, but it calls him 'Day Star, son of the Dawn', which was Lucifer, the Shining One, the Bearer of Light—a name often given to Satan (as in 2 Corinthians 11:14: 'Satan disguises himself as an angel of light'). We see from Isaiah 14:4 that the king of Babylon, like Satan, was a terrible oppressor of God's people. But now he has come to his doom:

How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart,
"I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far north;
I will ascend to the tops of the clouds,
I will make myself like the Most High."
But you are brought down to Sheol,
to the depths of the Pit. (Isaiah 14:12-15)

'I will make myself like the Most High.' What was Satan's temptation to the man and the woman in the Garden of Eden? 'You will be as God.' Why did he want us to believe that? Because that is what he was setting out to be himself. Satan is not setting out just to denigrate God. He is actually seeking to substitute himself for God, because he thinks that he should be God, because he's so beautiful, so strong, so wonderful, and he hates God. But here we see also the doom of 'Lucifer': 'You are brought down . . . to the depths of the Pit.' See how foolish and how misled Satan is! He is not God, and he never can be, because he is a creature made by God, and so his whole enterprise is doomed from the start. He can only ever work within the limits assigned to him by God, as we shall see.

We could spend some time looking at some of the things Satan did in other parts of the Bible.

In 1 Chronicles 21, he incited David to go against God. It was probably because there was something amenable to that in David at that time—Satan was able to find some leverage there. David had a great kingdom, and David was perhaps very pleased with all the things that God had given him, even proud of them, in the wrong way. He wanted to see how he was going, and how his kingdom was going. 'Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel'—to take a census. This was something that God did not want David to do at that time. Perhaps it indicated some lack of trust in God: Why are you wanting to count all the people? Don't you know that I know how many there are, and I am looking after your kingdom? But Satan incited David to do that, and to go against God's will there, and David and the kingdom came under judgement for that.

If you look at the same story in 2 Samuel 24, you will find that it does not mention Satan at all. It says God incited David to count the people, and then God judged them for it. This is something that we will find in the Book of Job: that Satan can do nothing but what God gives him to do. So those two texts from 1 Samuel and 2 Chronicles are not opposed to each other. 2 Chronicles just goes through the mechanics of how it happened, but it was an action of God when He saw something displeasing to Him in David's heart, and so pushed him through into that, to release David from it.

Zechariah 3 is an interesting chapter, and one that repays study, because there we see Satan very much in his role as the adversary or the accuser. This is one of the few times he shows up—as I say, you don't want to get over-obsessed or troubled by Satan: he doesn't get all that much airplay in the Bible, so we don't want to give him more than he deserves, but we need to know him and understand his strategies, and not be ignorant of his designs (see 2 Corinthians 2:11). Zechariah 3 is another of the visions that came to the prophet Zechariah:

Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this man a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was dressed with filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, "Take off his filthy clothes." And to him he said, "See, I have taken your guilt away from you, and I will clothe you with festal apparel." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with the apparel; and the angel of the LORD was standing by.

Joshua the high priest was 'dressed with filthy clothes', here identified as Joshua's 'guilt'. It looked like Joshua had plenty that Satan could accuse him of—the goodness we profess is filthy rags and naked shame. So Satan is there accusing Joshua. But God is saying, No—Satan, I rebuke you for that. And Joshua is reclothed at the Lord's command with clean best clothes. So that takes care of Satan's accusations. The filthy rags are taken away, and he is clothed in a clean turban, and good clothes. So, Satan, says God, I rebuke you! Satan couldn't, by accusing Joshua of his filthy rags, make a dent on God's goodness and holiness. It goes on to say:

Then the angel of the LORD assured Joshua, saying "Thus says the LORD of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here. Now listen, Joshua, high priest, you and your colleagues who sit before you! For they are an omen of things to come: I am going to bring my servant the Branch. For on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day. On that day, says the LORD of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree."

'The Branch' here is the Messiah. And there is a promise that what happened for Joshua will be there for the whole earth. We have gone into this chapter to show that Satan attempts to expose God or to detract from God in His holiness and righteousness, but God does something to make his accusations of no avail. He cleansed and reclothed Joshua, and He gave a prophecy at the time: I am going to bring a Messiah, and I am going to destroy the guilt of this land in a single day. So Satan will not have anything to point the finger at, and there will be peace—everyone 'neath vine and fig tree will dwell at peace and unafraid.

It will be good to bear that in mind as a background to the Book of Job, and Satan's role there. Satan's actions here were counter-acted by God justifying the high priest.

Turning to the New Testament now: Jesus himself was tempted by Satan. When this Messiah comes, you would expect that Satan would be all out to get him. And, as we know, he even tried to get Christ to worship Satan—that is how deceived and obsessed he was with himself as God—and Jesus said, No, you shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve. Where Satan was able to find a foothold, say, in David, or in Judas, or in Peter, he could find no foothold in Christ. God's holiness and righteousness was utterly secure there.

Jesus also exposed Satan's nature as a liar, as the father of lies, and as a thief and destroyer. In John 8, to those who were refusing to hear his word, Jesus says: 'You are from your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he

lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.' Then in John 10, when he is speaking about the good shepherd, he says: 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

In Revelation 12 we see how Satan is cast down from heaven onto the earth, and he is defeated there. How is he defeated? He is defeated by those who belong to Christ:

I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." (Revelation 12:10–11)

'The accuser of our brethren'—the maligner, the one who seeks to detract from God by accusing them—is thrown down. He is conquered by virtue of something God has done on the cross—'the blood of the Lamb'.

SATAN AND JOB

It is this Satan who comes now to stand before God and accuse Job. Not because he particularly has it in for Job, but because it is God Himself that Satan desires to accuse, to impugn, and ultimately to supplant.

1:7 The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it."

Imagine Satan just trudging up and down upon the earth—that is what he has to do. Remember how God appeared at the beginning of Ezekiel's prophecy, in a mighty chariot, that could appear here, and move to there! God does not need to trudge—He is the Lord of the whole earth. Contrast this picture we have of Satan here with the vision of the Lord in Ezekiel. No doubt what Satan is doing, going up and down the length and breadth of the earth is trying to find fault with God, to justify his rebellion, and to gather some evidence against God. That is what Satan is always trying to do.

But he is not the only one. How many of us try to do that—build up a dossier against God, look out for some slip-up that He has made? And we say, If we were God, we wouldn't let this or that or the other happen: if we were God, we wouldn't let that man murder his children, or whatever; if we were God, we would do a better job than He appears to be doing. And so we seek to justify our own desire, that Satan has implanted in us, to be as God, to be God ourselves. That stumbles and falls to the ground—all our building up of that dossier against God—when we come across one really holy and good person who has faith in God. There are those who seek to set themselves against God all their lives, until they come smack up against a particular Christian person, and there's something about that person that really gets under their skin, and no matter how hard they've been trying to build up their dossier against God, this person is an offence to them, because it challenges all of that. Because such a person, who has faith in God, who is holy and good, who knows that God is holy and good right through, and in control of all things, and whose whole life bears it out—such a person is an obstacle to disbelief. Why else do some newspaper columnists keep having to slam the Christians? If what they are claiming about God is true, they shouldn't have to bother. But they can't seem to be able to leave it alone—they have to keep writing about it. God is holy and good, and in control of all things, and when we come across a person whose whole life bears that out, it is a real problem for disbelief.

So Satan has been trudging up and down on the earth—no doubt he has tripped up over Job already. He has noticed him, and God is only telling him what he already knows, and loathes.

1:8 The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil."

Satan has his answer ready.

1:9 Then Satan answered the LORD, "Does Job fear God for nothing? 10 Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face."

Because of the stance that he has taken, Satan can only conceive that Job's faith is self-interested. Because that is Satan's own whole motivation. He cannot understand that someone could be as Job is if there was not something in it for him. He cannot conceive that anyone could love and serve God simply because God is as He is. Satan has rejected God as He is. So he thinks there must be something in this for Job. If Satan can show that Job's religion is really self-interest, then he would have that mark against God that he is looking for, and he would have a justification for his cynicism.

I wonder how we would go if that test was brought against us? How much of our religion is self-serving, or convenient for us? Where we gather on Sunday morning, at our church: that is where God in His holiness is to be worshipped. But we don't always take it that way. There are often people who have been going to church for years, and then their blessings are taken away, and things go against them—their wife dies of cancer, or something like that—and suddenly their faith is devastated. It is wiped out, and they never go near church again. If our blessings were taken away, and things went against us, would our lives still bring glory to God, or would we sell out on Him? There is an expression, 'fair-weather religion'—we'll keep it up as long as it suits us, as long as things go well for us. That is often what is behind a very common phenomenon now of church-swapping: I'll keep trying different churches until I find the one that suits me. (The real question must always be: 'Where does God want me to serve?') Or I won't go to a church at all. Fair-weather religion is with us. It is a common approach. The Book of Job is the end of all fair-weather religion.

What will happen if all Job's protection and blessing are taken away? If Satan could get Job to curse God, then that testimony to God's goodness would be removed. 'Stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.'

Note here that Satan acknowledges something that we do not always acknowledge: that all these things—the giving of blessings and the taking away of them—belong to God. 'Stretch out *your* hand now'—God—'and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.' Satan acknowledges that it is God's power to do that. Even Satan cannot deny that. Sometimes we say, the good things come from God, and the difficult things come from the devil, as if the devil is some great power equal and opposite to God. That is making the devil equal to God. It is giving him more power and credit than is due to him. No—only God is God, and Satan, like us, is a being created by God. Whatever delusion he is working under, he can never be other than that. There can never be an alternative God. There is only one. Here even Satan must acknowledge that if something harmful is going to happen to Job, that must first of all be God's decision. 'Stretch out *your* hand now'. Satan himself does set out to steal and kill and destroy—he is a murderer and a liar from the beginning. But the next verse makes it clear that Satan can do no more, even in that area of stealing and killing and destroying, than God appoints him to do.

1:12 The LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not stretch out your hand!"

‘All that he *has*’. What is Satan now able to do? He is able to touch everything that Job has, but he cannot lay a finger on Job himself. That is by the decree of God, and Satan is bound by it. Satan can touch anyone and anything that belongs to Job, but not Job’s person, at this point.

Now, what is God doing here? Is He being a bit reckless? Is He taking a risk? Maybe. Is He being hard on Job? That is not for us to say. But, as Satan’s attack is primarily on God Himself, not really on Job, so we may suppose that God believed He would be able to sustain Job in faith and righteousness through the worst attacks of Satan against him, and so prove the validity of His own faithfulness and goodness. If Job can be kept in faith through the worst testing possible, then God is vindicated in the face of Satan’s libels. And not only will God sustain Job in faith and righteousness, but through these very bitter attacks of Satan, God will bring Job through to a deeper, humbler and more magnificent faith than ever before, as we shall see, and so win a supreme victory, a superb victory, through all of this. Which is why we’ve got the Book of Job in the Bible. On this basis, I believe, God sends Satan to vent his scorn on God’s faithful servant Job.

I was once taking a group of people through the Scriptures in a particular course. We were all sailing along merrily until we got to 1 Samuel 16:14: ‘Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him.’ When we got to that verse, that’s when all hell broke loose. People would not have it that God could or would do such a thing. But that is what it says: ‘an *evil spirit from the LORD*’. If that does not fit with our understanding of God, then we need to enlarge our understanding and acceptance of God’s sovereignty over all things, even over the powers of evil.

1:12 So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

Satan, unaware of what God is going to do through all of this, actually believing that he can get at God through Job, having no idea how God could possibly sustain Job’s faithfulness through all this, having no idea how God could possibly even bring him to a more magnificent victory than ever before through all this, he sets out, no doubt thinking that he can succeed, and he does a very thorough job of it.

JOB LOSES ALL THAT HE HAS

So we return now to the earthly scene.

1:13 One day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in the eldest brother’s house, 14 a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were ploughing and the donkeys were feeding beside them 15 and the Sabeans fell on them and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.” 16 While he was still speaking, another came and said, “The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them ; I alone have escaped to tell you.” 17 While he was still speaking, another came and said, “The Chaldeans formed three columns, made a raid on the camels and carried them off, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you.” 18 While he was still speaking, another came and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother’s house, 19 and suddenly a great wind came across the desert, struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; I alone have escaped to tell you.”

Remember how many oxen and donkeys there were? Five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred donkeys—all taken, and the servants slaughtered. Seven thousand sheep, and very many servants, all destroyed by lightning. Three thousand camels, gone, plus the servants. And the most bitter blow: all his children dead. If we think we’ve got problems, spare a thought for poor old Job—all this, all in one day.

What was Job's response?

1:20 Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. 21 He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." 22 In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

What a wonderful faith. But it is the faith that God had given to Job, and God is vindicated by His faithfulness to Job in enabling Job's faith to hold fast, and Job's grasp of who God really is. As far as Job is concerned, as we shall see in the next chapter, Satan does not come into it at all—he simply does not feature. 'The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.'

ROUND TWO

So to the next round:

2:1 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. 2 The LORD said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the LORD, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it."

Satan has not given up—he is still trying to gather evidence against God.

2:3 The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil".

Exactly the same words that God used in the previous chapter—nothing has changed.

2:3 "He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason."

Note that God says all this has happened to Job without cause. We are often too quick to explain the presence of evil in the world. When something tragic happens, when something goes badly wrong, we think that if we can find a reason for it, some reasonable explanation, then we can handle it better. I think this desire to explain everything may be part of our desire to have everything under our control, to be God ourselves. There are things that we may never be able to control, or understand. But to give a reason for the existence of evil in God's world is to dignify evil beyond what is due to it. There is not one good reason for evil to be in God's universe. Take, for instance, our own sin. We are constantly looking for excuses and reasons why we have sinned—to excuse ourselves, or to put the blame on others, or on God Himself. We say, 'It was an accident, or it was part of my makeup, or it was hereditary; my parents didn't love me, or I was led astray'—anything but: 'I did it, and there was not one good reason why I ever should have', which is the truth. There is not one good reason why Satan or any other creature should ever have sinned against God. God never gave them reason. But that is what we have done, and things are not as they should be, and God Himself is moved in holy wrath against the creatures He has made and loves. Yet, even so, God is able to maintain in faith and righteousness the ones He loves. So God is still able to say, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.' So when these things happen, let's not try to explain them too readily, not even in terms of the good that might come out of them. We need to hang loose to that. God says there is no good reason why Job is suffering, so that should be enough for us. At one level we can say that certain things

happen because of this and that, but ultimately we must face the truth that evil is without proper cause in God's universe, and we dignify it beyond its deserving when we try to give it some explanation. Satan is, in fact, without excuse in the damage that he does to Job. There is not one good reason, given everything that Satan had from God, why he should ever have rebelled or set himself up against God. And we human beings are the same. All evil, including our own, is 'without cause'—without good reason. And in the end, the Bible tells us, it will have no place in God's universe—it will be a nothing.

2:4 Then Satan answered the LORD, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. 5 But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face."

This will be the real test. I have admirable patience under stress. But touch me with pain, and I will explode! When we used to do the dishes together with my brothers, wearing shorts, so that our bare legs were exposed, if for a bit of amusement they began using the wet tea towels to flick each other, I would say, 'Flick me with that tea towel, and I will not be responsible for my actions!' In other words, I will use that as my excuse to cast away all restraint and give full vent to my feelings of venomous hatred! A few years ago I suffered a very painful condition, which required an even more painful remedy—if you have ever had an operation for haemorrhoids you will know all about it. (That is when a friend gave me the quote from Shakespeare: 'There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will'! Bear that in mind reading the Book of Job.) We are so tender, and it is so easy for us to become wrapped in self-pity and depression when we suffer pain, because pain intrudes right in on our very being. Thank God that I was preserved by God in all of that, and am able to speak to you now as I do, out of what I was taken through at that time. Here it is: 'Skin for skin! . . . touch his bone and his flesh.'

2:6 The LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your power; only spare his life."

Once again, note how Satan can do no more than is given to him to do by God. He can now afflict Job's body, but he is not permitted to kill him.

2:7 So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

We need to be aware of Satan's stratagems: no doubt he has some kind of perverse delight in those sorts of things, and he has many very devious ways of attempting to get us into his power.

2:8 Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

A potsherd is a bit of broken pottery, which Job used to give some sort of treatment to his boils and sores. Ashes were a sign of mourning and penitence. Here he is at a very low point. Yet his response is still consistent with his faith in God.

This time, even his own family is against him: Job's wife, the one who is closest and dearest to him—the only one he has left, because all his children have perished—now she is against him (as Jesus' own brothers were against him, when he began his ministry).

2:9 Then his wife said to him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God, and die."

Perhaps we are inclined to say the same thing as Mrs Job at this stage, because that is what we would want to do. But let us listen carefully to Job's rebuke, and receive it into ourselves:

2:10 But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

Note how Satan once more gets no look-in as far as Job is concerned. Job sees it all only as the action of his God, to whom he remains intensely loyal. ‘In all this Job did not sin with his lips.’ As in 1:22: ‘In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.’ In our next section we will start to see how Job responded, with his mouth. We need to bear in mind, as we look at that, what is written here. He had plenty to say, as we shall see, and he said it very directly, with no holds barred. But in all this, he did not sin with his lips. He was no ‘martyr’, in the wrong sense of that word. Reading the Book of Job, we need to hear the right tone of voice, and that is not always easy to do, because we put our own tone of voice into the words that are here. ‘Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?’ could be read in a ‘martyred’ tone of voice. But that is not the way Job said it, or meant it. For him it was quite factual: ‘Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?’—*at the hand of God!*

As we go on through the Book of Job, we shall see how Job, in some small and often inadequate way, prefigures something of the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ, who ‘when he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly’ (1 Peter 2:23).

Prayer:

Lord, we do not want to be ignorant of Satan’s stratagems, and we thank You that in Your word You give us all we need to know about him to identify and resist his attacks. But, Father, even more, we want our eyes and our hearts to be fixed on You by faith: to see Your sovereign hand in all things—in giving and in taking away—and in all these things to know Your keeping and sustaining of us in this faith by Your own faithfulness to Yourself and so to us. Keep us from sinning with our lips and from charging You with wrong. We pray for those who at this time have suffered loss or pain: sustain them through Satan’s attacks by the mighty power of Your love, and reveal Yourself to them as their Father and Redeemer. We ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Three

JOB AND HIS SUFFERINGS—I

THE ALMIGHTY BATTLE

We now have one almighty battle on our hands. The whole sovereign holiness and goodness of God is at stake, in what is happening in this person Job—and also in us, when we suffer similarly. Everything for all of us hinges on that. If God's sovereign goodness and holiness can be impugned, then we've all had it. So issues of cosmic dimensions are being fought out, and Job is caught in the thick of it.

IS JOB AN ANGRY MAN?

In what now follows, we need to remember: 'In all this Job did not sin with his lips' (1:10) If we read things later on that we think is Job sinning with his lips, we need to remind ourselves of this verse. Job did not suddenly change between Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. (Some scholars attempt to drive a wedge between these chapters by saying that they come from different sources, but we are going to find the value of taking the entire book together as a consistent whole.) We also need to note God's own judgement on Job in 2:3: 'The LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still holds fast his integrity.' That does not change, to the end of the book. 'He still holds fast his integrity.' He does not charge God with wrong, he does not sin with his lips, he still fears God and turns away from evil. That is the context in which we need to see what Job is saying now. This is not contradicted by anything that Job now goes on to say.

We shall also see that Job's loyalty and integrity do not mean that he must be tight-lipped and stoical about his sufferings. We will see that he gives them full and articulate expression. But we must be careful not to misrepresent what Job says, and how he goes about it. Some of us, or perhaps all of us, may be angry people, and so when we hear Job speak we may automatically think that is what he is doing: that he is sounding off, that he is giving vent to his anger. There is a teaching abroad today, that is very common and widely accepted, that it is good to give vent to your anger, to express it in some way. Professional counsellors even encourage this as a form of therapy—they get you to yell and scream and abuse. They say that to express your anger helps you to get rid of it. I very much doubt that, and the value of that. Far from getting rid of your anger, it could be perhaps a loose and undisciplined excuse to justify and perpetuate your anger, to entrench yourself more solidly in it, or to transfer it onto someone else. You may think you've got rid of your anger by shouting and screaming and getting it out, but it will pop up again somewhere else. Because anger is in the human heart, and expressing it does not get rid of it—it only shows that it is there. Expressing it may even encourage it and root it more deeply. I do not know. As far as I can see, the only thing that can take away anger is a vision of God's grace that shows that all your angers are groundless, and that you have no reason for them. It is a powerful revelation, when that comes. What I do know is that venting anger is not what Job is doing here. He is onto something that has much more strength and integrity than that. 'He holds fast his integrity.' He is not justifying himself—that is not what it is saying. Mind you, Job is not bottling anything up, as we shall see, nor is he being coldly calculating and detached—he is right in the thick of the battle, and he gives full and articulate expression to the full range of his thoughts and feelings. But as far as I can see, reading it carefully, anger is not one of those.

Passion, yes—he is deeply and committedly passionate—but there is no trace of cheap, self-pitying anger.

So Job is not one of your angry young men. We may find one or two of those among Job's comforters before we are through, but that is not Job. Actually, Job is not young at all—we saw from Chapter 29 that in fact he is a man of age and wisdom and experience, and highly regarded in the community. And so it is worth respecting him ourselves, and paying attention to what he says. I believe he has gone beyond and left behind merely giving vent to his rage. He is concerned about deeper issues than that. We will misunderstand the Book of Job if we try to read into what he says any anger we may still have hanging around, and we will miss its message, which is God's words to us. I speak from my own experience of coming to the Book of Job with perhaps some of that in my own heart in earlier years.

COMPASSION AND SILENCE

So let us see what happens:

2:11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. 12 When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognise him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. 13 They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

These three friends come from different parts. Job's connections and friendships extended far and wide—he was such a great man in all of that region. They had a genuine concern, having heard of Job's misfortune and sufferings, and they decided: We need to get together and go and see Job. So that is what they did: they made an appointment together to come and condole with him and comfort him.

When they found him, they saw him so changed from his earlier condition. He was now sitting in the ashes and scraping himself with a chunk of pottery, his fine clothes and all his possessions gone. They scarcely recognised him. And they raised their voices and wept, tore their robes, and threw dust on their heads, to express their sorrow at this. That may seem a little strange to us, because that is not the way we usually express our grief or alarm. But they were doing the right thing there, in the way that etiquette required of them. I have conducted a number of funerals for Aboriginal people when I was in the north of South Australia: it is the thing to do there, to weep and to wail. There were a number of women, particularly the older women, who would especially wail at the time of the funeral. You might have thought, this is a bit disturbing, a bit distressing—where is their faith in Christ? And maybe there was an element of lack of faith there, as there might be with any of us. But we need to respect that weeping and wailing as a genuine cultural expression of grief. This is what these men were doing. We don't do that, because we have been trained to have a 'stiff upper lip', but maybe it wouldn't hurt for us to do a bit of that sometimes too.

Verse 13 speaks volumes about the depths of Job's suffering and the impact that it had on them, and their appreciation of that. 'They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.' They may have spoken a few foolish things later—they have plenty to say as they go on—but they started well, and we can learn from them. For people who are suffering or bereaved, just being there and saying little or nothing can be more helpful and important than a flood of words. They spent seven days just saying—nothing.

JOB'S LAMENT

In the coming sections we are going to look at what each of these three friends had to say to Job, and how he answered them. But first we are going to look at what Job himself had to say about his situation.

1 After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. 2 Job said:

3 "Let the day perish in which I was born,
and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived.'

4 Let that day be darkness!
May God above not seek it, or light shine on it.

5 Let gloom and deep darkness claim it.
Let clouds settle upon it;
let the blackness of the day terrify it.

6 That night--let thick darkness seize it!
let it not rejoice among the days of the year;
let it not come into the number of the months.

7 Yes, let that night be barren;
let no joyful cry be heard in it.

8 Let those curse it who curse the Sea,
those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan.

9 Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
let it hope for light, but have none;
may it not see the eyelids of the morning—

10 because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,
and hide trouble from my eyes.

11 "Why did I not die at birth,
come forth from the womb and expire?

12 Why were there knees to receive me,
or breasts for me to suck?

13 Now I would be lying down and quiet;
I would be asleep; then I would be at rest

14 with kings and counsellors of the earth
who rebuild ruins for themselves,

15 or with princes who have gold,
who fill their houses with silver.

16 Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child,
like an infant that never sees the light?

17 There the wicked cease from troubling,
and there the weary are at rest.

18 There the prisoners are at ease together;
they do not hear the voice of the taskmaster.

19 The small and the great are there,
and the slaves are free from their masters.

20 "Why is light given to one in misery,
and life to the bitter in soul,

21 who long for death, but it does not come,
and dig for it more than for hidden treasures;

22 who rejoice exceedingly,
and are glad when they find the grave?

23 Why is light given to one who cannot see the way,
whom God has fenced in?

24 For my sighing comes like my bread,
and my groanings are poured out like water.

25 Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me,
and what I dread befalls me.

26 I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;
I have no rest; but trouble comes.”

It is pretty clear what Job is saying there: he wishes he was dead (see particularly verses 20–22). He says that being dead would have to be better than what I am going through now. Sometimes we come across old people who feel that they are suffering in life, and they just want to die. And we tend to say, Oh no—you mustn’t think like that! Well, maybe they shouldn’t. But that is certainly one of the things that can come with suffering. That is what Job is saying here, and he is saying it very clearly. Even more than that: he wishes that he had not lived at all—that a life that comes to this would be better off not happening. And so he says, the day on which he was born should be cursed. Remember his wife had told him to curse God and die (2:9). He never curses God. But he does curse the day of his birth. It is almost as if that day still has some existence somewhere, and he is saying it ought to be blotted out—it ought to be wiped out of the calendar, it shouldn’t have ever been there, and if it is still around somewhere let it get its just deserts! The night when he was conceived, and the day when he was born: if it ever had any light, let it be blotted out as darkness, let God not have anything to do with that day in terms of showing His favour upon it, with no light shining on it, and let it be swallowed up in gloom and deep darkness, and let it be covered with clouds, and let it be terrified by blackness. The night, when all this happened: let thick darkness seize it, and let it not have a place among the days of the year—out of the calendar—and let it not come into the number of the months. Let it be stricken off, and let nothing more ever happen that night, and no joyful cry be heard in it—why should there be a joyful cry if it gave birth to me, that has resulted in what is happening now? If you’ve got any clever wizards that are good at cursing the day, well let them have a go at it too: those who ‘rouse up Leviathan’—those who conjure up the sea monster, who embodies all the terrifying powers of nature—get your best wizards and magicians on the job to curse that day. When the sun starts to come up on the dawn of that day (speaking as if it still has some kind of existence), even the stars that are shining before the sun comes up—let them be blacked out. Then, when the light starts to show in the sky, let that not happen. When the ‘eyelids of the morning’ begin to open—when the sun’s rays just start to appear over the horizon—let that not happen either! So that that day is no more, or, if it is, it’s in darkness.

POETIC EXPRESSION

We are starting to get into the poetic part of the Book of Job now: thirty-eight chapters or so of pure poetry. So we can expect these kinds of expression. This may not be the way we would normally express ourselves, but when you are talking about deep things poetry is the appropriate form of expression, not just prose and normal conversation. There are some things that you cannot express satisfactorily except by poetry. We would not normally be going around talking about cursing the day I was born. Yet, when you see it, it is very powerful. It tells you something about what is going on inside Job that really could not be put any other way. How he feels about his whole life, and how he particularly feels about what is happening to him now. So don’t be perplexed or puzzled by some of the forms of expression. I have been reading in the commentaries that in the original Hebrew it is very tough and difficult often even to translate, because it is so very incisive, terse, and contracted in the words, and in the words missing: words kind of thrown together. The English can’t really express the intensity of the feeling that is coming through in the original language; we can only pick up something of that. Because this day did not shut the doors of his mother’s womb—because it let him be born to this deep suffering.

BIBLICAL LAMENTS

Perhaps we should just look at some of the other expressions of similar things in the Bible, before we go on to the next verses. Jeremiah experienced suffering particularly through persecution at speaking the word of God, and we find with him sentiments very similar to those Job is expressing here:

Cursed be the day
on which I was born!
The day when my mother bore me,
let it not be blessed!
Cursed be the man
who brought the news to my father, saying,
"A child is born to you, a son,"
making him very glad.
Let that man be like the cities
that the LORD overthrew without pity;
let him hear a cry in the morning
and an alarm at noon,
because he did not kill me in the womb;
so my mother would have been my grave,
and her womb forever great.
Why did I come forth from the womb
to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame? (Jeremiah 20:14–18)

We might say he is asking a philosophical question there, as it might appear that Job is: these things happen, and why is this, and why is life at all? But I don't think that is what these words are saying. They are giving expression to very deep anguish. They are not raising a philosophical question at all. They are saying: My suffering is very intense, and I can make no sense of it. If we turn over to the Lamentations of Jeremiah, it is speaking there of the city of Jerusalem in its desolation, after it had been destroyed, and also of the prophet himself speaking there, and the sufferings of the people of God:

I am one who has seen affliction
under the rod of God's wrath;
he has driven and brought me
into darkness without any light;
against me alone he turns his hand,
again and again, all day long.

(See how these expressions of suffering in the Bible go straight to God: *You* are pressing against me, turning *Your* hand against me.)

He has made my flesh and my skin waste away,
and broken my bones;
he has besieged and enveloped me
with bitterness and tribulation;
he has made me sit in darkness
like the dead of long ago.
He has walled me about so that I cannot escape;
he has put heavy chains on me;
though I call and cry for help,
he shuts out my prayer;
he has blocked my ways with hewn stones,
he has made my paths crooked.

He is a bear lying in wait for me,
a lion in hiding;
he led me off my way and tore me to pieces;
he has made me desolate;
he bent his bow and set me
as a mark for his arrow.
He shot into my vitals
the arrows of his quiver;
I have become the laughingstock of all my people,
the object of their taunt-songs all day long.
He has filled me with bitterness,
he has sated me with wormwood.
He has made my teeth grind on gravel,
and made me cower in ashes;
my soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is;
so I say, "Gone is my glory,
and all that I had hoped for from the LORD." (Lamentations 3:1–18)

The sufferings that are depicted in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, the sufferings of Jerusalem and its prophet, also have an enlightening forward reference to the sufferings of Christ himself. So once again, as we study the sufferings of Job, we are brought to look towards the deep sufferings of Christ, which of course were no less than the sufferings of Job, in fact a good deal more.

I WISH I WAS DEAD

How does Job give expression to his sufferings? 'Why did I not die at birth?' Birth is a happy occasion, but there is no way that Job can see that. Even the baby suckling at its mother's breast: Job says that is no longer something that is attractive or happy to me. He says he would rather have died: 'For then I should have lain down and been quiet, I should have slept, I should have been at rest . . . ' Ever felt that? When you would rather just lie down and go to sleep than face what you've got to face—this can be a common expression of depression. That is what Job is going through: I'd rather just not bother with all this. But it is the sleep of death that he is longing for there. He goes through a number of inhabitants of the realm of death: kings and counsellors who engaged on great projects—but they don't have to worry about that any more—princes with gold and silver, rich men who had all those financial responsibilities—death brings an end to all of those. Up to here he has been saying, why didn't I die after I was born. But now he goes on to say, it might have been better if I had died before I was born, while I was still in the womb. Jeremiah said the same thing. Why was I not as a stillborn child? Then back to the state of death again: whether you are good or whether you are bad—rulers, or the wicked, the prisoners and the slaves consigned to hard labour—it all comes to an end with death, and they don't have to worry about it any more. All of those inequalities of life have now become irrelevant in death, and the turbulence of life has settled. It is interesting that the Egyptians thought that maybe the nobles had a chance of a good life in the afterlife, and that is why they built the pyramids and stocked them up with all sorts of goodies, but the peasants did not have such a chance. The Hebrew understanding was that the small and the great were together in that realm of death. As I once heard someone say, in a very Australian way, when someone had been putting on airs and graces: 'We all stink the same when we're dead!' Not quite what Job is saying here, but death is the great leveller, and this is what Job is looking towards here. He would be really glad to see death: he is one of those 'who long for death, but it does not come, and dig for it more than hidden treasures'. And yet, as we shall see, for Job there is no question of suicide here,

because he knows that life and death are in God's hands. If he is going to die, it will have to be God who takes away his life. There are times when he prays that God will do that, but it doesn't occur to Job to take his own life. No doubt he is going through what many people who do contemplate suicide go through. We are told that it is not so much that they want to die but that they can no longer bear to live, and that is the only way out as far as they can see it. Note also that there is no concept here of heaven or hell or judgement in death. As far as Job is concerned, it is just the end, the lying-down, the rest, the finish. For people who are in suffering, and in internal torment too, death appeals to them. I was talking with someone who spends some time in psychiatric hospital from time to time—there are a number of people who do that—and even though the care-givers in that situation would not want to know that this is what happens, this person said that at just about every meal there are discussions around the table as to how would you commit suicide, or have you got enough pills stashed away to do it—they might just be joking to try and cope with it, but some of them are serious, and some of them actually do that. That is part of the depression that can occur. So we can sense something of what Job is going through here.

NO WAY OF KNOWING

Job raises some deep questions: 'Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?' Not just for Job but for all of us: what is life all about, if it is going to be this difficult? Would it be better if it never happened? These are questions that can't really be answered, because life is, and we are born, and these things do happen. I don't think Job is really asking these questions at all, as such. What we do see is that Job is suffering deeply, and that it fills his whole vision—he can see nothing else—and all he can think of at the time is how much he would like to be free of it. And that's the way we are in intense pain and suffering.

Our Lord Jesus was the same in his suffering on the cross: he cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' He was not saying: Now, God, I want to sort out this deep theological question of the abandonment of God in suffering, and how that comes about. No—he was saying, '*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*' He asks 'Why . . . ?' because he did not know, because at that point he was right in the middle of the suffering, and the deepest suffering is that you do not even know or understand what is going on, or why: there is no rhyme or reason to it. You are not really in the depths of suffering as Jesus was until part of that suffering is not knowing why, or not having any understanding of what is happening to you; it being completely outside your control. Jesus knew why he had come, he knew what it would involve, he knew that he would go to the cross—he spoke about it plainly many times before it happened, and gave a detailed description of the sufferings that he would endure. He knew why it was going to happen, and what would be the outcome. But while it was happening, and when he was in the middle of it, he had no way of knowing, and no way of working it out.

This is not the time to address those kinds of questions. Job's comforters in the beginning were doing the right thing by saying nothing. I deal with people in bereavement at the time of a funeral, and sometimes they say, '*Why* has this happened?' I have found it a good thing just to say nothing, not try and come up with any explanation. I might even have a reasonable explanation, but that is not for them at that time. That is not really what they are asking for. Perhaps that is the mistake Job's comforters made as they went on, by trying to give theological and philosophical answers to Job's suffering. In the middle of it, the answers are by no means clear. If they were, you would not yet have come to the depths of suffering as Jesus did, and as Job did. If you could still work it all out, you would not be in that place. Any answers that may be proffered, however true they may be, are not likely to be helpful at

that point, as we shall see. They don't hit the spot. They are likely to appear and to be rather academic and unrelated to reality. Or they may be our own attempts to shield ourselves from that experience of suffering. If we can come up with tidy phrases like 'It's all in God's will', while there may be a time for saying something like that in comforting, it may be a way of saying, 'We don't want to be a part of this', and of actually leaving people in their suffering, and locking them into it on their own.

All we can really say from Chapter 3 is that Job is suffering deeply, it fills his whole vision, and naturally he longs to be free of it. We should respect all that, and be prepared to face that reality of suffering ourselves.

Prayer:

Lord, we thank You that when You saw our suffering, You did not hold Yourself back from it, but entered into it with us. You sent Your Son to enter into our flesh—the flesh which we have given over to sin and its deep suffering. We thank You that he did not only sit with us there, but that he did what no other comforter could do: You made him to become our sin, to bear our sin in himself, and to suffer Your condemnation of our sin in his flesh, even to the ultimate suffering of deep darkness and not-knowing, to take it all away, and to bring us to Yourself holy and blameless. In this great saving comfort by which You have comforted us, make us true comforters of others. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Four

JOB AND HIS SUFFERINGS—II

SUFFERING AND THE WILL OF GOD

In the New Testament, the First Letter of Peter and the Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians have the most to say about suffering. Particularly undeserved suffering, and suffering in the will of God:

Let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good. (1 Peter 4:19)

Some of us may still have difficulty with suffering being 'in accordance with God's will', or with suffering being brought to us by God, even when it is undeserved or when we are in the right. I would plead with you to hang in there: the whole of the Book of Job will help you with that. As we go through it together, let's see what God is saying to us. There is a very significant verse also in Deuteronomy (32:39):

See now that I, even I, am he;
there is no god beside me.
I kill and I make alive;
I wound and I heal;
and no one can deliver from my hand.

Once we can rise to the faith of Job and see all things as coming from God's hand, and in His goodness and love, then we have come to a wonderful place.

THE ENDURANCE OF JOB

We continue now to look at Job and his sufferings, and his own response to them. We saw that 'in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing' (1:22), and 'in all this Job did not sin with his lips' (2:10)—in what he was saying as a result of what came upon him. At no time did Job become angry with God. We may find that hard to understand. We may find it hard to believe that someone would not be angry with God if that person went through what Job was going through. Perhaps that is because angry is what we would be if the same thing happened to us. Maybe that is how we are now towards God in our lives. As long as we are, we will not understand this book. We need that vision of God's grace that will show that all our angers are groundless.

Job is not angry with God. He has left that far behind. We have seen that he is a man of stature, of godliness, of saintly maturity. Job is mentioned in the New Testament in the Letter of James:

You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near (James 5:8).

That is what gives us patience and hope in suffering: 'the coming of the Lord is near'. That is what Job was looking out for, as we shall see.

Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful (James 5:9–11)

We are to take as our example of suffering and patience ‘the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord’. It is interesting that Job here seems to be numbered among ‘the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord’. At the end of the book, God says in effect, ‘My servant Job has spoken of me what is right’ (see Job 42:8). So we need to listen to what Job says as the word of the Lord. The book taken as a whole is the word of the Lord, in that steadfastness of Job. Through coming to see and listen and hear what is being said there, we will see the purpose of the Lord, how He is compassionate and merciful.

We saw in Chapter 3 that, although he is steadfast and patient in suffering—he has that godliness and saintly maturity—Job was not stoical or tight-lipped about his suffering. He was quite passionate about it. He gives it full and articulate expression. What we saw there was that he was suffering deeply. He does not hold back on expressing that fully. He wishes he was dead, he wishes he had never been born, if this suffering is the outcome of his life. Part of suffering deeply, with Job, as it was with our Lord himself on the cross, is not to be able to know why this is happening. He does ask ‘Why . . . ?’ in verse 20: ‘Why is light given to one in misery?’ and in verse 23: ‘Why is light given to one who cannot see the way, whom God has fenced in?’ He does ask the question ‘Why . . . ?’ because in that depth of suffering he has no way of knowing what is the rhyme or reason—if there is any—for what is happening to him. But he is not necessarily looking for the answer to that question ‘Why . . . ?’ It is a cry in the form of a question, which simply gives expression to the deep suffering. We saw that this is not the time or place for the answers. When we hear people say in the midst of suffering, ‘Why is this happening?’ we need to take a leaf out of the book of the comforters, when they arrived and kept silence for seven days! There is a place for joining those who suffer in their suffering (as Paul says ‘weep with those who weep’ in Romans 12:15), and not trying to jump to answering their questions. The questions are not necessarily there for answers, and the answers we give won’t hit the spot at that time. It is a time for holding silence, and respecting what is happening.

MEET ME WHERE I AM

We are now going to look through the book at the other significant passages where Job gives expression to his suffering. Then we will come back and we will take each of the comforters separately one at a time: Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. So we will be going backwards and forwards through the book. That is why it would be good to have read the whole book right through as it is first, if you have not already done so. In Chapters 4 and 5 Eliphaz speaks, and he says in effect that Job is over-reacting to say all the things he is saying, and that if he just looked at it from the right perspective he would understand, and that would help him! But in Chapter 6 Job still feels rightly that he and his sufferings have not been taken seriously. If his comforters were prepared to acknowledge the nature and intensity of his suffering, they would see that his words are not excessive, to plead for death, or to wish he had never been born. He is not talking for nothing.

6:1 Then Job answered:

2 “O that my vexation were weighed,
and all my calamity laid in the balances!

3 For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea;
therefore my words have been rash.

See how Job is saying to the people who have come to comfort him, ‘You still haven’t realised what I am going through.’ He is not asking for their pity. He is just being quite factual here, spelling it out. ‘If you really understood what has happened to me—if my

vexation were weighed and all my calamity laid in the balances—you would find that it is heavier than the sand of the sea. It cannot be weighed. That is why I have been speaking the way I have; that is why my words have been rash. You may think I have been over-reacting, but I have been speaking according to the measure of the suffering that has come into my life, and I am not over-stating the case.'

Then again, as we have seen before, he attributes all this to the direct action of God:

6:4 For the arrows of the Almighty are in me;
my spirit drinks their poison;
the terrors of God are arrayed against me.

Then he says:

6:5 Does the wild ass bray over its grass,
or the ox low over its fodder?

When the wild ass on the plains or the mountain sides is crying out, it is because he is hungry, because he hasn't got food. If the ox has a nice full tummy, when he has eaten his fill of his fodder, he is not going to start bellowing for more. 'But,' says Job, 'I am braying like an ass, I am bellowing like an ox, because I am denied that satisfaction. I would not be doing that, if things are as good as you say they are. You try to comfort me, but everything you have said has not touched me yet.'

6:6 Can that which is tasteless be eaten without salt,
or is there any flavour in the juice of mallows?

7 My appetite refuses to touch them;
they are like food that is loathsome to me.

'You are trying to give me some comfort, but that's what it tastes like to me—I can't touch it.' ('The juice of mallows' has also been translated 'the slime of the purslane'—a rather tasteless succulent herb. Either way, it is repugnant to him.) 'It is not touching me. So if you are going to say something, say something that is going to meet me where I am.' These are very strong words.

ASKING GOD FOR DEATH

Then he speaks his heart before God, as well as those who are with him. As we will see later, when we study in detail the faith of Job, he continually looks past the others and what they are saying to God Himself, to the action of God. He sees what is happening in his life as coming by the action of God, and it is to the action of God that he looks for his deliverance, and for making some sense of all of this. But here he is not asking for that. Here he is just asking for death, and he is asking God for death:

6:8 "O that I might have my request,
and that God would grant my desire;
9 that it would please God to crush me,
that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!
10 This would be my consolation;
I would even exult in unrelenting pain;
for I have not denied the words of the Holy One.

That is the consistent stance of Job right through, and it is consistent with what we have seen. He says, 'I am not sinning with my lips. I am not accusing God of wrong.' This is also what God Himself has said of Job: 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him

on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason' (2:3). In these verses Job reiterates his desire for the release of death, but it is still the action of God that he looks to, as he always has. As we saw in Chapter 3, there is no thought of suicide here, which tends to occur when people are perhaps preoccupied with themselves and their own problems. It is interesting that this does not occur to Job, because his heart is set on God, not on himself so much. Life and death, he sees, are in God's hands. While he may long for death, it must come only by God's action. So he pleads with God that God would crush him and put an end to his misery. Whatever his 'comforters' or accusers may say—and constantly we find his accusers are trying to say: 'Well, you know, you've really offended against God, and you're being punished by God' (or words to that effect)—Job says, 'No, I'm not going to accept that. I have not denied the words of the Holy One'. 'He still holds fast his integrity'.

In verses 11–13 we see where Job has come to:

- 11 What is my strength, that I should wait?
And what is my end, that I should be patient?
- 12 Is my strength the strength of stones,
or is my flesh bronze?
- 13 In truth I have no help in me,
and any resource is driven from me.

He is saying, I am asking for death, but I haven't even got the strength to wait until it comes. I'm just so weak, and helpless. I'm not like stone and bronze—I'm human flesh. I'm frail, and I can't take this, and I've got nothing left. All his strength, all his help, all his resources are completely used up, they are all gone, and there's nothing left.

Our Lord Jesus came to that point on the cross when he cried, 'I thirst.' He had given all that he had, and the Father had given all that He could have given, in His love, and he had nothing left. 'I thirst.'

A BLEAK PROSPECT

We will skip a few verses now, and go to Chapter 7. It is in Chapter 7 that the question is put most keenly. Here Job reaches the depths of utter hopelessness and says to God, 'Why don't You leave me alone?'

- 7:1 "Do not human beings have a hard service on earth,
and are not their days like the days of a labourer?
- 2 Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
and like labourers who look for their wages,
- 3 so I am allotted months of emptiness,
and nights of misery are apportioned to me.
- 4 When I lie down I say, 'When shall I rise?'
But the night is long,
and I am full of tossing until dawn.
- 5 My flesh is clothed with worms and dirt;
my skin hardens, then breaks out again.
- 6 My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle,
and come to their end without hope.
- 7 "Remember that my life is a breath;
my eye will never again see good.
- 8 The eye that beholds me will see me no more;
while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone.

- 9 As the cloud fades and vanishes,
so those who go down to Sheol do not come up;
10 they return no more to their houses,
nor do their places know them any more.

It is as if we are employed in a job the we don't like doing—that of a labourer or a 'hireling'—from which we get no benefit ourselves. I came to the conclusion once that I am very lucky in that I am doing a job that I like, that I enjoy, and have satisfaction from, because I was talking to some people who said they wished it was like that for them. It was as if they hated what they were doing—they only did it for the money. There may be a lot of people like that, who are like a 'slave' or a hired labourer, who see their time as being a hard service. They just long for the night. Even the radio stations say on Monday morning, 'Don't worry, Friday's coming, when you can get back to the real thing'. That is a general attitude to work in Australia. That is what is being reflected here.

He longs for his wages, but all he gets are months of emptiness and nights of misery. And sleepless nights. Some of us may be able to identify with this, when we have had nights when we just can't get to sleep. When is the morning coming? This is no good—long drawn-out nights, and tossing till the dawn. A little later on, in verse 13, when he is talking about actually getting to sleep, then that is no comfort to him either, because then he is plagued with dreams and nightmares. So there is not much joy in all of that.

The skin hardening and then breaking out again may have been something to do with the disease he had—the sores and pustules going scabby then bursting out again. Medical people have had a lot of interest in trying to diagnose what Job's diseases were—I'm not sure how far they've got. But underneath all of that, we know the feeling: just when it is getting better, then it happens over again. When we were recovering from our accident, after a couple of weeks I thought, We are making some progress here—I am not feeling so much pain—and so you get on with living, and then you suddenly collapse in a heap. And you think, Well, how much longer am I going to have to put up with this? Am I never going to make any headway? One step forward, two steps back—that is how we feel at the time, in the midst of that. Back to square one, or worse. Or maybe you have been told to watch your diet, so that the cholesterol doesn't build up, so you do all the right things—cut out this and cut out that—and then when it is measured again it has gone up! And you think, Oh no—what is going on here? There are ways of coping with that, and ways of managing and getting around those things, but at the time all you feel is despair, and the pain gets to you, and you think: 'This is never going to get better no matter what I do. I can't do anything to help'. There is utter helplessness and pointlessness about it all: what's the point in trying, if it's not going to make any difference? Perhaps we have sensed something of that.

'My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and come to their end without hope.' Even though the nights are long, yet he is brought to reflect on the brevity and the apparent insignificance of life—like a thread just going through the loom: when it has got to the end or you've run out of thread, well, so what? Where have you got to? Especially when you look at what appears to happen at the end of life: 'Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good.' It is a bleak prospect that Job has in front of him now, as far as he sees. Death will come—he hopes sooner rather than later—but there will be no good in it. 'The eye that beholds me will see me no more': maybe he is talking with the people with him saying: 'You can see me now, but I won't be here for much longer'. But it is not just them, it is God. The Revised Standard Version when God is being addressed uses the old form 'thou'—although it is a bit antiquated, it is helpful in this context for us to see who is being spoken to. Here it says: 'while *thy* eyes are upon me, I shall be gone.' Job knows that he has always been in the eye of God, in the favour of God, and God is looking at him now, and he

says, 'but I will not be here much longer'. 'As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up'—when people die, we do not see them again—they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more.' The house is left empty, they don't return from the funeral, and then that becomes someone else's place, and it is almost as if they were never there, in the end. So there is that pointlessness and that futility: death appears to be the end, without hope.

I WILL COMPLAIN

But just as he comes to that point, such has been Job's relationship with God that he will not be cowed by that. He says, 'No—that can't be everything. That is all I can see, but that can't be everything'. He says, 'Therefore I will not restrain my mouth': 'I'm not going to give up now, I'm not going to bow under all of this. I am going to keep speaking until I am heard':

- 7:11 "Therefore I will not restrain my mouth;
I will speak in the anguish of my spirit;
I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.
12 Am I the Sea, or the Dragon,
that you set a guard over me?
13 When I say, 'My bed will comfort me,
my couch will ease my complaint,'
14 then you scare me with dreams
and terrify me with visions,
15 so that I would choose strangling
and death rather than this body.

'I will speak in the anguish of my spirit'—even though anguish of spirit is all that I have, that is what I will speak from. 'I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.' And so he comes before God again. This apparent hopelessness and pointlessness provokes him to press on to know what it is all about, to have it out. He knows he has had better than this with God, and he knows that he must still speak. We might think, 'Isn't this being a bit ungodly: to speak before God in this anguish of spirit, to complain to Him in the bitterness of his soul?' Once again, we are not talking here of accusing God of wrong, or being angry with Him. But we will give full vent to our complaints that we are experiencing at this time. The great saints have prayed in that way. Remember Hannah, in the Book of Samuel:

She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: 'O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant . . . ' (1 Samuel 1:10–11).

All we have there is Hannah's words. But look at how Eli responds to those:

As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. (1 Samuel 1:12–13).

The impression that Eli got looking at this woman who was pouring out to God the bitterness of her soul was that she was drunk. So she must have been writhing or rolling around or something—staggering under the weight of this complaint. But she was giving voice to it before God. That is not an inappropriate thing to do. We learn of our Lord himself:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear (Hebrews 5:7).

To button up—especially to button up before God—when you are suffering, is the worst thing you can do. Let God know what is in your heart. Not to accuse Him of wrong, but to cry to Him who is able to save you from death, with loud cries and tears, and to be heard for such godly fear of God.

What does Job say to God? ‘Am I the Sea, or the Dragon, that you set a guard over me?’ Remember how Job is feeling here. Back in chapter 6: ‘I have no help in me, my resources have been driven from me, I have no strength left’. Now he is saying to God: ‘Am I such a big threat to You? Am I like the raging sea that You have to set bounds on me so I don’t go any further, like You did when You created the world? Am I like the sea monster that You have to catch me in a net and try and hold me down? Why are You doing this to me? Am I so dangerous, am I so threatening to You?’ From such a pitiful figure as Job has become, this is real irony.

Then there are those verses about the terrors of sleep: ‘When I say, “My bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint,” then you scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions, so that I would choose strangling and death rather than this body’ or ‘rather than these bones’. That reminds us of Lamentations 1:13: ‘From on high hath the Lord sent fire into my bones, and it prevaieth against them’. That is how we used to sing it with the choir in a musical setting of the Lamentations—with the sufferings of Christ in view.

LET ME ALONE

Then we come really to the heart of what Job is saying here. This is the point at which, if we come to an understanding of this, we can draw great strength and hope, even though the whole tenor of this chapter appears to be hopeless:

- 7:16 I loathe my life; I would not live forever.
Let me alone, for my days are a breath.
17 What are human beings, that you make so much of them,
that you set your mind on them,
18 visit them every morning,
test them every moment?
19 Will you not look away from me for a while,
let me alone until I swallow my spittle?
20 If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?
Why have you made me your target?
Why have I become a burden to you?
21 Why do you not pardon my transgression
and take away my iniquity?
For now I shall lie in the earth;
you will seek me, but I shall not be.

Note a couple of things here. Firstly, contrary to what his comforters say, Job makes no claim to sinless perfection. We have seen that Job is an upright man, and righteous in all his ways, but that is because his heart was with God, and for God, and so, as we would say it now, God’s justification was with him, and was being shown in his life. The comforters, as we shall see, say, ‘You are trying to say that you have never done anything wrong, and that you don’t deserve any of this, and we’re telling you that you must have’. And Job says, ‘That’s not the point! I’m not claiming here that I’ve never done anything wrong’. He freely admits here, and in another place where he talks about the sins of his youth, in his rashness there, that he is a sinner. Who is not? He does say: ‘If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? . . . Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?’ There

is no word for 'If' in the Hebrew: Job says plainly: 'I have sinned'.³ So he never says that he does not have sin, that he does not have transgression, that he does not have iniquity. He is only too aware of his sins. Not that he thinks his suffering is punishment for them—he won't accept that. That is important to realise. He never comes to saying that. But in this situation he feels his sins pressing on him very keenly, as we all do. Our first thought when suffering or pain come upon us is: 'Well, what have I done to deserve this? Where have I put a foot wrong?' It brings our sins to remembrance. Job is in that situation. But he won't say that what is happening to him is punishment for his sins.

Secondly, here it is to God that Job speaks from the depths of his suffering. It is the action of God alone that he acknowledges in all this. As Jesus did on the cross. If we think that Job is speaking out of turn by saying that God has brought all this upon him, let us hear carefully the words of our Lord Jesus, when he says, 'It is written, "I [God] will strike the shepherd [Christ], and the sheep will be scattered"' (Mark 14:27). That is how he went into his sufferings: knowing fully that is what would happen—that it was 'necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory' (Luke 24:26 RSV). Necessary, by the will of God, that this should happen. And the apostles, with great power and joy, after his resurrection, said that Herod and Pontius Pilate—they were doing their darnedest, and they are responsible for what they did, as evil and wicked men—but they did no more than 'your hand [God] and your plan had predestined to take place' (see Acts 4:27, 2:23). So it is to God that Job comes. And it is in that questioning, addressed to God Himself, that we can sense a great wealth of hope and strength. I don't want to speak for God here—God is going to speak for Himself all in good time before the end of the Book of Job. But what is the answer to these questions, or what is raised by these questions: 'What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment?' What *are* we, if this is going on? In answer to these questions, we can say that life must really be worth something incredibly worthwhile; there must be tremendous issues being worked through that we can hardly see; God must have an amazingly high regard for our dignity as His creatures, if He *will not leave us alone*: if He will continue to bother us, if He will take us through all this and still keep us going. What I am saying is that Chapter 7, far from demeaning humanity as some insignificant pawn in the hands of a capricious and uncaring God, actually accords to us an amazing honour and dignity as the high creature with whom God is mightily concerned, on whom He is prepared to expend incredible cost and trouble, to bring about His purposes. Chapter 7 does not tell us what the outcome of that will be, and what this great cause is, that God is taking us through all this to get to. It only asks the question. The New Testament tells us:

no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Corinthians 2:9)

I believe that this, which we shall know in Christ, is the answer to the question Job is asking here. Chapter 7 simply asks the question in such a manner as to open the way for the revelation that is yet to come.

SUNLESS GLOOM

To conclude this look at Job in his suffering, let us read through Chapter 30. Remember we looked at Chapter 29, when Job was thinking back to how wonderful life was when he was in his prosperity before he suffered. Remember the great things we learned from that about Job

³ Francis I. Andersen, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1975, p. 138.

and God's favour and blessing upon him. Now by contrast, over against that, he sets out where he has come to now. We see it, towards the end of the book, set out in full. Naturally, at the beginning, Job is completely wrapped up in his own sufferings. By the end of the book, in Chapter 30, he sees the broad scope of what is going on: the social and other implications of what is happening to him.

- 30:1 But now they make sport of me,
those who are younger than I,
whose fathers I would have disdained
to set with the dogs of my flock.
2 What could I gain from the strength of their hands?
All their vigour is gone.
3 Through want and hard hunger
they gnaw the dry and desolate ground,
4 they pick mallow and the leaves of bushes,
and to warm themselves the roots of broom.
5 They are driven out from society;
people shout after them as after a thief.
6 In the gullies of [creek-beds] they must live,
in holes in the ground, and in the rocks.
7 Among the bushes they bray;
under the nettles they huddle together.
8 A senseless, disreputable brood,
they have been whipped out of the land.

He is talking here about the outcasts of society: the most contemptible, weedy people you could imagine, people who are quite unemployable. We saw in Chapter 29 that Job made a point of aiding the poor and wretched, but these, it appears, are those beyond even such help. They must be the lowest of the low. He is saying, I used not to have to bother what they would think of me, but now they are the ones who have got the upper hand on me.

- 30:9 And now they mock me in song;
I am a byword to them.
10 They abhor me, they keep aloof from me;
they do not hesitate to spit at the sight of me.

So Job has now become lower than the lowest of the low. They are now abusing him in his suffering:

- 30:11 Because God has loosed my bowstring and humbled me,
they have cast off restraint in my presence.
12 On my right hand the rabble rise up;
they send me sprawling,
and build roads for my ruin.
13 They break up my path,
they promote my calamity;
no one restrains them.

Thus the rabble are now unrestrained against Job.

- 30:14 As through a wide breach they come;
amid the crash they roll on.
15 Terrors are turned upon me;
my honour is pursued as by the wind,
and my prosperity has passed away like a cloud.

Jesus was in no different position when he was hung on a cross on a rubbish heap outside Jerusalem.

30:16 And now my soul is poured out within me;
days of affliction have taken hold of me.
17 The night racks my bones,
and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.
18 With violence he seizes my garment;
he grasps me by the collar of my tunic.
19 He [God] has cast me into the mire,
and I have become like dust and ashes.
20 I cry to you [God] and you do not answer me;
I stand, and you merely look at me.
21 You have turned cruel to me;
with the might of your hand you persecute me.
22 You lift me up on the wind, you make me ride on it,
and you toss me about in the roar of the storm.
23 I know that you will bring me to death,
and to the house appointed for all living.

So again we see Job addressing God directly in his anguish.

30:24 Surely one does not turn against the needy,
when in disaster they cry for help.
25 Did I not weep for those whose day was hard?
Was not my soul grieved for the poor?
26 But when I looked for good, evil came;
and when I waited for light, darkness came.
27 My inward parts are in turmoil, and are never still;
days of affliction come to meet me.
28 I go about in sunless gloom;
I stand up in the assembly and cry for help.
29 I am a brother of jackals,
and a companion of ostriches.
30 My skin turns black and falls from me,
and my bones burn with heat.
31 My lyre is turned to mourning,
and my pipe to the voice of those who weep.

That is Job's suffering, and it is not to be made light of.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we thank You that You do not leave us alone, even when we wish You would. We thank You that You have set Your heart on us before the foundation of the world; that You have been determined on nothing less than to bring us to Yourself as Your own children, holy and blameless before You in love, for us to enjoy what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart has conceived: the good things that You have prepared for those who love You. We thank You that You did not stop from sending Your own Son to the suffering of the cross to bring this about, and that You will not stop at anything that is necessary in our lives and in the life of this world to bring us to the glory that You have purposed for us. Thank You for the gift of Your Holy Spirit that we may know our union with Christ and the foretaste in him even now of these good things to come. May this make us proof in the midst of whatever suffering comes to us and to others. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Five

ELIPHAZ—I

JOB'S THREE FRIENDS

We turn back now to Job 2:11. We are beginning now to look at the three friends, or 'comforters' so-called, that came to be with Job in his suffering.

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognise him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

We have been looking, up to now, at Job's lament and his deep suffering. Now we will start looking at the three friends in turn, hearing what each one has to say, once they did start to speak, and how Job responds to that. We begin with Eliphaz.

THE TOUCHSTONE

Before we do that, we need to look at chapter 42 verse 7, right at the end of the Book of Job. You may have found, reading through the Book of Job, that in this great drama or debate it is not always easy to see who is right and who is wrong. As when we listen to any debate, after one speaker we say, 'That sounds good'; then, when we hear another speaker saying exactly the opposite, we say also 'That sounds good!' 'The one who first states a case seems right, until the other comes and cross-examines' (Proverbs 19:17). So how can we work it out? Things they say may be OK, but then they may be saying them for the wrong reasons. What they say may be partly true, and it may be partly false. So, as we read it through, we may become confused. Into that, also, we bring ideas and attitudes and experiences of our own, that may further complicate what we are reading—we may be reading into it things that are not really there at all, that come from our own experience and our own attitudes. As I have said before, we can't hear their tone of voice, and so we may misread it. We may say that Job or someone else is getting angry about something, because we would be angry if that is what we were saying, when in fact they are only stating facts, and saying what is. So how are we going to find our way through all of that?

We need to hear about it from God's point of view, and hear what He has to say about it. That is often what we don't do. At one Christian conference I went to, on sexuality, they were saying everything possible about sexuality from all the research that had been done, and there were all shades of opinion about this and that, but no one ever said, 'To find our way through this labyrinth, what does God actually say about this?' That can give us something that is much clearer. So what does God say about all of what is discussed in these chapters of Job? In chapter 42, God has a few words to say to Job, which we will come to later, and in verse 7 He speaks to Eliphaz and his friends:

After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.' So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

Just reading that can come as a bit of a shock when you have just read the whole book. I know a friend of mine who read the Book of Job right through, and thought, 'Job is really speaking out of turn here, and the others are getting stuck into him, and fair enough too!' Then suddenly he read what *God* said about what they said and about what Job said: 'You have not spoken right, as my servant Job has.' He said, 'That turned the whole book on its head for me! Suddenly I had to look at the whole thing again, and see what was actually going on.'

So if we come to that now, and use that as the touchstone for our assessment of these many different speeches, and Job's response to them, then perhaps we may be able to see things there that we would not have known or been able to see otherwise. Because we now have God's judgement and God's discernment on that. According to God, Job is speaking of God what is right, and his three friends are speaking what is foolish and wrong. So we will use that as a guide to the rightness and wrongness of what is being said earlier in the book.

GODLY FRIENDS

But let us be careful how we do that, and make sure we do not end up doing to the comforters what they did to Job: accusing them, or putting them down, or writing them off. Note how they respond to what God says here in chapter 42. They went and did what the Lord had told them. They offered the sacrifice for their folly, and the Lord accepted Job's prayer on their behalf. These were godly men. These three were faithful believers in the one God at a time when there was widespread apostasy and unbelief and idolatry and licentiousness. They were friends of Job, and they had come from a long way, from foreign parts, to come and condole with him. They shared his faith in the one true God. We do not know how many that could have been said of at that time. I would venture to say that these three were older and wiser than most of us here. So, like Job himself, they deserve our respect. We will not sit ourselves in judgement upon them. But we will hear what they say with the discernment that is given to us by God's own word of judgement.

ELIPHAZ SPEAKS A FIRST TIME

So let's get back to Eliphaz now, in chapter 4. Eliphaz was probably the oldest and most respected of the three friends. He is the one who speaks first. He is also the gentlest and, to start with, the most tactful. Job has just, in chapter 3, cursed the day of his birth, lamented his situation and his suffering, and expressed his longing for death. Eliphaz is the first to reply:

- 4:1 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered:
2 'If one ventures a word with you, will you be offended?
But who can keep from speaking?
3 See, you have instructed many;
you have strengthened the weak hands.
4 Your words have supported those who were stumbling,
and you have made firm the feeble knees.

We saw in chapter 29 that this is true: that Job was one who had great wisdom, and many looked to him for that, and that he upheld many who were suffering, and he gave them great comfort and consolation and practical help in those circumstances. But Eliphaz hears Job speaking in this alarming way, and responds:

- 4:5 But now it has come to you, and you are impatient;
it touches you, and you are dismayed.

We saw that there was no hint of suicide with Job—if his life is to come to an end as he wishes, then it must be by the action of God. But Eliphaz interprets this as impatient dismay on Job's part. Job is used to being one who gives advice and help, but now the boot is on the other foot, Eliphaz is saying: 'You can't take it! And that is why you are complaining.' Yet, as we saw, we found no trace of self-pity in Job's response to his afflictions—or, if we did, it would have come from us—it is not in Job's own words: he is simply stating facts, saying how it was for him, saying it would be better now if I was dead.

So Eliphaz is starting to accuse Job, in a gentle way, of being impatient and dismayed, of not being able to take this when it comes to him. But he says:

4:6 Is not your fear of God your confidence,
and the integrity of your ways your hope?

Note here that he still considers that Job is upright. He knows that Job is a man of faith in God, and has fear of God, and he knows that he has integrity. Eliphaz will come out on a different side later on, but for now he believes in Job's innocence, and encourages him to hope in that.

THE INNOCENT AND THE WICKED

Then Eliphaz gives a little dissertation on the ways of God:

4:7 Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?
Or where were the upright cut off?
8 As I have seen, those who plough iniquity
and sow trouble reap the same.
9 By the breath of God they perish,
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.
10 The roar of the lion, the voice of the fierce lion,
and the teeth of the young lions are broken.
11 The strong lion perishes for lack of prey,
and the whelps of the lioness are scattered.

What he is saying there is that the wicked do 'come a cropper', and that God brings them down. No matter how strong they may be, like great lions, they will end up being deprived. The upright and the innocent are looked after by God. That is fair enough: he says, God will preserve you if you are innocent; He will bring trouble on the unrighteous. That is true of what God says about Himself in many other places. In His covenants with Israel, in particular, He spells that out in great detail: you keep my covenant, this is what will follow; you break it, that is what will come. God is very clear on that. It is right through the Bible. I think we are all aware of that. Job could rightly be encouraged by that, being a man of faith and integrity.

A SPIRIT IN THE NIGHT

But now we come to what is at the basis of Eliphaz's faith, and it is interesting to note where it comes from.

4:12 Now a word came stealing to me,
my ear received the whisper of it.
13 Amid thoughts from visions of the night,
when deep sleep falls on mortals,
14 dread came upon me, and trembling,
which made all my bones shake.
15 A spirit glided past my face;

the hair of my flesh bristled.
16 It stood still,
but I could not discern its appearance.
A form was before my eyes;
there was silence, then I heard a voice:

This is obviously some kind of spiritual or visionary experience which has had a profound effect on Eliphaz, which perhaps has set the tone for his belief over many years since this happened. He is quite ready to talk about it. He has just had an opening gambit, then it is straight on to this spiritual experience that he has had, which is the basis for all his thinking and believing.

I have had people speak to me about such experiences they have had. You tend to get this when you are a clergyman. People tell you about their supernatural experiences: some vision that they have had, or some near-death experience perhaps, some dream or some visitation, which has had a powerful impact on their lives, and has been a stimulus to their faith in God. I do not wish to deny the reality and value of those experiences, or that many of them come from God, in His kindness towards that person. However, I always check such experiences against the revelation that God has given us in Scripture, and judge them accordingly. I think we need to do that. To those who have such experiences, I would say two things. Firstly: if your vision becomes more important to you than the Scripture, or becomes a replacement of it, then it is taking up a disordered position in your life. Secondly: these things are given to us often for our private edification. If they are for someone else as well, God will make that clear to you, and if He has not made that clear to you, and you make a habit of talking about it to others, then you may be taking it out of the realm where it belongs, and you may be using it inappropriately for some purpose of your own.

We have instances of that in the Scriptures, where people were given visions or experiences which were just for them, from God. Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 12:1–5 of an experience he'd had of being taken way into the heavenlies. He said, I saw things there which are not to be uttered. He is very reticent in talking about it, even mentioning that this has happened. He does it in the third person: this happened to someone I know, he says. He says he doesn't want to say anything more about it, because he has seen unspeakable things which he is not going to share with the Corinthians, because it is not his place to do that. In the Book of Revelation, in chapter 10, John the seer, who is receiving all these revelations of the unfolding of history and the judgements of God: there is a point there when he hears seven thunders speak. He knows exactly what those seven thunders are saying. They are thunders from the throne of God. He is about to write down what they have just said, but God says, Seal up what has been spoken by the seven thunders, and do not write it down. So we never get to hear in the Book of Revelation what those seven thunders said. Probably because it was something that was given to sustain John himself in the receiving and in the imparting of this incredible vision that was so important for the life of the church. So sometimes these things are given to us not to blab about, or to impose on someone else in their situation.

There is another instance: Julian of Norwich, a godly woman in the fourteenth-fifteenth century in England, who practically died from a severe illness, and was given sixteen visions or revelations of Christ, which opened out to her wonderful things about how God relates to us, and how everything is done in love. It was twenty years before she wrote anything about those visions—we now have them in a book called *The Revelations of Divine Love*. When she finally wrote them down, it was the fruit of twenty years of mature reflection on those experiences that God had given her when she was a young woman.

I just say that, because I know that I have erred at times with regard to some experiences, supernatural or otherwise, that have been given to me, in trying to put them onto other people.

There is something else that troubles us with regard to this experience of Eliphaz, in that it did not have a good or peaceful effect upon him. He was lying there in the night, and it was creepy: the hair of his flesh stood up on end, and there was this spirit that he could not quite discern. We have misgivings especially when we hear what this voice says, and try to see how it matches with what we read elsewhere in Scripture.

- 4:17 'Can mortals be righteous before God?
Can human beings be pure before their Maker?
18 Even in his servants he puts no trust,
and his angels he charges with error;
19 how much more those who live in houses of clay,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed like a moth.
20 Between morning and evening they are destroyed;
they perish forever without any regarding it.
21 Their tent-cord is plucked up within them,
and they die devoid of wisdom.'

A very mournful picture, isn't it? A very plaintive spirit, out of the emptiness, mouthing these words.

ELIPHAZ'S BASE POSITION

It seems that Eliphaz, having affirmed the orthodox view of God's dealings with humankind, is still much shaken by the magnitude of Job's suffering. He has to come to terms with it in some way. He does this by magnifying God, and making human beings to be of little account. This is his whole attitude. Particularly in verse 17:

- Can mortals be righteous before God?
Can human beings be pure before their Maker?

The implied answer there is: No—there is no hope of that. So you have to somehow make the best of a bad job before God. I wonder how many people have that as their underlying approach to life?

It is very different from what Job says. Job utterly rejects that, as we shall see. He says, Yes! I believe a person *can* be righteous before God. I believe that we *can* be pure before our Maker, and I desire to stand before God, and be righteous and pure, and I call upon God for that to happen! We will come to look at the great faith of Job, particularly in that tremendous passage in chapter 19, verses 25–27: 'I know that my Redeemer lives'—my *Redeemer*! Job never regarded himself as not needing to be redeemed, as not being a sinner, so he is looking to *God* to be able to stand righteous and pure before his Maker:

- For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then from my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

Even if death finishes me, I shall see God, on *my* side, favourable towards me, as I stand holy and blameless before Him, on account of His redeeming action towards me. That is Job's great hope, and Job's great faith.

This is being completely demolished here by Eliphaz, who has opted for the lesser option, of trying to make the best of a bad job before God.

HEDGING THE HOLY

What Eliphaz is doing here is something we all tend to do. Even Eve, in the Garden of Eden, when the serpent came: she knew what God had said. She knew the orthodox position that God has given them everything good, but that if they disobey Him, and eat of the fruit, then they will be subject to His judgement. But she makes a similar mistake to Eliphaz, I think, when she responds to the serpent: 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, *neither shall you touch it*, lest you die"' (Genesis 3:2–3). God had not said anything about not touching the fruit, He had just said, Do not eat it. She was perhaps so over-awed by that, that she herself put a hedge around what God had said, and had said, Well, it is not that I just won't eat it—I *won't even touch it!* And maybe I'll be safe that way. See what her security is in then? Something that *she* has made, a hedge or taboo that she has put there, that is now her security, rather than simple and direct obedience in relationship with God.

We do this all the time. Jesus had to battle with this over the matter of the Sabbath. God had given the Sabbath as a wonderful gift—a day of rest. It was serious if that Sabbath was broken: the Pharisees of Jesus' day had read in the Books of Exodus and Numbers how people were stoned to death for breaking the Sabbath (Exodus 31:12–17, Numbers 15:32–36). So they said, Just to make sure we don't break the Sabbath, we'll make all these rules and regulations about what we can do on the Sabbath and what we can't, and then we'll be safe from breaking the Sabbath! Instead of putting their trust in God who gave them the Sabbath, they were putting their trust in their rules and regulations: how far they can travel and how far they can't travel, what they can do and what they can't do on the Sabbath. They have got it all sorted out, and that puts them at one remove from relating to God—this is now their security, and not God Himself.

Eliphaz is doing something similar here, where he is so over-awed by God that he says, Well, I will set Him at one remove, and I will say, No—you've got to do *this* to be right with God. You can't hope with Him face to face—that's too much. But just try doing it *this* way, and you'll be right. See how reducing and demeaning that is actually to human beings.

Jesus had to battle with that. I think we have it in the churches today too: that withdrawal from facing God directly in all that He is and all that He does, and trying to set up something ourselves—trying to come to terms with it ourselves, to make some kind of compromise arrangement which secures us. Which God is just going to knock through, when He comes.

If that spiritual experience that Eliphaz talks about is real, then it is likely that it was locking on to something that was already there in Eliphaz's heart, just as the serpent locked on to something that was there in Eve's heart. So he ends up saying that God is so great, you can't hope to get close to Him, you can't hope to be righteous and pure before Him, because He even counts His servant and His angels of little account. What kind of angel would have told him that? Not one of the good ones who are face to face with God, but one of the fallen angels who has got it in the neck (compare 15:15)! The New Testament says we are to pay no regard to revelations of angels that are contrary to the gospel of Christ (see Gal. 1:8; Col. 2:18–19). So how can mortals, who live in houses of clay that crumble into the dust, who are crushed before (or like) the moth—our lives are just like that, and we are gone—so what

hope can *we* ever have of standing before God? How depressing! You can't even get to know anything, you can't even get any wisdom before you die.

GET IT RIGHT

So if that is Eliphaz's approach to life—and obviously he is entrenched in that now—and yet he is faced with a righteous man undergoing the kind of suffering that Job is at the hand of God, he is bound to say: 'No—we can't have that—you must have done something wrong, Job, and we are going to have to help you by telling you what it is, and helping you to put it right so you can do the right thing and come back to God'. He has already implied that when he has said: 'You are a little bit over-impatient, you are a little bit over-dismayed (verse 5)—you shouldn't really be like that, Job'. He has tried to say it in the nicest way, but we can still sense the barb in that underneath.

He says in chapter 5:

- 5:1 "Call now; is there anyone who will answer you?
To which of the holy ones will you turn?
2 Surely vexation kills the fool,
and jealousy slays the simple.
3 I have seen fools taking root,
but suddenly I cursed their dwelling.
4 Their children are far from safety,
they are crushed in the gate,
and there is no one to deliver them.
5 The hungry eat their harvest,
and they take it even out of the thorns;
and the thirsty pant after their wealth.
6 For misery does not come from the earth,
nor does trouble sprout from the ground;
7 but human beings are born to trouble
just as sparks fly upward.

Eliphaz must have something to accuse Job of, and the sin he comes against in verse 2 is vexation and jealousy. He says, 'You are unduly vexed, and you are jealous, now that you have had everything taken away from you, of those who still have something'. I guess Eliphaz and his friends were still rather comfortably off and unafflicted, and perhaps they felt that a little bit, seeing Job left with nothing and in terrible agony, and they wanted to say, 'Well, you are jealous of us! And your vexation is out of place.' And he says, 'That is really what makes you a fool'—he is calling Job a fool here. And then he is warning what could happen to him: 'I have seen the fool taking root, but I cursed his dwelling! I would not tolerate that, and I cursed him, and he came to his doom.' He is almost saying, 'Job, you had better watch out! This is what I have done before.' That is his level of tolerance, perhaps, because of the way he is. The fool's offspring are crushed, and there is no one to deliver them (how sensitive and caring is that towards a man who has just lost all his children!): once you have done the wrong thing, and have received the curse, that's it! Written off.

AN ALIEN AND HOSTILE UNIVERSE

Here is Eliphaz's world-view, in verses 6–7:

- For misery does not come from the earth,
nor does trouble sprout from the ground

—in other words, if trouble comes, there must be some good reason for it, so come on, Job, what really is the reason for your suffering? But he says—

human beings are born to trouble
just as sparks fly upward.

This is a very pessimistic, stoical, fatalistic view that he ends up with.

Many people have that. They think that the reality is the alien and hostile universe, and in that we have to find some comfort from a God who loves us and cares for us and perhaps even rescues us from that, but the reality is for them that ‘human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward.’ I was reading a Christian writer, who was actually attacking all sorts of Christian doctrines, but he just let slip at one point that this is what he thought life is really like—‘an alien and hostile universe’.

That is not how the Bible presents it. The Bible sees everything as coming from God’s hand, just as Job did. Job doesn’t think it is an alien and hostile universe—it doesn’t occur to him, he doesn’t think in those terms. He says, ‘Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD’ (1:21). See how Job sees everything in the context of the action of God. He has also said, ‘Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips. A very different view, of a universe in the hands of a close and personal God.

But Eliphaz and his ilk have abstracted their world-view from that, and said, No, we’ve got a universe where things are pretty tough, and we’re on our own. ‘Life wasn’t meant to be easy.’

COMFORT IN GOD

Eliphaz then seeks in that for some comfort from his faith in God, which is a good place to go. So he says:

- 5:8 As for me, I would seek God,
and to God I would commit my cause.
9 He does great things and unsearchable,
marvellous things without number.
10 He gives rain on the earth
and sends waters on the fields;
11 he sets on high those who are lowly,
and those who mourn are lifted to safety.
12 He frustrates the devices of the crafty,
so that their hands achieve no success.
13 He takes the wise in their own craftiness;
and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end.
14 They meet with darkness in the daytime,
and grope at noonday as in the night.
15 But he saves the needy from the sword of their mouth,
from the hand of the mighty.
16 So the poor have hope,
and injustice shuts its mouth.

Eliphaz turns to God for escape from this troublesome universe, for relief from it, and he turns to God in an orthodox way, with orthodox belief. He says some lovely things there, and it reads just like some of the Psalms. Compare verse 10 with the Psalm 65:9–10: ‘You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water . . . You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.’ So

Eliphaz is on the right track here. Verse 11 is exactly what Psalm 113 says: 'He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.' This is echoed also in the songs of Hannah and of Mary (1 Samuel 2:8, Luke 1:52). So that is great stuff. Verse 13: Paul the apostle was talking about human wisdom, and how God frustrates that by establishing His wisdom, and to quote from the Old Testament to substantiate this, he goes to these words of Eliphaz (see 1 Corinthians 3:19). So Eliphaz is saying a very quotable thing here—worthy of being quoted by the apostle Paul himself to substantiate his understanding of God's wisdom. That is why I say we must not condemn these comforters out of hand, and we must not sit in judgement upon them. But we must see where they are coming from, how far they go, and where they stop, where they cut out.

Verse 17, again, is one that is quoted in the New Testament:

5:17 How happy is the one whom God reproves;
therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.

That reads very much like Proverbs 3:11–12, which is quoted in Hebrews 12:5–6, where the writer wants to go very much into the matter of suffering that comes to God's people, by the hand of God, as a chastening or disciplinary suffering: 'My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.' So again it is certainly not that Eliphaz here is out of order when he says this. And then, when he says:

5:18 For he wounds, but he binds up;
he strikes, but his hands heal.

I wonder how many Christians have a measure of faith in God that rises to what Eliphaz is saying here. This is exactly what God says in Isaiah 45:7: 'I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things', and that incredible verse in Deuteronomy 32:39: 'I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.' That is a wonderful thing, and that is something that Eliphaz has come to see.

BUT NOT TOO CLOSE!

But his response to that—to God's initiative and sovereignty over all His creation—is one which backs off. It is possible to lay hold of that, as I have done myself, but then to say, 'Well, if that's what God does, what hope have we got? It's all in His hands, and there is nothing we can do.' It is possible to say, 'There you are, you see? God does all that—so sit down and be quiet'. That is virtually what Eliphaz is saying to Job.

But that is not what Job does. Job knows that too. Job sees that—he does not need to be told that by Eliphaz. But he responds in the way Abraham did, when God said to Abraham, 'I'll show you, Abraham, what I am about to do: I am going to wipe out Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness'. Abraham does not say, 'Oh well, God, if You're going to do that, I'll just go and hide somewhere.' He says, 'But God—You're the Judge of all the earth! Will You not do right? If there are any righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah, how can You destroy them?' And so God enters into dialogue with Abraham, and Abraham, starting from forty and reducing the number each time, gets God to say that if there are only ten righteous people in the city, He will not destroy it. (God knows that there is only one righteous person in the city, and that is Abraham's nephew Lot, and He gets him, and members of his family, out before He destroys Sodom and Gomorrah—see Genesis 18:16–33.) The point we are making here is that, unlike Eliphaz, Job is prepared to enter into that

dialogue with God, pleading God's righteousness on behalf of humanity. Whereas Eliphaz is saying, If God's like that, we'd be better off keeping our distance.

Prayer:

We thank You, dear Father, for the wisdom of those whom You have brought to Yourself. You Yourself are the fountain of all wisdom and knowledge, of all goodness and truth, of all righteousness and peace. We thank you that You are to us a God nearby and not far off. Let us never take Your truth to ourselves at any distance from You. Let us never stop at a point where we cease to receive from You. Let us never seek or opt for alternative sources of wisdom and knowledge that keep us from You and Your great salvation of us in Jesus Christ, As we see and acknowledge all things to be in Your hands in this vast and often overwhelming creation, so may we be bold at Your bidding to press towards Your throne of grace, to seek and find You there in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we gladly pray. Amen.

SIX

ELIPHAZ—II

Remember that we began this study of Job's friends that came to comfort him by looking at Job 42:7–8, where we saw that God's judgement on the whole debate was that Job was right in what he said, and the friends were wrong. As we said, that does not mean that everything they say is false. They were godly men; they were good theologians. So they are not to be judged and condemned, but to be attended to with discernment. We saw that Eliphaz started from the presupposition that human beings cannot be righteous or pure before God. He had that strange spiritual experience which laid the foundation of his understanding: 'Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?' (4:17) Eliphaz had come to the conclusion that this could not be so. To cope with that, he magnified God, in a way that was very orthodox: God has universal sway—yes. But accordingly he made human beings to be of little account. If human beings cannot be pure before their Maker, then we had better go and hide somewhere, like a little ant under a stone. Sure God can still be God, but we had better not get in His way too much. That is really the consequence of what Eliphaz started from. So he became quite deterministic about it: 'human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward' (5:7), and there is no way out of that. Quite fatalistic, stoical, pessimistic: you have to put up with this, you have to knuckle under, that's the way it is. At the same time, many of the things Eliphaz said are orthodox, and some of them are quoted in the New Testament as truth about God. It is what we do with those things—why we say them, and where we go with them—that can be off the track.

We came to chapter 5:17–18, and we saw the validity of what Eliphaz is saying there:

How happy is the one whom God reproves;
therefore do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.
For he wounds, but he binds up;
he strikes, but his hands heal.

However, we saw the conclusion that he draws from that is that Job had better be quiet, if God is this great God, and had better not speak out of turn. We saw that this is not what Job is prepared to do at all: Job desires to come before God and to receive his vindication from God. Just like all the great saints have—Abraham prayed about Sodom and Gomorrah, and God's judgement that was coming there, and pressed through to the heart of God, that is full of mercy.

YOU'LL BE RIGHT, NO WORRIES

Eliphaz, still trying to put the best construction he can on what has happened to Job, encourages him to turn to God, and do the right thing and be right with God, and he will be rewarded. Again, a fairly orthodox view:

5:19 He will deliver you from six troubles;
in seven no harm shall touch you.
20 In famine he will redeem you from death,
and in war from the power of the sword.
21 You shall be hidden from the scourge of the tongue,
and shall not fear destruction when it comes.
22 At destruction and famine you shall laugh,
and shall not fear the wild animals of the earth.
23 For you shall be in league with the stones of the field,

- and the wild animals shall be at peace with you.
24 You shall know that your tent is safe,
you shall inspect your fold and miss nothing.
25 You shall know that your descendants will be many,
and your offspring like the grass of the earth.
26 You shall come to your grave in ripe old age,
as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in its season.
27 See, we have searched this out; it is true.
Hear, and know it for yourself.”

What Eliphaz is saying here is: If you are right with God, nothing will go wrong with you. This is a little bit of an insensitive thing to say to someone who has just suffered like poor old Job. For instance, ‘you shall inspect your fold and miss nothing’: Job has just had his entire stock wiped out. ‘You shall know that your descendants will be many’: remember that poor old Job has no family left at all. So there is some issue here that Eliphaz seems to be trying to avoid by saying these things.

We see the same thing in our own day with what has come to be called the ‘prosperity doctrine’, which was very strong there for a while, where if you do the right thing by God, nothing will go wrong with you, nothing will touch you, nothing will harm you—in fact you will end up with cadillacs and big houses and swimming pools, because the Lord desires to bless you, and so this is the way it will go. This is the kind of error that Eliphaz is coming into here. It comes from an *over-anxious* application of what the Bible says about God’s desire to bless us. It does not quite fit with the way things actually happen. Once you have espoused some form of that prosperity doctrine, then when something goes wrong, we can see how you would not be able to handle it at all. Suddenly you think: ‘Help—I must have done something wrong—what have I done wrong? God has lost His favour towards me!’ If you are basing your life on that sort of understanding, there are some happenings that you will not be able to handle without complete loss of faith.

SUFFERING FOR GOD’S SAKE

Paul the apostle speaks of the things that come against us in life, particularly as Christians, in Romans 8:35–39:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.”

Note here that it is for *God’s* sake that ‘we are being killed all day long’ and being put through these sufferings—it does not quite fit with the prosperity doctrine. Paul is not even saying that these things will be swept aside, or that these things will stop happening if we turn to God. He says,

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

‘In all these things’—while they are still going on. So God does preserve those who belong to Him, but He preserves them mainly in faith, *through* tribulations, as these are happening. This is what we see God doing with Job.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the full-flowered faith, in the New Testament, that Job is groping for in his sufferings in the Old Testament.

Paul himself experienced all those things, as he set out in 2 Corinthians 11:24–29. This is all in the cause of the gospel of Christ, with a person who has been justified, and is living in obedience to God:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?

I think Eliphaz would have had just as much trouble with Paul as he had with viewing the sufferings of Job, and his 'prosperity doctrine' would not stand up very well. Back in 2 Corinthians 4: 8–10, Paul shows how God does sustain His faithful people in all of that:

We are afflicted in every way, *but not crushed*; perplexed, *but not driven to despair*; persecuted, *but not forsaken*; struck down, *but not destroyed*; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

That is really the situation, and comparing what Eliphaz says here in verses 20–27, we can see that he is pushing it a little bit hard. But he is still trying to be positive, he is still trying to give Job the benefit of the doubt, and he is still saying to Job, Look: trust in God, turn to God, do the right thing, and you will be saved. Later, as we shall see, he loses his patience with Job, and tries the other tack.

WHEN FAULTY FAITH IS CHALLENGED

As we saw in Job 6:1–13 (see Study 4), Job answers that and says, In what you are saying, you still have not appreciated the full extent of my suffering. He says in 6:6–7, The words you have offered me so far are tasteless words: they don't touch me where I am. And in 6:8–13 he renews his request to die, and admits his total weakness and frailty, and having come to the end of his resources.

But then he speaks a rebuke, specifically to Eliphaz, which also encompasses what the others will say later on:

- 6:14 Those who withhold kindness from a friend
forsake the fear of the Almighty.
15 My companions are treacherous like a torrent-bed,
like freshets that pass away,
16 that run dark with ice,
turbid with melting snow.
17 In time of heat they disappear;
when it is hot, they vanish from their place.
18 The caravans turn aside from their course;
they go up into the waste, and perish.
19 The caravans of Tema look,
the travellers of Sheba hope.
20 They are disappointed because they were confident;
they come there and are confounded.
21 Such you have now become to me;
you see my calamity, and are afraid.
22 Have I said, 'Make me a gift'?

- Or, 'From your wealth offer a bribe for me'?
23 Or, 'Save me from an opponent's hand'?
Or, 'Ransom me from the hand of oppressors'?

24 "Teach me, and I will be silent;
make me understand how I have gone wrong.
25 How forceful are honest words!
But your reproof, what does it reprove?
26 Do you think that you can reprove words,
as if the speech of the desperate were wind?
27 You would even cast lots over the orphan,
and bargain over your friend.

28 But now, be pleased to look at me;
for I will not lie to your face.
29 Turn, I pray, let no wrong be done.
Turn now, my vindication is at stake.
30 Is there any wrong on my tongue?
Cannot my taste discern calamity?

Job is saying there just what we have started to see: that the pressure is on, the heat has come, and because they have opted for going in this one particular direction, they cannot stand it. He is saying, The truth is, you cannot handle what you see happening to me, because your doctrine, and the basis of it, is not big enough to do that. So you are to me like creeks that dry up in summer, that promise refreshment but do not deliver it, and bring only disappointment. I look to you for comfort, and I am confounded. You come to see my calamity, and you are afraid. It is fear of what you see that you are speaking out of, not faith in God.

We must be careful too that we do not back off, or attempt to preserve ourselves in our faulty faith when it is challenged by something like this. If we find something that has gone wrong in our own life, or in someone else's life, that seems to throw our faith out the window, then maybe we need to hang in there and see if our faith was big enough, and that the God we trusted in was really God as He is? That is what Job is saying there. 'You see my calamity, and are afraid.' We must be careful not to back off, just to preserve ourselves.

We see that with each of the comforters. They have got their set doctrine, their whole attitude to life. What has happened to Job challenges that, and then what Job says challenges it even more, and we find them backing off, and putting up barriers, and saying: 'Well—you must be wrong! Because you are challenging what I thought, and I don't want to change it'. Not just, 'You must be wrong', but, 'You must be *evil*'. That is what they end up saying to Job, Eliphaz included.

Job says in verses 22–23: 'It is not as if I have asked you to get me out of this. Why is it driving you to panic? I just want you to be my friends. I want you to be here with me, and to hang in with me. And yet you are starting back off, starting to get panicky, starting to speak out of your fear and inability to cope with it'.

LOOK ME IN THE EYE!

He says in verse 24: 'I am prepared to be told if I am out of turn'. Job is not a foolish man. He is a wise man, who knows the importance of receiving counsel and advice—and rebuke if need be—from others (see Proverbs 12:15; 19:20; 20:18; 27:5–6). He wants them to speak the truth in love (as in Ephesians 4:15). He says, 'Honest words are forceful, but you are just coming up with reproof'.

We may say that Eliphaz up to now has not yet pointed the finger at Job. But he has said one or two things that imply that, as in 5:2: 'Surely vexation kills the fool, and jealousy slays

the simple.’ He is just making a general statement there, but we may know from our own experience that, when we are in a very sensitive position, we can pick up the vibes. When someone makes an implied rebuke towards us, we pick it up straight away. So before Eliphaz has spelled that out or taken it further, Job knows where he is coming from, and where he is heading—he has sensed that barb in his voice.

Job says: ‘What does reproof from you reprove? All I have been saying is that I am in a desperate situation. I have been spelling out the depths of my suffering’. Job is saying, as Jesus said later on, ‘Which of you convicts me of sin?’ (John 8:46). We have seen in 7:20 that Job never regarded himself as having sinless perfection, or as not being a sinner. He is not blameless. But he is saying, ‘In this matter, how have I sinned with my lips? How have I denied the words of the Holy One?’ What has Job said? ‘The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD’ (1:21). ‘Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?’ (2:10). That is all he has said. He has not denied the words of the Holy One in this matter. He is saying in verse 26: ‘Understand my despair. Don’t try and find fault with me, don’t try and close in on me, like you are doing’.

Verse 27 has some very strong words, but in effect they are true. He is saying, You are starting to cut me off to preserve your own security, and the security of your own doctrine and attitude to life. That is the equivalent to bargaining over a friend or casting lots over an orphan—it is that kind of coldness and calculatingness, that self-preservation, that you are doing.

So he says: ‘Let’s relate to one another directly: “Be pleased to look at me—I will not lie to your face.” Let’s have this out eye to eye. You are starting to avert your eyes from me, but do please look at me. Look me in the eye and tell me if I am out of order here in what I am saying. Don’t leave me alone. “My vindication is at stake”: there are big issues at stake here—we ought to be able to stand in this together and see it through. What have I said wrong so far? Haven’t I only been saying how I am in deep suffering? “Cannot my taste discern calamity?”’

CAN WE STAND BEFORE GOD?

Then Job goes to chapter 7, which we have looked at before. There we saw that he asked that question in verses 17–18: ‘What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment?’ That is a little different from what Eliphaz has been saying, that human beings cannot be righteous before God or pure before their Maker, and so are of very little account to God really—he will go on to say that. Job is saying, ‘No’. What was the conclusion we came to as the answer to those questions? It was that God is so intimately concerned for us that He *will not* leave us alone, He will not hold back from us whatever of suffering is necessary to work His purpose of glory in us.

Then Bildad, and Zophar, have their words to say. But we will stay with Eliphaz for the time being, and come back to them later. Eliphaz gets his second bite at the cherry in chapter 15:

- 15:1 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered:
2 ‘Should the wise answer with windy knowledge,
and fill themselves with the east wind?
3 Should they argue in unprofitable talk,
or in words with which they can do no good?
4 But you are doing away with the fear of God,
and hindering meditation before God.

It seems that Eliphaz's tact has forsaken him here somewhat! It is coming out into the open now what he really thinks of Job. In these verses Eliphaz is saying: 'You can do no good with these words that you are saying, about standing before God and all that kind of thing. This is unprofitable, it is "windy knowledge"—you are just belching out the wind. Because, he says, "you are doing away with the fear of God, and hindering meditation before God". Eliphaz thinks that Job is being unsubmitive in all of this. He is saying, Look: this is the way it is, so you should be submissive before God, you should bow and scrape, you should go and hide before Him, and not be so blatant and so open. He is virtually saying, Hush your mouth—God might be listening! And then where will we all be? Because of the way Eliphaz understands God—or does not understand God.

Then he comes out and actually accuses Job of wrong:

15:5 For your iniquity teaches your mouth,
and you choose the tongue of the crafty.
6 Your own mouth condemns you, and not I;
your own lips testify against you.

He says, 'It is your iniquity that you are speaking out of; it is your sin. That is what is informing your words. You are being crafty—you are a very clever arguer, Job! But really it is deceit that you are coming up with'. It seems Eliphaz is almost becoming convinced by what Job is saying, but he does not want to be convinced, because that would demolish his whole system. So he must now accuse Job of sin and iniquity, if he is going to protect himself.

CAN WE TELL GOD ANYTHING?

Then he says,

15:7 Are you the firstborn of the human race?
Were you brought forth before the hills?
8 Have you listened in the council of God?

That is very like some words that God actually says to Job in chapter 38:4–5, when God Himself addresses Job:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?

But that is God speaking, not Eliphaz. There is a world of difference between when God shows you that, as His revelation in love and mercy, and when someone who is holier-than-thou is trying to hammer you down with it. It is true that we do not have an inkling of what God was about in the act of creation, except what He might show to us. But that is for us to be in awe and love before God about, and not to be in despondency and hopelessness about. The same with Isaiah chapter 40, when God says in verses 13–14:

Who has directed the spirit of the LORD,
or as his counsellor has instructed him?
Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,
and who taught him the path of justice?
Who taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?

There is a sense in which Eliphaz here is jumping the gun a bit, because Job has not done anything or said anything that could be construed as trying to teach God 'how to suck eggs'!

ELIPHAZ PULLS RANK

We then find that what Eliphaz is really concerned about here is his own 'orthodox' wisdom and Job's apparent slight on that.

- 15:8b And do you limit wisdom to yourself?
9 What do you know that we do not know?
What do you understand that is not clear to us?

They can sense the challenge that is coming to them in what Job is saying in the position he is taking up, but they feel, 'Well, you don't know any more than we do! And, actually, we are probably wiser than you are', because:

- 15:10 The grey-haired and the aged are on our side,
those older than your father.

It seems that these men, or Eliphaz anyway, were older than Job, from the generation before. He says, 'Now listen, young Job, you should have better respect for your elders'!
He then asks,

- 15:11 Are the consolations of God too small for you,
or the word that deals gently with you?

'You can only expect God to mete out a little bit of consolation to you in life—why are you wanting more? And up to now I have been dealing very gently with you'—in Eliphaz's first speech that is probably true. 'But you have rejected that':

- 15:12 Why does your heart carry you away,
and why do your eyes flash,
13 so that you turn your spirit against God,
and let such words go out of your mouth?

That is where he is saying, Hush your mouth! How can you say such things? God might be listening! And then, where would we be?

ELIPHAZ'S BASE POSITION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Eliphaz then reaffirms his position:

- 15:14 What are mortals, that they can be clean?
Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous?
15 God puts no trust even in his holy ones,
and the heavens are not clean in his sight;
16 how much less one who is abominable and corrupt,
one who drinks iniquity like water!

That is Eliphaz's base position, as he had spelled it out before in 4:17–21, but it is coming through here a little more abrasively than it did there. What he goes on to say now just follows from that: really, there is no hope, there is no strong mercy that we can appeal to. Look at all the things he says will happen to the wicked: there is not a glimpse of light in any of it. The flowers on the olive tree are blown off, so they never form any fruit, and the grapes drop off the vine before they are even ripe, and not one remains:

- 15:17 I will show you; listen to me;
what I have seen I will declare—
18 what sages have told,
and their ancestors have not hidden,
19 to whom alone the land was given,
and no stranger passed among them.
20 The wicked writhe in pain all their days,
through all the years that are laid up for the ruthless.
21 Terrifying sounds are in their ears;
in prosperity the destroyer will come upon them.
22 They despair of returning from darkness,
and they are destined for the sword.
23 They wander abroad for bread, saying, 'Where is it?'
They know that a day of darkness is ready at hand;
24 distress and anguish terrify them;
they prevail against them, like a king prepared for battle.
25 Because they stretched out their hands against God,
and bid defiance to the Almighty,
26 running stubbornly against him
with a thick-bosomed shield;
27 because they have covered their faces with their fat,
and gathered fat upon their loins,
28 they will live in desolate cities,
in houses that no one should inhabit,
houses destined to become heaps of ruins;
29 they will not be rich, and their wealth will not endure,
nor will they strike root in the earth;
30 they will not escape from darkness;
the flame will dry up their shoots,
and their blossom will be swept away by the wind.
31 Let them not trust in emptiness, deceiving themselves;
for emptiness will be their recompense.
32 It will be paid in full before their time,
and their branch will not be green.
33 They will shake off their unripe grape, like the vine,
and cast off their blossoms, like the olive tree.
34 For the company of the godless is barren,
and fire consumes the tents of bribery.
35 They conceive mischief and bring forth evil
and their heart prepares deceit.

That is where Eliphaz's position takes him to. It is all darkness, and no light. There is no respite, and no hope.

It is a bit like when we talk to our children about family discipline, and they think we are tough on them. But then, when we say, 'Well, what would you do?'—they would come down like a ton of bricks, and there would be no mercy, if it was one of their brothers or sisters! And we think, 'Well, maybe as parents we have picked up a thing or two over the years'. That is a bit like how Eliphaz is here. If Eliphaz was God, the way he understands God, this is the way he would deal with the wicked.

AN END TO ANGER?

But we know that time and time again in the Scriptures God says that He does not keep His anger for ever, because He delights in steadfast love. The wonderful thing about God's anger is that it stops—there is an end to it. We always find that. In Micah 7:18:

He does not retain his anger for ever because he delights in steadfast love.

‘Who is a pardoning God like Thee, or who has love so rich and free?’ Or in Exodus 34:6–7:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, *slow to anger*.

We have seen that Eliphaz is quick to anger. Before, when he was talking about the fool in 5:3, he said,

I have seen fools taking root,
but suddenly I cursed their dwelling

—and then you should have seen what happened to them! So be warned, Job! Eliphaz, because of where he is coming from, is quick to anger, and then there is no end to his anger.

God rebukes that. There are times when God has had to say to His people, ‘My anger is still operating, because it has not yet come to its end, and you have been taking it too lightly’. So, often, we find in the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel God says, ‘No, my anger is not finished yet’: ‘For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still’ (Isaiah 5:25, 9:12, 17, 21, 10:4; see also Jeremiah 23:19–20, and Ezekiel 9:9–10; and Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2:1, 4, 6). But then, in each of those books we come to the point, as in Isaiah 40:1–2: ‘Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid’, and so it goes on with the great blessing that follows. Jeremiah 31:31–40 has the promise of the new covenant. Ezekiel reaches a turning point after chapter 33 when his message can turn from woe to blessing and hope. Even in the Book of Amos, where God is saying that His anger is still going on, yet His anger is against Edom: ‘For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because he pursued his brother with the sword and *cast off all pity*; he *maintained his anger perpetually*, and *kept his wrath forever*’ (Amos 1:11). That is why God is angry with Edom: because Edom’s wrath has no end. That is not God: God comes to the end of His wrath—it is measured, it is complete, it is finished, and He brings His great grace. In fact, God’s judgment and wrath is part of His grace.

This end of God’s opposition is really what Job is pressing on towards, whether he can see it or not. But Eliphaz wants to cut all that short, and just leave us with unending wrath.

That is something that we all need to be careful of. There is not a lot spoken in the churches today about God’s wrath and judgment. So when we come to it—when we start to face all the Scriptures do say about God’s wrath and judgment, it can overwhelm us. If our hearts are like Eliphaz’s, then we will start to lay it on thick. That has been done many times in Christian history: we will lay about with wrath. That comes from a heart that is still perverse, still unforgiven, still unrepentant, because it has not come to the heart of God’s strong mercy. When we see God’s strong mercy, particularly when we see God’s wrath on humanity worked through to its full end in the human flesh of God’s own Son on the cross for us all, then any amount of wrath will not faze us, because we know that it comes from that heart of love.

FACE TO FACE WITH GOD?

We are seeing that Eliphaz tackles life at one remove from God. He picks up the things that are true about God, but then builds his own construct on them, out of what is still in his own heart. Whereas Job is seeking God as He really is, and is seeking to be direct with God. That is why he wants these comforters to be direct with him, too: Come on, look me in the face!

There is one more thing that we can see from this passage, which shows us where Eliphaz is coming from, and the kind of shields we can put up to protect ourselves from a direct relationship with God:

15:17 I will show you; listen to me;
 what I have seen I will declare—
18 what sages have told,
 and their ancestors have not hidden,
19 to whom alone the land was given,
 and no stranger passed among them.

Eliphaz is not saying, 'I have got this in direct revelation from God'. He is saying, 'This is the tradition of the ancestors'. The tradition of the ancestors can always get a bit encrusted. It might start from God, but we take it to ourselves, then work it out, and pass it on. This is something that Jesus had to battle with, against the Pharisees and the scribes of his own day, particularly in Mark 7:

'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition . . . thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on (verses 6–8, 13).

That is just another example of how Eliphaz is coming to Job at one remove from God, and is having to shore himself around to some extent: pulling rank, and saying, This is what the ancestors have told us, so we ought to go by that, and you had better knuckle under.

Seven

ELIPHAZ—III

As we take a final look at Eliphaz, the first of Job's three 'comforters', we are going to hear Job call them 'miserable comforters'—because they did not bring him an awful lot of comfort!

We saw that Eliphaz's starting point was in chapter 4, verse 17: 'Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?' This was something that came to him in that rather strange and mournful spiritual experience, when a spirit brought through this despondent message: 'Human beings cannot be righteous before God: how can we ever hope that human beings could be pure before their Maker?' He repeated that in chapter 15, verses 14–16: 'What are mortals, that they can be clean? Or those born of woman, that they can be righteous? God puts no trust even in his holy ones, and the heavens are not clean in his sight; how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, one who drinks iniquity like water!' That is what has determined Eliphaz's whole attitude to life and God: that really you cannot ever have a hope of being totally righteous and pure before God as a human being. Especially as a sinner: sin is such a deep and horrible thing—how could that ever be overcome or removed between us and God?

SIN IS NO LIGHT THING

Before we dismiss that, let us feel the force of it. Eliphaz is saying that sin is no light thing. Sometimes, because we have had the experience of forgiveness—we have come into God's grace—we forget the depth and the horror of sin. We have a natural tendency as human beings to underestimate that anyway, to justify ourselves in it. Sin also has its own inbuilt deceit which covers its tracks and tries to hide itself from us. But to God sin is no light thing. It cost Him the whole of His Son, going to the Cross and to the depths of human depravity and misery, to remove sin and to restore that wonderful relationship with God.

That is something that does bear in upon Eliphaz, and he is sensitive enough, and he knows God well enough, to know that sin is a real problem.

TOO HARD FOR US?

Also we need to check with ourselves to see, even though we know we have received God's forgiveness and are in His grace (if that is the case), whether we do not really believe deep down that what Eliphaz says is true: that we can never be pure before God. I was talking with a friend, a Christian pastor, and we were discussing Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). As I listened to him talking about it, there was a sort of uneasiness within me. He was saying that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was setting out the *ideal* of life in the kingdom of God, but of course we could never expect or hope to attain to that. When Jesus, for instance, spoke about God's teaching on divorce, he said, 'That is the ideal, and of course we must try to reach that, but so often we have to settle for something less'. (I don't know if he would have said the same about murder and adultery, which are also included in the Sermon on the Mount.) There is this feeling that there is the ideal, but then there is the real, practical thing: of course, we could never reach the ideal, but it is good to have an ideal that we can aim at, and fall short of all the time. When I indicated my uneasiness with that, he said to me, 'Well, how do you look at the Sermon on the Mount?' I said, 'I think it is Jesus setting out the heart of the Law of God, and I would say to that exactly what Deuteronomy 30:11–14 says about the old Law: "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too

hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." I don't think God ever gave us commandments intending that we should break them or that they should be too hard for us to do. Of course, all the commandments are to be kept, and can only be kept, in deep relationship with God. That is what the commandments are all about: they are life lived in direct relationship with God, and in dependence on Him, on His grace every moment. So when my friend was saying that Jesus set forth the ideal, but we can never reach it, I said, 'That sounds to me like a good excuse to settle for something less!' But he said, 'Oh no: we must *try*, we must always *try*! But every day we will fail, and every day we will need to kneel down at the end of the day and confess our sins and ask for forgiveness'. That sounds very orthodox, and that is just what Eliphaz would say. But I found it a rather depressing prospect, and I was wondering why. I think it is because underlying it is this deep despair that we could never be righteous before God.

Whereas we know, from the beginning of the Letter to the Ephesians (1:4–5), that God's whole plan is that He is going to bring us, as His children, to be holy and blameless before Him in love, face to face.

SINLESS PERFECTION?

Where we are coming from will determine how far we can go. Eliphaz, coming from his position, finds that he cannot go along with Job. Where is Job coming from? Let us look again at Job 19:25–27 (we will be looking at this again in detail—it is central to Job's position and quest): 'I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh *I shall see God*, whom I shall see *on my side*, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.' It is his *Redeemer* that he believes lives: Some one who can redeem him from evil, and bring him to be pure and holy and blameless before Him, and make Himself to be on his side. Job's basic position is: I *will* stand righteous and pure before my Maker. That sounds terrible to Eliphaz and the others. The only basis on which they think Job can say that is if he is claiming to have sinless perfection. That is the only way *they* could see that anyone could stand righteous and pure before God: if they had *never done anything wrong* and had been totally perfect all their lives. That is why they get so stuck into Job, because that is what they think he must be saying. They cannot hear that is not what he is saying. They think that is what he *must* be saying, because they do not know any other way out of it.

We have seen that Job has never said that. Job is very aware of his sins, especially those of his youth, in his foolish days. The difference in Job is that he has a faith in God that says: 'God is able to make me stand before Him in holiness and righteousness'. That is why all the time he goes past his comforters and has to try and push past what they are saying—to get to God! To address God directly on this score. The comforters cannot come at that. They would not be so bold, they would not be so foolhardy. If they think there is no way out of it, that they want to keep their distance from God, really, as we shall see.

Right in the last chapter, when God Himself addresses the comforters, they do realise. When God says, 'Job was right, and you were wrong', and Job prays for them, and they repent, and that is lovely. In the meantime, however, it is pretty willing, right through.

QUICK TO ANGER

So Eliphaz has an orthodox belief in God—we have said before that these are very godly men in a godless age, and so they need to be respected for that—but Eliphaz did not have this faith

that Job has, that God justifies the ungodly (as in Romans 4:5). Eliphaz is so aware of the appalling horror of sin, as far as he is able to be aware of that (I don't think any of us can be fully aware of it), and he takes that seriously, but he sees no way out. So in chapter 15, verses 17–35, he says, 'I will show you what happens to the wicked'. We see there very clearly that, as far as Eliphaz is concerned, there is no escape, there is no respite, there is no forgiveness, there is no end to wrath. Verse 30, for instance, talking of the wicked: 'they will not escape from darkness; the flame will dry up their shoots, and their blossom will be swept away by the wind.' He says, 'To think anything else is to fool oneself'. We saw that, corresponding to that, Eliphaz himself is quick to anger, is quite brutal and final in his application of anger, as in 5:3: 'I have seen fools taking root, but suddenly I cursed their dwelling'—and that was it, finish! They met their doom, and rightly so!

We saw that God is not like that. The lovely thing about God's wrath is that it comes to an end, when it has done its job, and brings us in to grace and mercy and love. So there is something about God that still Eliphaz has not realised.

Because of that, Eliphaz has got to find other ways of coping. In 5:19–27 we saw that he had a superficial prosperity teaching that said: God is high and powerful, but if you do the right thing, if you grovel for mercy, as he is trying to get Job to do here, and really just admit your sins and say you are on the wrong track and come back to God, and then do the right thing by God, then God will look after you, and you will have all the good things, and you will have all your descendants, and all your property and all your flocks and herds—everything that had been wiped out, that Job had lost—Eliphaz was saying he would have all this if he just did the right thing by God. That is the prosperity teaching that has been around again lately. But that does not fit the reality of Job, just as it did not fit the reality of Paul, or of Jesus himself—the righteous who suffered in the cause of God.

Job was ready to point that out to Eliphaz, as he points it out to the other comforters: that what you are saying just does not match up with reality. 'Here I am', he says. He does not say he has been sinless, but, he says, in this instance, 'I have not said a word against God, I have not charged God with wrong, and yet this is still happening to me, this terrible suffering. So what does that do to your prosperity doctrine?' We saw that Eliphaz got a little bit unnerved by that, and said, Well, I'm older than you are, and I ought to know, and there have been plenty of wise teachers who have said the same as I have said, so you had better just knuckle under and listen to what we are saying! Having had that doctrine taken away from him, Eliphaz will now have to come to another conclusion, as we shall see in chapter 22. In chapter 15 he has already started on that: he has already begun to say that Job must be terribly wicked, if all this is happening to him. 'You are doing away with the fear of God, and hindering meditation before God. For your *iniquity* teaches your mouth, and you choose the tongue of the crafty. Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you' (15:4–6). It is your sin that is telling you what to say now, and you are being very clever about it. 'Why does your heart carry you away, and why do your eyes flash, so that you turn your spirit against God, and let such words go out of your mouth?' (15:12–13). He is accusing Job of being angry at God, though we saw that is not what Job is being at all. Isn't it so common that we often accuse other people of our own sins? Eliphaz knows that he would be jolly angry at God if he was in the same situation as Job was, and so that is what he attributes to Job. We can attribute that to Job too, because we might be in the same position. Eliphaz is upset at this challenge to his own wisdom, and so in 15:17–35 Eliphaz gives that catalogue of despair: the blossom will be swept away by the wind, and there is no hope for the wicked.

MISERABLE COMFORTERS!

No wonder we hear next:

- 16:1 Then Job answered:
2 'I have heard many such things;
miserable comforters are you all.

You are giving me no hope here; you are giving a catalogue of despair. Just as Eliphaz in 15:2 had called what Job was saying 'windy knowledge', and all his words 'like the east wind', Job comes back at him:

- 16:3 Have windy words no limit?
Or what provokes you that you keep on talking?

He is saying: 'You're the ones with the windy words! You are the ones who are talking emptiness.' He points out also that his situation is different from theirs, now:

- 16:4 I also could talk as you do,
if you were in my place;
I could join words together against you,
and shake my head at you.
5 I could encourage you with my mouth,
and the solace of my lips would assuage your pain.

We have taken warning before of trying to heal wounds too lightly, of trying to use words to smooth over people's sufferings, or of trying, for our own sakes as much as anything, to say something helpful when maybe it is better to say nothing—just to be there with the person. Job is saying, If you were in my position, I could sit there, I could string words together as you have, I could patronise you, as you are trying to do to me now.

STRONG WORDS

He goes on to say again about his situation, and again how he attributes it to the action of God:

- 16:6 If I speak, my pain is not assuaged,
and if I forbear, how much of it leaves me?

He says, I can talk about it, and nothing happens; if I stop talking about it, it is still there.

- 16:7 Surely now God has worn me out;
he has made desolate all my company.
8 And he has shrivelled me up,
which is a witness against me;
my leanness has risen up against me,
and it testifies to my face.
9 He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me;
he has gnashed his teeth at me;
my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.
10 They have gaped at me with their mouths;
they have struck me insolently on the cheek;
they mass themselves together against me.
11 God gives me up to the ungodly,
and casts me into the hands of the wicked.
12 I was at ease, and he broke me in two;

he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;
he set me up as his target;
13 his archers surround me.
He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy;
he pours out my gall on the ground.
14 He bursts upon me again and again;
he rushes at me like a warrior.
15 I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin,
and have laid my strength in the dust.
16 My face is red with weeping,
and deep darkness is on my eyelids,
17 though there is no violence in my hands,
and my prayer is pure.

Isn't it amazing how with such strong words Job can speak out before God! Eliphaz's catalogue of despair in chapter 15, of all the dreadful things that will happen to the wicked, seems almost theoretical compared with the way Job speaks of what God is doing to him: 'He is slashing open my kidneys, He is bringing wave upon wave against me'! Job never holds back in expressing what is happening to him. Again note that there is no accusation of God in this. He is just saying what is his experience. Even when he says, 'God is hating me', he is not using that as an emotional expression. He is saying, 'The action of God is very directly against me at this time' (compare Malachi 1:2–3, Romans 9:13). This is not theoretical for Job at all. It is his actual experience, and he is right in there. Look again at verses 13–14: 'He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy; he pours out my gall on the ground. He bursts upon me again and again; he rushes at me like a warrior.' Just to be able to say that of God, and yet still to be in faith with God, betokens a bold and strong relationship.

So God is not leaving him alone. It reminds us of what Job had said back in chapter 7, verse 17–19, when he had pleaded with God: 'What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment? Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle?' He had said, 'Why doesn't God leave us alone? What *are* human beings, that you make *so much* of us?' There is a notable quote from P. T. Forsyth, the Scottish theologian: 'If God spared not His own Son, He will spare no historic convulsion needful for His kingdom.'⁴ If God was prepared to do what He did to His own Son in the Cross, and to take him through that, then God is not squeamish, and He is not fazed by the worst that can happen in the world. Forsyth wrote those words in the middle of the First World War, when there was a 'historic convulsion' going on in Europe such as had never been seen in the history of humankind. Yet, like Job, Forsyth was saying, 'It is God who is taking us through this, to carry out His purposes of good and of love. It is His *unrelenting love* that will not let us go, and that takes us *so seriously* as to not hold back even this kind of suffering. Because His purpose for us is so great, and His desire to take us there is so strong.'

So it is God's unrelenting love. We cannot expect Job to know that in the middle of this, any more than Jesus knew it when he cried out 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34). That is not how it comes through when you are in the middle of these things. And yet Job was pressing through to know something of that. And he still claims in verse 17: 'There is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure': 'I have not charged God with wrong, I have said, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away". I have said, "Blessed be the name of the Lord", in all of this.'

⁴ P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, 1917, (New Creation Publications Inc., Coromandel East, South Australia, 1988), p. 194. Forsyth here gives an interesting twist to Romans 8:32.

FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

And now we see where Job is coming to:

16:18 "O earth, do not cover my blood;
let my outcry find no resting place.
19 Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven,
and he that vouches for me is on high.

That is his faith. He says, I can't see it, but I know that God sees me, and that He is going to vouch for me in the heavenly places.

16:20 My friends scorn me;
my eye pours out tears to God,
21 that he would maintain the right of a mortal with God,
as one does for a neighbour.

How different from Eliphaz's position! That He, *God*, would maintain the right of a mortal with God, as one does for a neighbour! It is from that position of *friendship with God* that Job is speaking. There is something that has affected that—his deep suffering—but he does not want to let that friendship go, and he is pressing through to it.

16:22 For when a few years have come,
I shall go the way from which I shall not return.

All I am faced with now is death, so let's find out what it is all about, and press through to that relationship with God.

FACED WITH DEATH

In chapter 17, Job goes on. He says, 'All I am faced with now is death. I am not going to say that is all there is.' Whereas the mockers, the comforters, are not being that honest. They are saying, 'No, come on, things can change'. He says, 'No. Face up to the fact of death'. This is what brings these great issues to bear:

17:1 My spirit is broken, my days are extinct,
the grave is ready for me.
2 Surely there are mockers around me,
and my eye dwells on their provocation.

Then he speaks again to God:

17:3 Lay down a pledge for me with yourself;
who is there that will give surety for me?

None of these comforters are going to be able to help me, or to guarantee me. So again, God, I am calling on You to do that for me.

17:4 Since you have closed their minds to understanding,
therefore you will not let them triumph.

Job is asking God for vindication against these accusations that are starting to come from his friends.

17:5 Those who denounce friends for reward—
the eyes of their children will fail.

We cannot say that the three comforters actually had their eye on Job's goods—as it was, he had nothing left anyway, so they could not have benefited much from his will! But he is saying, What you are doing is the equivalent to that: trying to pick the flesh from my bones, rather than help me.

He speaks again of the action of God in his life:

- 17:6 He has made me a byword of the peoples,
and I am one before whom people spit.
7 My eye has grown dim from grief,
and all my members are like a shadow.
8 The upright are appalled at this,
and the innocent stir themselves up against the godless.
9 Yet the righteous hold to their way,
and they that have clean hands grow stronger and stronger.
10 But you, come back now, all of you,
and I shall not find a sensible person among you.
11 My days are past, my plans are broken off,
the desires of my heart.
12 They make night into day;
'The light,' they say, 'is near to the darkness.'
13 If I look for Sheol as my house,
if I spread my couch in darkness,
14 if I say to the Pit, 'You are my father,'
and to the worm, 'My mother,' or 'My sister,'
15 where then is my hope?
Who will see my hope?
16 Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?
Shall we descend together into the dust?"

What is Job saying there? He is saying (verse 9) that he is righteous before God, and that he is holding to his way, and he is being made stronger. They are certainly not making him doubt his position. They are just isolating him, really, by the things they say, and making him more alone than ever. But that has not stopped him from holding firm to what he is saying before God. And so he says, 'Come on again!' They have had the first round: Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Eliphaz has started the second round, and Job says, 'Come on, keep coming! But', he says, 'you still haven't got it. You're saying I'm in darkness, but the light is about to dawn. But be real! "My days are past, my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart." So let's not fool ourselves about that. Don't try and make night into day. I am faced squarely with death, but if I succumb to that, and if I let all my hope go down that drain, I can't let that be the end either. I just can't embrace death as the final outcome of all of this. I know there's got to be more to it than that.' More than that Job cannot say at this point. He leaves it there.

JOB MUST BE TERRIBLY WICKED

Eliphaz's final address is in chapter 22. Here the mask comes right off Eliphaz, and he accuses Job of outright sin and iniquity and wickedness. That is the way he has to go, if that prosperity doctrine has been denied him, and Job has said that does not fit. He needs to come to another conclusion, and his conclusion is that God is high and mighty, and He is far removed from us: so far above us that really in effect it makes little difference to Him whether we are good or bad. But if this is happening to Job, he must have been *terribly* wicked for God to have taken this much notice of him, to bring all these sufferings on him that have come now. So now Eliphaz must come out and accuse Job of all kinds of

wickedness. That is the only way he can make sense, according to his own scheme of thinking, of what is happening to Job.

- 22:1 Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered:
2 'Can a mortal be of use to God?
Can even the wisest be of service to him?
3 Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous,
or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless?

Again, this is his basis: he says, 'No. What does God care about us really? Even if we are so righteous, or so blameless, what does that do for Him? Is it gain or pleasure to Him? Surely He is so high and mighty that this cannot touch Him!'

We know that is not so. We have heard God Himself saying, Look at my servant Job: an upright and blameless man!—delighting in him before Satan. That is not the way Eliphaz understands it, because he does not think anyone can be righteous before God. He says,

- 22:4 Is it for your piety that he reproves you,
and enters into judgment with you?

You are saying, Job, that you do fear God, and that you are pious and righteous before Him. But *if that is so, why is this happening to you now*—this reproof, this judgment that has come upon you—if you are as good as you say you are?

So then he catalogues all the things he thinks Job must have done wrong, to merit this kind of treatment. Look at them: withholding bread from the hungry, taking over land from people, and sitting secure while other people have nothing, sending the widows away empty, crushing the arms of the orphans, even ripping off your own family:

- 5 Is not your wickedness great?
There is no end to your iniquities.
6 For you have exacted pledges from your family for no reason,
and stripped the naked of their clothing.
7 You have given no water to the weary to drink,
and you have withheld bread from the hungry.
8 The powerful possess the land,
and the favoured live in it.
9 You have sent widows away empty-handed,
and the arms of the orphans you have crushed.
10 Therefore snares are around you,
and sudden terror overwhelms you,
11 or darkness so that you cannot see;
a flood of water covers you.

We know that Job has done none of that. Job refutes that in chapters 29 and 31 and says, 'No, that is not the way I have been. You cannot make those claims against me.'

GOD IS HIGH AND MIGHTY

Then Eliphaz seeks to set forth the high-and-mightiness of God. This is fair enough. As we have said, there are many things that Eliphaz and the others say that are right and true.

- 22:12 Is not God high in the heavens?
See the highest stars, how lofty they are!

God is higher, even taller, than anything else: even if He stood on the ground, His head would be way above the heavens—if we can talk in that way. God is bigger than everything.

Eliphaz has got that right, but he has not got it right in that he omits to say that the Lord descends to look on the lowly (as in Psalm 113:5–9). Eliphaz has got only one side of it.

- 22:13 Therefore you say, 'What does God know?
Can he judge through the deep darkness?
14 Thick clouds enwrap him, so that he does not see,
and he walks on the dome of heaven.'

Eliphaz is saying, That is what Job has said. But there is nowhere that Job has said that, if we examine what has happened up to now. Job has said, God is holding back from me in my despair, and He is not coming to help me, in fact He is aiming His arrows at me. Job is not saying that God is so high and mighty and far removed that He does not know what is going on. That is something that has come from Eliphaz's own heart.

SCORN FOR THE WAY OF THE WICKED

So Eliphaz again spells out how the wicked are dealt with by God and cannot prosper. The righteous, by which he means himself and his cronies, he says: 'We see it, we laugh them to scorn, and are glad that God has dealt with the wicked, because we won't have any truck with the wicked. Maybe God fills their houses with good things, but as far as I am concerned, the counsel of the wicked is far from me: I will not have anything to do with them, and I am glad when I see them come to their end':

- 22:15 Will you keep to the old way
that the wicked have trod?
16 They were snatched away before their time;
their foundation was washed away by a flood.
17 They said to God, 'Leave us alone,'
and 'What can the Almighty do to us?'
18 Yet he filled their houses with good things—
but the plans of the wicked are repugnant to me.
19 The righteous see it and are glad;
the innocent laugh them to scorn,
20 saying, 'Surely our adversaries are cut off,
and what they left, the fire has consumed.'

COME BACK TO GOD

In these last verses, Eliphaz urges Job to come back to God. Again, these words show that Eliphaz is a godly man, and that relationship with God is very important to him:

- 22:21 Agree with God, and be at peace;
in this way good will come to you.
22 Receive instruction from his mouth,
and lay up his words in your heart.
23 If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored,
if you remove unrighteousness from your tents,
24 if you treat gold like dust,
and gold of Ophir like the stones of the torrent-bed,

—if you count these possessions that you have lost as nothing, and do not set great store by them, and have God as your true treasure—how lovely!—

- 22:25 and if the Almighty is your gold
and your precious silver,
26 then you will delight yourself in the Almighty,

- and lift up your face to God.
27 You will pray to him, and he will hear you,
and you will pay your vows.
28 You will decide on a matter, and it will be established for you,
and light will shine on your ways.
29 When others are humiliated, you say it is pride;
for he saves the humble.

Eliphaz is trying to get Job to come back to God. On what basis is he doing that? One translation of verse 30 is:

- 22:30 (*RSV*) He delivers the innocent man;
you will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands.

If that is what he actually said (the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain at this point), then he is coming back to a fairly barren legalism: always do the right thing, and God will do the right thing by you. But the meaning may well be:

- 22:30 (*NRSV*) He will deliver even those who are guilty;
they will escape because of the cleanness of your hands.'

It may be that even Eliphaz has some understanding of the forgiveness of God. He is, after all, calling on Job to repent, and come back to God, and is saying that God will bless him if he does that, and he will be blessed in his relationship with God.

PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED

However, sometimes we can say these things and be out of place. If you are talking to someone who is already a Christian, and telling them to get converted—ever done that, or seen someone trying to do that to you?—it is not the right time or place. You are talking to the wrong person. That is what Eliphaz is doing here. Job has done all of that. He knows it. He is right in there—closer, if we can put it that way, than Eliphaz is himself.

Our children, when they were younger, went from time to time to some of the evangelistic meetings held by the aboriginal church in the town where we were. There was always a call out to the front, to give your life to the Lord. On more than one occasion, one or two of our children had gone out to the front in response to these calls. Then it came time for their Confirmation in the Anglican scheme of things, and we said, 'Before you can be confirmed, you really need to know where you stand with regard to God, and you need to be able to give your life to God'. One of our children said, 'Well, I've done that three times already—how many more times have I got to do it?' That is a bit like what Eliphaz is doing to Job here!

Eight

BILDAD—I

Bildad the Shuhite was the second of Job's three friends to speak. Remember chapter 2, verse 11:

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite.

We also need to remind ourselves, as we consider each of these three, what God says about them in chapter 42, verse 7:

After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.'

That tells us that, in all of what is happening here, what Job says is right, and what his friends are saying is wrong. That does not mean that everything they say is false. They are godly men, and good theologians, so they are not to be judged and condemned, but they are to be attended to with discernment.

BILDAD'S POSITION

Eliphaz, remember, began from the presupposition that human beings cannot be righteous or pure before God. So he magnified God, and made humanity to be of little account. He became quite deterministic and fatalistic about it. 'Human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward' (5:7). Eliphaz was a little bit stoical and pessimistic: he said, 'You have to put up with that situation, you have to knuckle under to it'. And he said, 'If you play the rules right, you will get looked after'. This was a kind of prosperity teaching which we saw came from an over-anxious application of the truth, which does not accord with reality—it does not accord with Job's experience, or with the experience of Jesus, or Paul, or others—the righteous who suffer. Eliphaz's God ended up being removed and indifferent, so Eliphaz had to say finally: Job must be a terrible sinner, if this God is so provoked against him.

Bildad the second speaker is not quite so old or wise as Eliphaz. He starts from a slightly different position, and he does not carry things through as far as poor old Eliphaz did. The hallmark of Bildad's contributions is that he has a cast-iron system, a doctrinal straitjacket, that he starts in, and that he finishes in, and that he never sees his way clear to break out of. He starts, admirably, with an unshakeable belief in the justice of Almighty God. Job has that belief in God's justice, too. It is to this that Job appeals. But for Bildad it is not so much a personal relationship, as Job is seeking, so much as a rigid, logical, doctrinal system. When that system is challenged, by Job, and by the situation that he faces, then all Bildad can do is to close up, and become obdurately insistent on the rightness of his doctrinal stance.

Bildad first speaks in chapter 8:

8:1 Then Bildad the Shuhite answered:
2 'How long will you say these things,
and the words of your mouth be a great wind?

Bildad gets stuck into Job right away! Eliphaz says something similar to Job in his second speech (15:2), not his first, but Bildad from the start says, 'You are just mouthing empty words—it is like a big puff of wind'.

Then Bildad lays his foundation:

8:3 Does God pervert justice?
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?

There is the right way; there is the wrong way. God is fixed in the right way. He will not change from that. So it is cast-iron, like that.

Of course, it is true: God will not pervert justice, and the Judge of all the earth will not do wrong. But how large is Bildad's conception of this God?

THE SINS OF THE CHILDREN

In verse 4 he says that it is not just Job who is in the wrong. Remember one of the sufferings of Job was that all his children perished. Bildad, rather unfeelingly, gets stuck into Job's children. He must do that, you see, if he is to apply this system. He says, 'They have all perished, so they must have been terrible sinners, so they must have got their just deserts'. And that's that.

8:4 If your children sinned against him,
he delivered them into the power of their transgression.

That is just what Job doesn't need to hear. And that is really not the way Job approached God on behalf of his children. Think back to chapter 1, verses 4–5:

His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' This is what Job always did.

Job knew the justice of Almighty God. He knew the seriousness of sin. Job also knew the provision that God had made for His mercy. So he made full use of that, in his prayer for his children, and his offering of sacrifice for them. Bildad appears to know nothing of that. The children have perished, and so they must have been terrible transgressors, and that's it. They have been delivered into the power of their transgression.

VENDING-MACHINE GOD

Bildad does urge Job to seek God and be accepted, but there is a condition attached: 'if you are pure and righteous':

8:5 If you will seek God
and make supplication to the Almighty,
6 if you are pure and upright,
surely then he will rouse himself for you
and restore to you your rightful place.
7 Though your beginning was small,
your latter days will be very great.

It is almost like a vending machine: put in the right coins, you get out the right package. If you are pure and right, then God will be bound to do this back to you; but if you are not, he will be bound to do the opposite. That is the kind of system in which Bildad is working. You

will get great reward, if you are pure and upright. Quite straightforward. Why can't you just accept that?

THE SYSTEMATISERS

Bildad goes, for his authority, to the olden days:

- 8:8 For inquire now of bygone generations,
and consider what their ancestors have found;
9 for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing,
for our days on earth are but a shadow.
10 Will they not teach you and tell you
and utter words out of their understanding?

He appeals to respect for the forebears and the tradition of the great teachers of the faith. That is something that we often do. We need to be careful how we do it, and that we are actually representing them rightly.

I was reading a book once about a fellow called Grimshaw, of Haworth. He was one of those involved in the evangelical revival in eighteenth century England. He was an Anglican minister, and Haworth was a little parish up in the north of England, and he just got on with preaching the gospel, under God. This book that I was reading was claiming, Ah, Grimshaw—he was one of the founders of *our great evangelical tradition*! That could not have been further from the mind of Grimshaw. He was just getting on with preaching the gospel. What he and others did had been taken, and set up into a system, 'the great evangelical tradition', and he had been put at the head of that. That is what happens, unfortunately, with all the great teachers, like Luther, and Calvin: they are men who were getting on with the job under God, and in the course of that they made certain statements, in their wrestling with God and with the situation they were in, and people then lock onto those statements *outside* the cut-and-thrust of the wrestling with God and with people that those great souls were engaged in. So, after Luther had gone, after Calvin had gone, the systematisers came in, and they took things that they had said, and they put them into categories. They then end up, sometimes, making those great teachers say things that they never really said, or not in quite that way. Because it is now at one remove from the cut-and-thrust of that wrestling. The same thing will happen with teachers that are abroad today.

So Bildad is your armchair theologian, or your library-research theologian, who takes what some have said—like what the Bible says about the justice of God, or what the Bible says about rewarding the righteous, or what the Bible says about punishing the wicked—but then abstracts that and makes it into a system, which then he cannot see out of to the reality of God as God really is.

When Bildad puts his theology into words, he phrases it beautifully. This little piece from Bildad is some of the finest poetry in the Book of Job:

- 8:11 Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh?
Can reeds flourish where there is no water?
12 While yet in flower and not cut down,
they wither before any other plant.
13 Such are the paths of all who forget God;
the hope of the godless shall perish.

That is beautiful stuff. But as we read through this, we see there is no hope for the wicked. The godless person will just be destroyed. He says, That is the way it *must be*, with the wicked:

- 8:14 Their confidence is gossamer,
a spider's house their trust.
15 If one leans against its house, it will not stand;
if one lays hold of it, it will not endure.
16 The wicked thrive before the sun,
and their shoots spread over the garden.
17 Their roots twine around the stoneheap;
they live among the rocks.
18 If they are destroyed from their place,
then it will deny them, saying, 'I have never seen you.'
19 See, these are their happy ways,
and out of the earth still others will spring.

20 See, God will not reject a blameless person,
nor take the hand of evildoers.
21 He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,
and your lips with shouts of joy.
22 Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,
and the tent of the wicked will be no more."

The problem with this, when we take the truth and set it up into a system, is that it then becomes automatic and self-perpetuating. It allows no room for the free sovereign action of the personal God. Even God must obey these logical rules that are imposed by the theologian on His truth.

It may be as Bildad sets out here, that the hope of the godless will perish. But God may decide to keep the wicked going. This is what Job later points out to Bildad, that Bildad cannot quite cope with. What about when God *does* keep the wicked going, for purposes of His own: perhaps to bless them, because He wants to send His rain on the just and the unjust (see Matthew 5:45); perhaps to judge them: to bring the pressure of His love to bear on their lives (see Luke 5:1–11); or perhaps for some other purpose of His own, that is not for us to say. Perhaps in His forbearance, to bring them to repentance (see Romans 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9). Or for whatever reason.

INCOMPARABLE GOD

Job sees through what Bildad is saying here. He is not satisfied with that tidy system, whether it is going to reward him or not. Reward is not what Job is wanting. He is not saying, I want to get my act right so I can get all my wealth back again, and get my family back, if that is possible. Job is not interested in that. He has come to the edge of his life, and he is not really concerned with those issues any more. What Job wants is God—he wants God to deal personally with him. He will not be content with any thing else.

In chapter 9, Job replies:

- 9:1 Then Job answered:
2 'Indeed I know that this is so;
but how can a mortal be just before God?
3 If one wished to contend with him,
one could not answer him once in a thousand.

Maybe Job is beginning to say in this chapter, 'I would rather be condemned by a warm, true living God, than rewarded by some kind of cold impersonal vending-machine system, however much it may favour me.' In chapter 9, he is not just answering Bildad; he is also harking back to what Eliphaz was saying. This may sound a little bit like what Eliphaz was saying here: that God is so highly exalted that you could never be just before Him—Eliphaz

was saying human beings can never be pure before their Maker. I don't think Job is saying that here. 'How can a mortal be just before God—how can I come before God?' That is what he is asking. Eliphaz was despairing of this ever being possible. Job is insistent that it is possible, and he wants it to happen. He feels that everything is against him, and the action of God is hard and heavy against him, and he wants to be able to break through that and come before God and speak with Him. But he knows that, in doing that, it is not going to be on the basis of an evenly-balanced system, like Bildad was saying. Bildad was saying, 'You put this in, you get that out'. Job is saying, 'No, God's not like that'. Eliphaz is right when he says that, if you want to balance God and humanity off against each other, where is humanity? For God is God, and He is not going to be locked into a system that balances us out, one against the other. That is why he says, 'If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times.'

9:4 He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength
—who has resisted him, and succeeded?—

Job is saying a word to his comforters there: 'You think I am trying to harden myself against God, to stand up against Him. That is not what I am on about at all. That would never succeed. For look at God: who He is, what He does! God can remove a mountain—what will He do with a human being?'

9:5 he who removes mountains, and they do not know it,
when he overturns them in his anger;
6 who shakes the earth out of its place,
and its pillars tremble;
7 who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
who seals up the stars;
8 who alone stretched out the heavens
and trampled the waves of the Sea;
9 who made the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the chambers of the south;
10 who does great things beyond understanding,
and marvellous things without number.

There is no deficiency in Job's appreciation of God's greatness and His majesty. In fact, it seems whenever Job speaks about God, there is so much more welling up in his heart, and welling up in our hearts, than there is when the comforters attempt to speak about God, in the way that they want to put Him into their boxes or into their categories. Job's heart is so full of God that when he just gives expression to some of the very things that the comforters were trying to say, it comes across with so much more grandeur and majesty.

CAN I LAY HOLD OF GOD?

But this is also Job's problem:

9:11 Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him;
he moves on, but I do not perceive him.
12 He snatches away; who can stop him?
Who will say to him, 'What are you doing?'

He is saying, 'I am searching for God in these sufferings of mine, and no way can I lay hold of Him! No way can I question what He is doing in that way'.

He goes on to talk of the greatness of God:

9:13 God will not turn back his anger;
the helpers of Rahab bowed beneath him.

That is a reference back to the beginning of the Book of Genesis, where we are told that the earth was void and without form, and there was chaos, and the swirling depths of the ocean, and God sent out His creative word over all of that. There are various stories that are hinted at in the Bible about the kind of process by which God subdued chaos and established His order of creation. One of them was that there was a great chaos monster called Rahab, with all its cohorts, and in a mighty battle God subdued that. There are various hints of that kind of story coming through in the Bible, and this is one of them. Job harks back to that. He is saying, 'If God has a purpose against a person, you are not going to put a stop to that until God has done what God is going to do'. See how he comes back to God's sovereignty and God's freedom of action, and the greatness and the majesty of that, which Bildad was trying to restrict.

9:14 How then can I answer him,
choosing my words with him?

If I try and put a prayer into the right words, how is that going to stop God doing what He is going to do?

9:15 Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.
16 If I summoned him and he answered me,
I do not believe that he would listen to my voice.

I cannot make any claims on my own behalf against God. I must be on the basis of God's mercy, freely and sovereignly administered by God. 'If I summoned him and he answered me'—I think he means in the kind of way that Bildad says, so that we are sort of on an even footing, and He *has to* respond to my request that is phrased in the right way—if it was that, he says, I could not respect a God that worked at that kind of level.

Job goes then into a further description of his sufferings:

9:17 For he crushes me with a tempest,
and multiplies my wounds without cause;
18 he will not let me get my breath,
but fills me with bitterness.
19 If it is a contest of strength, he is the strong one!
If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?

We have seen before, and we shall see right through the Book of Job, that Job will want to deal with no one other than God. Satan does not get a mention in the mouth of Job, though we know he was involved in chapters 1 and 2. Job sees everything that is happening, rightly, as the action of God in his life, and it is before this God that he now wants to come. This is the thing that the comforters can't come at.

Job also knows that if he was to approach God according to the evenly balanced system that Bildad is propounding, he would get nowhere:

20 Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me;
though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.
21 I am blameless; I do not know myself;
I loathe my life.
22 It is all one; therefore I say,
he destroys both the blameless and the wicked.

- 23 When disaster brings sudden death,
 he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.
24 The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;
 he covers the eyes of its judges—if it is not he, who then is it?

He says, 'I am innocent . . . I am blameless'. Remember that Job has not ever called himself sinless. We shall see again that he does acknowledge himself as a sinner: that there were sins in his youth, and there are iniquities that are uncovered and brought to his mind by this great suffering—as we do become very sensitive to our sin when suffering comes. Job is fully aware of that. He has already said, 'I must appeal for mercy'. You can only appeal for mercy if you are a sinner, and Job does that. But he is saying, In this matter of the sufferings that have come on me now, my present disposition towards God is not sinful, it is not wrong, I haven't charged God with wrong, and I still will not do that. I have acknowledged that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, and I have blessed the name of the Lord—in this suffering. That is what he is referring to here. 'I am innocent, I am blameless. You are trying to accuse me of coming against God, or trying to set myself against God in all of this, and you are telling me to submit and knuckle under to that. But I am not in a wrongful position in this suffering, as I am now.' That is what he is saying. It is in this that he is calling upon God vindicate him.

GETTING IT RIGHT?

It may be that not everything Job says in his suffering is wholly well judged and well balanced. In our sufferings we don't always see clearly—that is part of the depth of suffering—and we don't always say things that are completely judicious. So when he starts to say, 'He destroys both the blameless and the wicked'—well, we know that this happens, that everyone good or bad must die—and 'When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent', he begins here perhaps to overstep the bounds. When God finally speaks to Job, there are certain things that He must rebuke about Job. Even though He commends Job and the position he has taken over against the comforters, God at the same time must rebuke some of what Job has said in his anguish. This may be an instance of where Job has lost sight of God and the truth of God in some way.

Job does say, 'The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges.' God does give the earth over to the wicked: He gives the earth over to the control of Satan, who is 'the ruler of this world' (see Luke 4:5–8, John 12:31–33, 14:30–31, 1 John 5:19). That is all part of the working out of His great purpose. The thing that Job is saying is: 'If it is not he, who then is it?' Who can stand alongside God? Not Satan, not any of the human race, not me. It is God who is sovereign. Here Job is not charging God with wrong, but he is saying, 'This is the way I can see it now', and it does not fit at all with what Bildad has said.

Then again, he goes into spelling out the experience of his suffering, which is very great:

- 9:25 My days are swifter than a runner;
 they flee away, they see no good.
26 They go by like skiffs of reed,
 like an eagle swooping on the prey.

So much for what Bildad says about the endurance and prosperity of the righteous! But then, he says, if I try to put a brave face on it, and say I won't try and work this out with God, I can't do that either!

- 9:27 If I say, 'I will forget my complaint;

I will put off my sad countenance and be of good cheer,'
28 I become afraid of all my suffering,
for I know you will not hold me innocent.
29 I shall be condemned;
why then do I labour in vain?
30 If I wash myself with soap
and cleanse my hands with lye,
31 yet you will plunge me into filth,
and my own clothes will abhor me.
32 For he is not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him,
that we should come to trial together.

Job knows that if the whole of his life is weighed up before God, then there is plenty there that God would have every right to condemn him for. If he goes that way, he would not stand a chance. What he desires is to come before God for justification. But how can this come about?

9:33 There is no umpire between us,
who might lay his hand on us both.

There is no third party in this, and there is no system that can make it as if there is a third party between us, by which we can negotiate. It's God, and it's me, and that's all we can say!

9:34 If he would take his rod away from me,
and not let dread of him terrify me,
35 then I would speak without fear of him,
for I know I am not what I am thought to be.

Job is acknowledging that God has every right to lay His rod upon Job, but he is saying, 'Nevertheless, I desire to have that closeness of relationship with You, I do want to speak with You directly. Not to make any claims for myself, not to put myself on the same level as God—for that could never be—but I do want to be before Him'.

WARM AND REAL, AND BIG ENOUGH

That is why Job does not hold back in giving voice to his sufferings, as we have seen before:

10:1 I loathe my life;
I will give free utterance to my complaint;
I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
2 I will say to God, Do not condemn me;
let me know why you contend against me.

It is because Job has such a great and a warm and real understanding of God that he does not bottle up, he does not button down, as the comforters are trying to tell him to do, but he speaks his heart, and he knows, 'Well, God has just got to be big enough to handle that, and that is why I will come out with it'. He is not trying to put himself in the right before God, or phrase it in such a way that it might be acceptable to God—he figures, 'Whether it is right, or whether it's not, God has got to be big enough to handle this, so I will say it anyway'. That is what all the great pray-ers do, like Abraham, and the Psalmist. They don't hold anything back before God. Simply *because they* know the greatness and the mercy and the reality and the truth of God as He really is.

10:3 Does it seem good to you to oppress,
to despise the work of your hands

- and favour the schemes of the wicked?
- 4 Do you have eyes of flesh?
Do you see as humans see?
- 5 Are your days like the days of mortals,
or your years like human years,
- 6 that you seek out my iniquity
and search for my sin,
- 7 although you know that I am not guilty,
and there is no one to deliver out of your hand?

One of the prophets says, 'God is not a human being, that He should condemn or that He should try and follow through our sin to its bitter end, as we might' (see Hosea 11:8–9). Once again, Job is saying, 'We are not on the same level: You are not a human being like we are. You are not like these comforters who are trying to push me through in the full extent of my being a sinner. You are bigger than that':

- 10:8 Your hands fashioned and made me;
and now you turn and destroy me.
- 9 Remember that you fashioned me like clay;
and will you turn me to dust again?
- 10 Did you not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese?

Completely at God's mercy, stirred around, helpless.

- 10:11 You clothed me with skin and flesh,
and knit me together with bones and sinews.
- 12 You have granted me life and steadfast love,
and your care has preserved my spirit.

We saw that right at the beginning, how favoured Job was with God. Particularly in chapter 29, how Job really knew closeness with God right through his life, and delighted in Him, and was wise and mature and strong in that. These are the things that Job is appealing to. He is saying, 'Surely, all of that could not have been for nothing! Because we had such fellowship there, and I knew such a wonderful relationship with You, that surely what is happening now cannot be the last word.'

- 10:13 Yet these things you hid in your heart;
I know that this was your purpose.

Job is still saying, 'Even these sufferings are something that has come from God, for His purpose'. The same purpose by which God was showing favour to Job earlier is now the purpose by which He is inflicting these deep sufferings.

- 10:14 If I sin, you watch me,
and do not acquit me of my iniquity.
- 15 If I am wicked, woe to me!
If I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head,
for I am filled with disgrace
and look upon my affliction.

Note here again how Job does not deny his sin, or claim that it should be overlooked. Yet even Job's righteousness, in the face of this suffering, cannot really make a difference to him:

he cannot hold that up as something that he can use to lever God away from him, or to get His hand off him, if that is what God is going to do.

10:16 Bold as a lion you hunt me;
you repeat your exploits against me.
17 You renew your witnesses against me,
and increase your vexation toward me;
you bring fresh troops against me.

Perhaps Job is saying there that even the comforters have been gathered together by God, as part of the compounding of his sufferings.

10:18 Why did you bring me forth from the womb?
Would that I had died before any eye had seen me,
19 and were as though I had not been,
carried from the womb to the grave.

Once again Job is saying, as we have seen before: ‘Surely, if this is the outcome of life, it would be better never to have lived’. He is asking to die, but it would have been better never to have been born, or to have died in the womb.

10:20 Are not the days of my life few?
Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort
21 before I go, never to return,
to the land of gloom and deep darkness,
22 the land of gloom and chaos,
where light is like darkness.”

If Bildad had been able to receive all of that, as Job was spelling out the depths of his suffering before God, and speaking to God, and witnessing to God, as he knows God to be, then maybe it would have cracked open some of that cast-iron system, and Bildad would have come to a revelation of God. We know later, in the end, God does speak to Bildad, as he speaks to Eliphaz and Zophar, and gets them to ask Job to pray for them, and they accept that ministry, and so do repent, and so participate in the kind of revelation of God that Job has received, and in the benefits of that. Before that happens, Bildad is still locked into his cast-iron system, and none of that warm, palpable reality that Job is bearing witness to cracks that open, and he just becomes very tight-lipped about the whole thing—he can’t handle it.

Gracious Father, we thank You that whatever we try to erect against You, to shore ourselves up, or to take hold of life in our own way, You do not let that stand; but that by Your word, and by Your action in our lives, You bring Yourself to us, and us to Yourself. Help us to know that You are God, that we are Your creatures, and to be glad of that, and to be glad of the great dignity to which You call us, that we might know You: not just know You, but know You as our Father, and us as Your children, and be conformed in Your wonderful image. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Nine

BILDAD —II

What we have found about Bildad is that he has a cast-iron system, a doctrinal straitjacket, that he starts in, and finishes in, and never sees his way clear to break out of. He upholds the justice of Almighty God—he has a fine, unshakeable belief in that—but for Bildad it is not so much a personal relationship as a rigid, logical doctrinal system. You do something wrong, you have consequences that follow; you do things right, you have consequences that follow from that. It is all a bit automatic, rather than the kind of personal relationship with God—a coming before God—that Job is searching for. It also makes the whole system dependent on what we do, rather than on the free and sovereign action of God. When there are things that do not fit with Bildad's doctrinal system—when Job confronts him with those, in his own situation and in what he says—all Bildad can do is close up, and become insistent on the rightness of his own doctrinal stance.

Let us remind ourselves of what Bildad said in 8:11–13:

Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh?
Can reeds flourish where there is no water?
While yet in flower and not cut down,
they wither before any other plant.
Such are the paths of all who forget God;
the hope of the godless shall perish.

Remember how we said that we cannot discount all that these comforters say. They are men of God, and good theologians. What Bildad says here is much the same as we find, for instance, in Psalm 1: those who trust in the Lord will be like a tree planted by a stream of water, but those who are not trusting in the Lord will be like a shrub out in the desert, with nothing to feed it. That is fine. But when that becomes detached from God, and applied, rigidly, to every situation, then it has lost its source. So in 8:20–22 Bildad says—and here he is trying to put the best construction on this for Job, to be positive towards him; for the moment he uses this doctrine to encourage Job: he believes he is innocent, and likes to think the best of him—and so he says, This system that I am setting forth will reward you, if you do the right thing:

See, God will not reject a blameless person,
nor take the hand of evildoers.
He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,
and your lips with shouts of joy.
Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,
and the tent of the wicked will be no more.

Job sees through that. He is not satisfied with that tidy system—whether it is going to reward him or not. In chapters 9 and 10, he wants God to deal personally with him. Perhaps Job would even rather be condemned by a warm, true and living God, than be rewarded by some kind of cold impersonal vending-machine system, however much it may favour him.

COLD COMFORT

We can remind ourselves just how much 'comfort' Job was getting from these helpers in what they are trying to say if we look again at 16:1:

I have heard many such things;
miserable comforters are you all.

Job is not getting much solace from his so-called ‘comforters’, because he can see further than they can. This is especially true in the case of Bildad. In 17:2 Job says:

Surely there are mockers around me,
and my eye dwells on their provocation.

He says to God:

Lay down a pledge for me with yourself;
who is there that will give surety for me?
Since you have closed their minds to understanding,
therefore you will not let them triumph (17:3–4)

Job is saying, ‘Poor old Bildad: he has a closed system—and a closed mind!’ But Job attributes even that to the action of God. Bildad wants to be comfortable in that, so Job says, ‘OK, God, You’ve closed his mind, he can’t see any further. I can see further than he can right now. That is where You have locked him into for the moment. So I know that their advice is not going to prevail. You are bigger than that, and I can see that You will not let what they are saying come to pass.’

He even goes so far as to say in 17:5:

Those who denounce friends for reward—
the eyes of their children will fail.

Perhaps there are other motives going on in the comforters, or something as bad as that. But Job’s friends offer him no hope.

BILDAD GETS CROSS

In chapter 18, Bildad has his second speech. He is quite upset, but he sticks to his digs:

18:1 Then Bildad the Shuhite answered:
2 ‘How long will you hunt for words?
Consider, and then we shall speak.
3 Why are we counted as cattle?
Why are we stupid in your sight?
4 You who tear yourself in your anger—
shall the earth be forsaken because of you,
or the rock be removed out of its place?’

Bildad is getting quite cross with Job here. He says, ‘You haven’t been listening to what I have been saying, and I have been telling it very clearly. Now just be quiet, and listen, and then say something sensible! What you have been trying to do is totally disrupt the foundations of the universe. Here am I, spelling it out exactly the way it is, but you want everything to suit you.’ It is interesting that often we accuse others of the things we are most guilty of ourselves—we see that with Bildad too.

Bildad thinks that Job is regarding them as stupid. ‘All this anguish that you are going through’, he says—where Job has been saying, ‘The Lord is ripping me apart’—‘you are tearing yourself in your anger’. We have seen that Job is not an angry man. He was simply spelling out the way things were, and the way he was experiencing them. He was not trying to ‘have a go’ at God at all. Maybe Bildad has a bit of anger, and he is putting this onto Job.

A TRAP IS SET FOR THE WICKED

Here Bildad really emphasises his position, and spells it out clearly:

- 18:5 Surely the light of the wicked is put out,
and the flame of their fire does not shine.
- 6 The light is dark in their tent,
and the lamp above them is put out.
- 7 Their strong steps are shortened,
and their own schemes throw them down.
- 8 For they are thrust into a net by their own feet,
and they walk into a pitfall.
- 9 A trap seizes them by the heel;
a snare lays hold of them.
- 10 A rope is hid for them in the ground,
a trap for them in the path.
- 11 Terrors frighten them on every side,
and chase them at their heels.
- 12 Their strength is consumed by hunger,
and calamity is ready for their stumbling.
- 13 By disease their skin is consumed,
the firstborn of Death consumes their limbs.
- 14 They are torn from the tent in which they trusted,
and are brought to the king of terrors.
- 15 In their tents nothing remains;
sulfur is scattered upon their habitations.
- 16 Their roots dry up beneath,
and their branches wither above.
- 17 Their memory perishes from the earth,
and they have no name in the street.
- 18 They are thrust from light into darkness,
and driven out of the world.
- 19 They have no offspring or descendant among their people,
and no survivor where they used to live.
- 20 They of the west are appalled at their fate,
and horror seizes those of the east.
- 21 Surely such are the dwellings of the ungodly,
such is the place of those who do not know God.”

Again, wonderful poetry—Bildad is a fine poet. But we get the sense that it is unrelated, really, to anything that Job is going through. Bildad is stating it as an abstract principle, rather than saying, ‘Job, this is what is going to happen to *you*’, or even, ‘This is what God is going to do with you’. He simply says, ‘This is what will happen’. It is all very automatic and pre-ordained. The trap is set, and it will spring, and that’s it! This is the way it is going to be.

‘Surely the light of the wicked is put out, and the flame of their fire does not shine.’ It may be that they are going to be snuffed out in death, or it may be just a way of saying, ‘Nothing will go right for them—they won’t have light, they will be in darkness. Everything that they do will bring about their own doom. They will drop themselves in a hole; they will get trapped, they will be snared; they will be running all their lives, chased by terrors; they will come into calamity, hunger, disease (‘the first-born of Death’—disease is closely related to death, and does its bidding, because disease often leads to death). Anything they trust in they will be torn from, and they will be brought to the king of terrors (perhaps death itself). They will lose all their possessions; judgment will come, with brimstone scattered over their habitations. They will have no life; they will dry up and wither. No one will remember them;

they will have no fame or reputation, and no offspring and no survivors. People will be appalled to see the terrible things that happen to the ungodly.’

That is what Bildad believes. He is quite insistent on all of that. He does not want to press it through to the implication that therefore Job is wicked, and must deserve all he has got. But Bildad still insists that he himself must be right—he can’t be wrong. If he had to admit that he was wrong, is it that he would then have to face the real personal God, and deal directly with Him, and that perhaps he could not handle that? Can any of us ‘handle’ that, ourselves?

GOD HAS CLOSED HIS NET

Job, on the other hand, knows that he is dealing directly with the living personal God. In chapter 19, he begins by saying to his friends:

19:1 Then Job answered:

2 ‘How long will you torment me,
and break me in pieces with words?

Bildad has not followed through the implications of what he has said. If he had, he would have said, ‘Look, Job, this has all happened to you, so you must be a godless person’. Bildad has not been prepared to do that. He just wants to state his principles. Job, however, does take it personally, as we would expect. The implications of what Bildad is saying are obvious to him, so he responds accordingly. He extends it to all three of them:

19:3 These ten times you have cast reproach upon me;
are you not ashamed to wrong me?

4 And even if it is true that I have erred,
my error remains with me.

Job is fully aware of his own shortcomings. But in this matter Job considers that he has not wronged God, and that he is not out of kilter with Him.

19:5 If indeed you magnify yourselves against me,
and make my humiliation an argument against me,
6 know then that God has put me in the wrong,
and closed his net around me.

That is something that even Bildad was not prepared to say. He had said, ‘You do this, and that will happen’. Job is saying, ‘Well, if that is true, it is *God* who is doing it—so let’s come before God!’ None of the comforters ever come before God in prayer. Have you noticed that? They spell out what they have to say. Job alone, the true godly man, is the only one who addresses God directly. So he calls out to God:

19:7 Even when I cry out, ‘Violence!’ I am not answered;
I call aloud, but there is no justice.

8 He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass,
and he has set darkness upon my paths.

9 He has stripped my glory from me,
and taken the crown from my head.

10 He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone,
he has uprooted my hope like a tree.

11 He has kindled his wrath against me,
and counts me as his adversary.

12 His troops come on together;
they have thrown up siegeworks against me,
and encamp around my tent.

That is Job's personal agony, spelled out again. It is compounded by Job's knowledge that the One who is doing this to him will not speak to him about it.

LONELINESS AND DESOLATION

He expresses then his utter loneliness and isolation in all of this. The more these comforters say, the more they isolate him and leave him on his own, with no one share with, no one to understand:

19:13 He has put my family far from me,
and my acquaintances are wholly estranged from me.

Sometimes people find it very difficult to handle someone who is in deep suffering, especially when it is something like cancer, or AIDS. Suddenly there are good reasons why you do not want to know that person, or it is best not to have dealings with them.

19:14 My relatives and my close friends have failed me;
15 the guests in my house have forgotten me;
my serving girls count me as a stranger;
I have become an alien in their eyes.

That distancing, that coldness, extends even to the servants of his household: We now do not want to have anything to do with you. 'We knew you before, when you were our master, when all was well, and we bowed to you, and were part of your household. Now we do not really want to know you, because we don't really understand what's happening.' This is people's own defence mechanism: 'We don't want to be faced or confronted with what is happening here, or what the implications of that might be, or what God might be doing in that'.

19:16 I call to my servant, but he gives me no answer;
I must myself plead with him.

His servants now even despise him, or crow over him, in a way. He has to beg them: Come on, I need your help here. Demeaned and helpless in this way is how some people in hospital or nursing homes may feel, when they are unable to get the help that they need.

We saw even that Job's wife had said to him, 'Curse God, and die' (2:9–10). That must have been one of the deepest sufferings that he had to endure, not to have her heart with him in this:

19:17 My breath is repulsive to my wife;
I am loathsome to my own family.
18 Even young children despise me;
when I rise, they talk against me.
19 All my intimate friends abhor me,
and those whom I loved have turned against me.
20 My bones cling to my skin and to my flesh,
and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth.

In the next verse he brings it back to reality, back to personal issues:

19:21 Have pity on me, have pity on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me!
22 Why do you, like God, pursue me,

never satisfied with my flesh?

Job feels that God is arrayed against him. These 'friends' are just putting more nails in the coffin. He says, 'Stand with me in this!'

REGULATED BY STRICT JUSTICE?

In chapter 24, Job answers Bildad's case. He demolishes it, point by point. He points out where it does not match with things that really happen in this life. Bildad has said that every evil will receive a direct judgement from God, and that will be it. Against this, Job asks the question, 'Why are *not* times of judgment kept by God? You say they are, but I look around, and that is not always what I see':

24:1 Why are times not kept by the Almighty,
and why do those who know him never see his days?

You are saying that everything is regulated according to strict justice, but I am going to show you now that there are those who are godless, who get away with it, for quite a time, and that there are those who are with God who strain to see the good days:

- 24:2 The wicked remove landmarks;
they seize flocks and pasture them.
- 3 They drive away the donkey of the orphan;
they take the widow's ox for a pledge.
- 4 They thrust the needy off the road;
the poor of the earth all hide themselves.
- 5 Like wild asses in the desert
they go out to their toil,
scavenging in the wasteland
food for their young.
- 6 They reap in a field not their own
and they glean in the vineyard of the wicked.
- 7 They lie all night naked, without clothing,
and have no covering in the cold.
- 8 They are wet with the rain of the mountains,
and cling to the rock for want of shelter.
- 9 There are those who snatch the orphan child from the breast,
and take as a pledge the infant of the poor.
- 10 They go about naked, without clothing;
though hungry, they carry the sheaves;
- 11 between their terraces they press out oil;
they tread the wine presses, but suffer thirst.
- 12 From the city the dying groan,
and the throat of the wounded cries for help;
yet God pays no attention to their prayer.

This is talking about social injustice: how the rich and powerful get more rich and powerful, and the poor and helpless get more poor and helpless. That is something that has been going on in Australia now for a number of years, and it is still getting worse. There are those who can afford their big houses and their overseas trips, and there are those who are finding life more and more difficult. The way it is spoken of here is more akin to what has been going on for decades in under-developed countries, as the rich countries have been garnering all the world's resources to themselves, and ordering the world's economic system so that it suits

their purposes, and ride rough-shod over those who do not have the same kind of power. We need to be aware of that, and open our eyes to it. Job here spells it out very clearly.

The removal of landmarks means the seizing of other people's property, and the seizing of their flocks and pasture. Taking the widow's ox for a pledge: the poor are obliged to borrow from the rich, and then they have to pay high interest for that, and if a poor person only has one ox, and the money-lender says, 'What are you going to give me for security', and the poor person says, 'All I've got is my ox', and the money-lender says, 'Well, give me that', then suddenly all earning capacity is gone, because the poor person depends on that one ox to plough and put in crops. The poor are locked into a poverty cycle, where they cannot get out. So the poor are reduced to trying to get the pickings. They are thrust off the road: they are not given the main chance. They have to go like wild asses in the desert, they have to go picking for food for their children, trying to get what is left over from the rich. They do not have the right kind of covering or clothing. They are not properly housed: they have to live in caves, or shelter under mountains. The rich can be quite ruthless: they can even 'snatch the orphan child from the breast' as a pledge, perhaps to be taken into slavery. The poor go about naked and hungry. They have to do all the work for the land-owners and those who have the wealth, but they cannot participate in the benefits of it. They carry the sheaves, but they do not get their share to eat. They make the olive oil; they help make the wine, but they do not get to drink much of it themselves. It all goes to the rich. So 'the dying groan, the wounded cry for help, *and nothing seems to happen*', Job says. What is going on here? How does that fit with your armchair theology?

In verses 13–17, he speaks about the wicked, those who seem intent on evil: murderers and adulterers, those who work in the dark, and are more comfortable in the dark than in the light. If what they did in the dark came to light, it would not bear being seen. Darkness is also the time for break-ins and petty crime. When the sun goes down, that is when they get up to do their dark deeds:

- 24:13 There are those who rebel against the light,
 who are not acquainted with its ways,
 and do not stay in its paths.
14 The murderer rises at dusk
 to kill the poor and needy,
 and in the night is like a thief.
15 The eye of the adulterer also waits for the twilight,
 saying, 'No eye will see me';
 and he disguises his face.
16 In the dark they dig through houses;
 by day they shut themselves up;
 they do not know the light.
17 For deep darkness is morning to all of them;
 for they are friends with the terrors of deep darkness.

The violence we continue to experience in our city and state, with the unearthing of bizarre murders, and the resources of the police being stretched to their limit, not being able to find all of the perpetrators of these things and to follow them through— this is a familiar picture to us. Job is simply pointing out that this is just what happens. 'How do you explain that, Bildad? You say':

- 24:18 Swift are they on the face of the waters;
 their portion in the land is cursed;
 no treacher turns toward their vineyards.
19 Drought and heat snatch away the snow waters;

so does Sheol those who have sinned.
20 The womb forgets them;
the worm finds them sweet;
they are no longer remembered;
so wickedness is broken like a tree.

‘That is what you have been saying, that suddenly they are left with nothing. But you look at the rich today, and they seem to be doing very well, and really to be enjoying life. Some of them live to a great old age. They get squares of towns named after them—it is not that they are not remembered any more. They seem to be honoured, with buildings and other edifices named after them. They are remembered.’ It is interesting when we go over some of the great names that we hear in history, that places are named after, and then we read a bit of history and find what rogues they were—how did they get away with that, to be honoured for it?

24:21 They harm the childless woman,
and do no good to the widow.
22 Yet God prolongs the life of the mighty by his power;
they rise up when they despair of life.

Even when it looks like they are getting their just deserts, and are on their death-bed, back they bounce again!

24:23 He gives them security, and they are supported;
his eyes are upon their ways.

It is not that Job is saying they all get rewarded for what they are doing, because he goes on to recognise that they do end up dying. But then, so does everyone else. So what is the difference? Job regards himself as very close to death—he does not know how many days he has left, and he would find it a real release to die. So he does not deny death. That must come to the rich and the powerful too.

24:24 They are exalted a little while, and then are gone;
they wither and fade like the mallow;
they are cut off like the heads of grain.
25 If it is not so, who will prove me a liar,
and show that there is nothing in what I say?’

Job gives a very balanced picture. He is not trying to set up another rigid system over against Bildad’s. He is trying to be open to the whole of reality in everything that happens. ‘Surely’, he says, ‘this is self-evident’.

PERSONAL MERCY

Job is pointing to the reality that Jesus spoke of when, in the Sermon on the Mount, he said, ‘Your Father in heaven . . . makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous’ (Matthew 5:45). We may say that there is no justice in that. But what we find there is heaps of mercy. Mercy is a personal thing. Justice can be automatic, or rigid, but mercy is always personal. That is what Job is groping for, all through. He is just pointing out what goes on, and then saying, ‘Well, *where is God* in all of this?’ Maybe we can start to understand when we see those words of Jesus: ‘Your Father in heaven . . . makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous’. Does that mean we then have to take up the position of Eliphaz, who said, ‘It doesn’t matter whether you are good or bad—God’s so highly exalted, it’s not going

to make any difference to Him'. Job cannot say that, and Jesus certainly would not either. Jesus knew everything about the judgment that is due to evil and sin: he received it on the Cross in his own person, by the action of God. So this is where we are: we are not in an automatic system; we are in a universe that is governed by a real and personal God. He can delay His just requirements on evil, if he wants to. He can bring judgment straight away, or He can give a person a long time. So you cannot say in life that if something goes wrong, it is God punishing me, because I am evil, or if something goes right, it is God blessing me, because I am good. That may be true; but you could just say, 'It may be God being very forbearing with me'. There is blessing, there is judgment, and there is *forbearance*—the holding back of judgment, delaying it in patience and mercy. There is also letting the whole thing play itself out, and pay itself out, as part of God's action. We see that in Romans 1:18–32, where God gives us over to what is in our hearts—lets it go right through—because He knows at the end of the day He can still handle that; He has still got it covered.

Job is baffled, and often we are, at the apparent injustices, because we cannot see as God sees. Job is seeking to come to that position where he can see as God sees, or at least come before God and know that God is still God. Look at 2 Peter 3:9: 'The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.' There is no question about God's justice, but God is free within that to work as He wishes to bring through His steadfast love, which is really what He is on about.

I am not trying to justify God, or just make an answer to Bildad and Job's problems: we do not want to set up another system. I am giving you some pointers here, where we can start to have a framework or a feel in our hearts for an understanding of these things.

BILDAD'S LAST STAND

In 26:25 Job lays down the question: 'If it is not so, who will prove me a liar, and show that there is nothing in what I say?' This leads into Bildad's final speech. What Bildad says here is very short: it is the shortest chapter in the Book of Job. It is short because Bildad really has nothing more to say, and no help whatsoever to give to Job. He just reasserts his position:

- 25:1 Then Bildad the Shuhite answered:
2 'Dominion and fear are with God;
he makes peace in his high heaven.
3 Is there any number to his armies?
Upon whom does his light not arise?
4 How then can a mortal be righteous before God?
How can one born of woman be pure?
5 If even the moon is not bright
and the stars are not pure in his sight,
6 how much less a mortal, who is a maggot,
and a human being, who is a worm!'

Here end the words of Bildad. He is unremitting in his dogged insistence. He will not go as far as Eliphaz in condemning Job—he is not big enough to do that. But he will not admit that he might be wrong. So in the end he is forced to Eliphaz's position. Bildad ends up where Eliphaz started from: these are almost exactly the same words as in 5:17–19 and 15:14–16. From there, there is no other way to go but to join Eliphaz in condemning Job, and in saying that Job must be terribly wicked if God has brought all this upon him—God, who is so far removed, must have been deeply provoked for this to happen to Job. However, Bildad does

not do that. He probably would not, because he is not big enough. He is a small-minded man. Eliphaz was misled, but he was prepared to take on the tragic role and bring the condemnation to bear on Job. As we saw, there was a lot of godliness about Eliphaz. But Bildad was a small man.

Have you heard the story about who is the smallest person in the Bible? I always used to think it was 'Knee-high-miah' (Nehemiah), until I came across Bildad the 'Shoe-height' (Shuhite)! That is what Bildad is: a small man. And that is why his final contribution, like himself, is short.

Ten

ZOPHAR

Finally among the three friends we get to Zophar. Let's remind ourselves again that at the end of the Book of Job (42:7) God has a word to say about the three friends, and says in effect that they have not spoken rightly of Him as Job has. We are using that as a key to examine what each of the friends say. That does not mean that everything they say is false: they are godly men, they know their theology, so we do not condemn them but attend to what they say with discernment. Sometimes not even what they say is wrong, but the way they say it and the reason they have for saying it—the attitude behind it—is deficient.

The two older ones, Eliphaz and Bildad, have spoken first each time. Eliphaz started from the assumption that human beings cannot be righteous or pure before God. We are small, and of no account, so we must knuckle under, and put up with it when suffering comes. Job knew he was not perfect, but even so he believed that he could and would come before God justified—that is his appeal to God. (The Bible understands 'righteousness' as being righteous before God with the righteousness that comes from God—see for example Genesis 15:6, Philippians 3:9—not what we build up from below. So you are righteous before God as a justified sinner, by virtue of God's redeeming action.) Eliphaz eventually 'did his block' and said that Job must be a terrible sinner if God is making him suffer this much. Bildad, as we saw, was the one with the strict doctrinal position from which he would not budge. When Job demolished it, he remained tight-lipped and unmoved. He never comes out and openly condemns Job, as Eliphaz was driven to, but he ends up in much the same position.

Zophar is the youngest of the three friends, and less guarded than either of them. He arrogantly thinks that he is far superior to Job in his understanding of God. Though he speaks third each time, he 'lets Job have it' much earlier than the others do.

JOB IS CONDEMNED

Zophar's first speech is in chapter 11:

- 11:1 Then Zophar the Naamathite answered:
2 'Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
and should one full of talk be vindicated?
3 Should your babble put others to silence,
and when you mock, shall no one shame you?
4 For you say, "My conduct is pure,
and I am clean in God's sight."

(We have seen already that Job is not saying this—Zophar has completely misconstrued him here.)

- 5 But oh, that God would speak,
and open his lips to you,
6 and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!
For wisdom is many-sided.
Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.

This is the first time Zophar speaks—he gets stuck straight into Job. He says that Job is full of talk, that everything he is saying is just a babble of words. He says, 'I know that God could show you a thing or two, Job'. Later God does show Job a thing or two, or three or a million. But not because Zophar tells Him to!

In the second part of verse six, Job is already condemned out of Zophar's mouth. Consider the dimensions of the suffering of Job. Zophar is saying, 'That is not half of what you deserve, because of the blasphemies that are coming out of your mouth now'. Sometimes the most dangerous people, and the most insensitive, are the ones who know a few things. Like me, for example! There was a time in my life when I set out to set the world straight, and you wreak havoc as you do it. Zophar goes on to speak of things that God will show Job later on. As we shall see, they come better from God than from Zophar. Perhaps it is best to let God reveal them. If you do have some inkling about the greatness and the wonder of God, just think back to how you were before you knew it, and remember how it was God Himself who revealed it to you. We can witness to what we know, but God must bring the point home. Often it is best to stand back and let Him do it.

I AM TELLING YOU

Zophar says to Job:

- 11:7 Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?
8 I t is higher than heaven—what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?
9 Its measure is longer than the earth,
and broader than the sea.
10 If he passes through, and imprisons,
and assembles for judgment, who can hinder him?
11 For he knows those who are worthless;
when he sees iniquity, will he not consider it?
12 But a stupid person will get understanding,
when a wild ass is born human.

Zophar condemns Job out of hand very rudely. There is no hope for Job here. He is saying, 'Job, you are past redemption. You are a stupid man, you will never understand. Come on, here's my wisdom, and I'll tell you what God's like! When an ass's colt is born to a human being, then maybe you will get some understanding!'

That is the mistake we can make: we may be sprouting our new-found wisdom to someone who has known it better than we have. This is the case with Zophar and Job. Job knows exactly what Zophar is telling him. Zophar, maybe because he is young and has just discovered it, thinks that nobody else knows all this, and he has to tell them and get it across to them—set them all straight. In the time I am referring to in my life, when these great and wonderful things that I discovered about God came through to me, I wanted set all the older clergy right—the bishops didn't have a clue! These godly men had been praying for fifty years—they needed to be told a few things they hadn't yet realised, by someone who knew it! That is what Zophar is doing here, I think.

MORAL COUNSEL

Zophar then gives Job some strong moral counsel:

- 3 If you direct your heart rightly,
you will stretch out your hands toward him.
14 If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away,
and do not let wickedness reside in your tents.
15 Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish;
you will be secure, and will not fear.
16 You will forget your misery;

- you will remember it as waters that have passed away.
17 And your life will be brighter than the noonday;
its darkness will be like the morning.
18 And you will have confidence, because there is hope;
you will be protected and take your rest in safety.
19 You will lie down, and no one will make you afraid;
many will entreat your favour.
20 But the eyes of the wicked will fail;
all way of escape will be lost to them,
and their hope is to breathe their last.'

This last verse is very much like what Bildad was saying. Or even harking back to what Eliphaz said, when he said there is no hope for the wicked, there is no mercy, no forgiveness. The possibility of that does not even occur to him.

'I HAVE UNDERSTANDING AS WELL AS YOU'

Job has already had a belly-full from the other two in this first round, so we can understand if, under the circumstances, he is a little short with young Zophar:

- 12:1 Then Job answered:
2 'No doubt you are the people,
and wisdom will die with you.

When you die, all the wisdom will have gone from the world!

- 12:3 But I have understanding as well as you;
I am not inferior to you.
Who does not know such things as these?

That rather sums up Zophar's approach. If Job was not suffering so much, he might have just kept silent, and made allowances for him, and prayed for him—as no doubt some have done with me, as I have gone away thinking, 'Well, I really put them right!' Job does later pray for Zophar, and Zophar comes to a change of heart. But sometimes we 'young fellows' need to be told—it doesn't do us any harm—and here Zophar is told by Job. 'Who does not know such things as these?'—this is theological commonplace, what you are saying.

PUT YOURSELF IN MY POSITION

Job then goes on to talk about his suffering, and tries to get Zophar to realise what it means to him:

- 12:4 I am a laughingstock to my friends;
I, who called upon God and he answered me,
a just and blameless man, I am a laughingstock.
5 Those at ease have contempt for misfortune,
but it is ready for those whose feet are unstable.
6 The tents of robbers are at peace,
and those who provoke God are secure,
who bring their god in their hands.

Job is saying that robbers and idolaters are better off than one who has called upon God and known that close fellowship with God, but is now a laughingstock. He says, 'It is easy for one who is not going through this suffering to say all the things you are saying'.

- 12:7 But ask the animals, and they will teach you;

- the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
8 ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
9 Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
10 In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.

Job is saying, Everyone knows this—this is kindergarten stuff! I can say this as well as you. In fact, I think Job says it a bit better.

- 12:11 Does not the ear test words
as the palate tastes food?
12 Is wisdom with the aged,
and understanding in length of days?

The *RSV* translates verse 12: 'Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days.' Job is saying to young Zophar, 'When you grow up, and have heard as many words as I have, then maybe you'll know a bit more what you are talking about'.

OUT-ZOPHARING ZOPHAR

Job then shows that he has a much better grasp of who God is and what He does than young Zophar does. What follows reads quite magnificently. Job, suffering as he is under the hand of God, is in a much better position than Zophar is to know it for real. In this passage, he 'out-Zophars' Zophar!

- 12:13 With God are wisdom and strength;
he has counsel and understanding.
14 If he tears down, no one can rebuild;
if he shuts someone in, no one can open up.
15 If he withholds the waters, they dry up;
if he sends them out, they overwhelm the land.
16 With him are strength and wisdom;
the deceived and the deceiver are his.
17 He leads counsellors away stripped,
and makes fools of judges.
18 He looses the sash of kings,
and binds a waistcloth on their loins.
19 He leads priests away stripped,
and overthrows the mighty.
20 He deprives of speech those who are trusted,
and takes away the discernment of the elders.
21 He pours contempt on princes,
and looses the belt of the strong.
22 He uncovers the deeps out of darkness,
and brings deep darkness to light.
23 He makes nations great, then destroys them;
he enlarges nations, then leads them away.
24 He strips understanding from the leaders of the earth,
and makes them wander in a pathless waste.
25 They grope in the dark without light;
he makes them stagger like a drunkard.

That is a quite magnificent passage, about God's ruling over the nations. It has echoes of Isaiah 40: the nations are like a drop from a bucket, like dust on the scales before Him. It is

more poignant even than that, because Job in his suffering can feel something of the suffering of the nations: where they are raised up, and then they are cast down—as he himself had been—and the leaders, who were great men and great counsellors, are reduced to nothing, to be made captives and slaves, and the strong meet their match. And it is God who does all this: ‘the deceived and the deceiver are his’.

‘I WOULD SPEAK TO THE ALMIGHTY’

Job continues in chapter 13:

- 13:1 Look, my eye has seen all this,
my ear has heard and understood it.
2 What you know, I also know;
I am not inferior to you.
3 But I would speak to the Almighty,
and I desire to argue my case with God.

That is something that none of the friends is prepared to do. Only Job himself ever does that, in the whole book.

- 13:4 As for you, you whitewash with lies;
all of you are worthless physicians.

‘You are not making me better—you are making me worse!’

- 13:5 If you would only keep silent,
that would be your wisdom!

There is a verse in the Book of Proverbs that says, ‘Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent’ (Proverbs 17:28). Good advice!

LET GOD SPEAK FOR HIMSELF

Job continues:

- 13:6 Hear now my reasoning,
and listen to the pleadings of my lips.
7 Will you speak falsely for God,
and speak deceitfully for him?
8 Will you show partiality toward him,
will you plead the case for God?
9 Will it be well with you when he searches you out?
Or can you deceive him, as one person deceives another?
10 He will surely rebuke you
if in secret you show partiality.
11 Will not his majesty terrify you,
and the dread of him fall upon you?
12 Your maxims are proverbs of ashes,
your defences are defences of clay.

Note verse 8: ‘will you plead the case for God?’ God really needs no one to speak for Him. He is very capable of speaking for Himself. Job at least knows that. Sometimes we feel constrained to plead the case for God. Often that comes out of our own insecurity, or the insecurity of our own faith. Whom are we really trying to convince? Our efforts to apologise for God, or to put Him in the right, often come out of our own lack of sureness ourselves. That will be shown up, as such, by God. God will not say, ‘Oh, thanks very much for putting

up a good case for Me! I really appreciated that!’ No: He will say, ‘Just be sure that what you say is utterly true. And even if you can’t get to the bottom of it yet, don’t try and sort it all out in an attempt to justify Me’.

So it is good for Christians who can say, ‘I don’t understand what God is doing now’. Even if you are talking to a non-Christian person who is accusing God to you. We can say that.

Job is saying: ‘If God is going to be proved just, I don’t want it to be because someone has argued it carefully and well and convincingly; I want it to be *because it is so*’. So he says, ‘Let’s not show any partiality *either for God or against Him*. He is saying, Partiality *for* God will be discerned and judged by God, if you are trying to protest too loudly! You do not have to plead the case for God. Let God Himself be God! He will speak for Himself. If you are trying to build up some case for God, it is like trying to gather together ashes, or build defences of clay. God in His reality will break through those. It is only the reality of God as He really is that can be the true answer.

In that, Job is anticipating God Himself appearing to him at the end of the Book. This alone brings us true satisfaction.

IT TAKES ONE TO KNOW ONE

The next time Zophar speaks is in chapter 20. Remember how bitter he was against Job right from the start; how prepared he was to condemn him and write him off before he even began. In this, he does not let up on Job.

- 20:1 Then Zophar the Naamathite answered:
2 ‘Pay attention! My thoughts urge me to answer,
because of the agitation within me.
3 I hear censure that insults me,
and a spirit beyond my understanding answers me.
4 Do you not know this from of old,
ever since mortals were placed on earth,
5 that the exulting of the wicked is short,
and the joy of the godless is but for a moment?’

Zophar is saying here really that Job is a wicked and arrogant person, and a godless man. Forgive me for saying so, but sometimes it takes one to know one! I have on occasion been appalled at when I have caught myself judging another person, and putting on them, usually when they do not deserve it, something that I am doing myself. That seems to be the trap that Zophar has fallen into here. He is obviously very stirred by what is happening: there is haste and agitation within him. He feels he has been insulted and censured by Job—which indeed he has!—and he won’t accept that. So he says, ‘the exulting of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless is but for a moment’, and the implication of that is: ‘So why else do you think you are the way you are now?’

Titus 1:15 says, ‘To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure. Their very minds and consciences are corrupted.’ Even when we are looking at something or someone that is quite pure, our distorted vision will see it as corrupted and twisted. Sometimes, if we want to see ourselves as we really are, we should look at what we are trying to put on other people. I am sure that is what is happening here with Zophar: he sees Job as proud and arrogant and wicked, but it would appear that much of that could be a description of Zophar himself.

THE DOOM OF THE WICKED

Zophar goes on to say about the wicked:

- 20:6 Even though they mount up high as the heavens,
and their head reaches to the clouds,
7 they will perish forever like their own dung;
those who have seen them will say, 'Where are they?'
8 They will fly away like a dream, and not be found;
they will be chased away like a vision of the night.
9 The eye that saw them will see them no more,
nor will their place behold them any longer.
10 Their children will seek the favour of the poor,
and their hands will give back their wealth.
11 Their bodies, once full of youth,
will lie down in the dust with them.

Zophar is trying to address the issue of what Job says later in chapter 24 (see previous session: Bildad II) by saying: 'Sure, the wicked do mount up to heaven, and they are full of youthful vigour, but their time is short, and they will get it in the neck, and their children certainly will'.

- 20:12 Though wickedness is sweet in their mouth,
though they hide it under their tongues,
13 though they are loath to let it go,
and hold it in their mouths,
14 yet their food is turned in their stomachs;
it is the venom of asps within them.
15 They swallow down riches and vomit them up again;
God casts them out of their bellies.
16 They will suck the poison of asps;
the tongue of a viper will kill them.
17 They will not look on the rivers,
the streams flowing with honey and curds.
18 They will give back the fruit of their toil,
and will not swallow it down;
from the profit of their trading
they will get no enjoyment.
19 For they have crushed and abandoned the poor,
they have seized a house that they did not build.

20 They knew no quiet in their bellies;
in their greed they let nothing escape.
21 There was nothing left after they had eaten;
therefore their prosperity will not endure.
22 In full sufficiency they will be in distress;
all the force of misery will come upon them.
23 To fill their belly to the full
God will send his fierce anger into them,
and rain it upon them as their food.
24 They will flee from an iron weapon;
a bronze arrow will strike them through.
25 It is drawn forth and comes out of their body,
and the glittering point comes out of their gall;
terrors come upon them.
26 Utter darkness is laid up for their treasures;
a fire fanned by no one will devour them;
what is left in their tent will be consumed.
27 The heavens will reveal their iniquity,
and the earth will rise up against them.

- 28 The possessions of their house will be carried away,
dragged off in the day of God's wrath.
29 This is the portion of the wicked from God,
the heritage decreed for them by God.'

It seems almost as if Zophar has a delight and fascination with the doom of the wicked: especially with that arrow going through and coming out the other side, covered with whatever is inside (verses 24–25). There is a sense in which what Zophar says is true, that, though the wicked may be prospering, they are often not happy in their riches. But often they are—very happy and comfortable, thank you very much! Zophar, however, says that this unhappiness is inevitably so: in the day of God's wrath, if not before, they will certainly be dealt with in no uncertain terms. At least Zophar sees this as coming at the hand of God, which is a little more explicit than Bildad was able to be.

'WHY DO THE WICKED LIVE ON?'

Job's response this time is more measured than the first time he replied to Zophar—he is a bit more tired this time perhaps. He does not want to enter into bickering and argument at that level. You could argue all day as to whether the wicked get their just deserts or whether they don't. As right through, Job desires to come before God, and to bring his friends with him. It is not just that he wants to be before God, but he can see that there is a block in their understanding and in their largeness of spirit, and he says, 'Can't you come before God with me, and see what I am looking for?' He says, 'Is my complaint against human beings? It isn't really: you can say what you like; it is God that I want to come before'.

- 21:1 Then Job answered:
2 'Listen carefully to my words,
and let this be your consolation.
3 Bear with me, and I will speak;
then after I have spoken, mock on.
4 As for me, is my complaint addressed to mortals?
Why should I not be impatient?
5 Look at me, and be appalled,
and lay your hand upon your mouth.
6 When I think of it I am dismayed,
and shuddering seizes my flesh.

Job is talking about his suffering again, and he is bringing them back to reality. He overlooks Zophar's rudeness and condemnatory tones, and takes his point seriously. As he does later with Bildad, here Job steadily points out that what Zophar has said does not match with reality.

- 21:7 Why do the wicked live on,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
8 Their children are established in their presence,
and their offspring before their eyes.
9 Their houses are safe from fear,
and no rod of God is upon them.
10 Their bull breeds without fail;
their cow calves and never miscarries.

That is very important, if you are a breeder of stock.

- 21:11 They send out their little ones like a flock,
and their children dance around.

- 12 They sing to the tambourine and the lyre,
and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.

The children of the rich have great parties. Is there a hint of wistfulness here, in that the celebrations of Job's own children are now silent?

- 21:13 They spend their days in prosperity,
and in peace they go down to Sheol.
14 They say to God, 'Leave us alone!
We do not desire to know your ways.
15 What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?
And what profit do we get if we pray to him?'
16 Is not their prosperity indeed their own achievement?
The plans of the wicked are repugnant to me.

Job may be saying here: 'The counsel that you are trying to give me is far from me'. Or he may be saying, 'That is not how I was when I was in prosperity, but there are plenty of people who are in prosperity who say, "Who cares about God? We are fine! What difference is He going to make to our balance sheet?"'

- 21:17 How often is the lamp of the wicked put out?
How often does calamity come upon them?
How often does God distribute pains in his anger?
18 How often are they like straw before the wind,
and like chaff that the storm carries away?

Well, the friends have got to face up to that question. Job then addresses what Zophar said in 20:10, that the children of the wicked will suffer loss:

- 21:19 You say, 'God stores up their iniquity for their children.'
Let it be paid back to them, so that they may know it.
20 Let their own eyes see their destruction,
and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty.
21 For what do they care for their household after them,
when the number of their months is cut off?

Job's response here is in line with how God has set it out in Deuteronomy 24:16, and Ezekiel 18, that we will each be accountable for our own misdeeds. But Job does not try to set that up as a counter-system to Zophar's proposition. Job acknowledges the personal freedom and sovereignty of God in all these matters, even though it remains a mystery to him:

- 22 Will any teach God knowledge,
seeing that he judges those that are on high?
23 One dies in full prosperity,
being wholly at ease and secure,
24 his loins full of milk
and the marrow of his bones moist.
25 Another dies in bitterness of soul,
never having tasted of good.
26 They lie down alike in the dust,
and the worms cover them.

27 Oh, I know your thoughts,
and your schemes to wrong me.
28 For you say, 'Where is the house of the prince?
Where is the tent in which the wicked lived?'

- 29 Have you not asked those who travel the roads,
and do you not accept their testimony,
30 that the wicked are spared in the day of calamity,
and are rescued in the day of wrath?
31 Who declares their way to their face,
and who repays them for what they have done?
32 When they are carried to the grave,
a watch is kept over their tomb.
33 The clods of the valley are sweet to them;
everyone will follow after,
and those who went before are innumerable.
34 How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?
There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood.”

That is Job’s answer to Zophar: How does what you say match with the reality of life as it is widely experienced? What you say is invariable is plainly not so. So how can the converse implication that Job is one of the wicked, simply because these adverse things have happened to him, be sustained?

We do not hear again from Zophar. He has blown himself out. He cannot answer Job, and he has nothing more to say. As we saw of the other two: Eliphaz and Bildad each speak three times—though Bildad is running short by the time he comes to his third turn—but Zophar only manages twice, and then is silent.

‘THE THUNDER OF HIS POWER WHO CAN UNDERSTAND?’

We will look now at chapters 26 and 27, at part of what Job says when all the three of them are finished. These chapters show that, despite what Zophar said, Job does know God.

Have you ever assumed in your arrogance that someone you are talking to is not converted, when they know God all the time, and have done so much longer than you have? Or have you ever had someone speak to you like that? They may be trying to make sure you are converted and know God—and good on them! But be careful that you are not trying to do that yourself.

Job’s grasp of the things of God is deeper and firmer than any of theirs, and is on a sounder and more experienced footing. He begins with irony:

- 26:1 Then Job answered:
2 ‘How you have helped one who has no power!
How you have assisted the arm that has no strength!
3 How you have counselled one who has no wisdom,
and given much good advice!
4 With whose help have you uttered words,
and whose spirit has come forth from you?

In other words, they have not helped him at all! In fact, quite to the contrary.

Here now Job starts to display his own understanding of God, and of His greatness:

- 26:5 The shades below tremble,
the waters and their inhabitants.
6 Sheol is naked before God,
and Abaddon has no covering.

(Sheol is the world of the dead, Abaddon is the underworld.)

- 26:7 He stretches out the north over the void,
and hangs the earth upon nothing.

- 8 He binds up the waters in his thick clouds,
and the cloud is not torn open by them.
- 9 He covers the face of the full moon,
and spreads over it his cloud.
- 10 He has described a circle on the face of the waters,
at the boundary between light and darkness.
- 11 The pillars of heaven tremble,
and are astounded at his rebuke.
- 12 By his power he stilled the Sea;
by his understanding he struck down Rahab.
- 13 By his wind the heavens were made fair;
his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.
- 14 These are indeed but the outskirts of his ways;
and how small a whisper do we hear of him!
But the thunder of his power who can understand?

In verses 12–13 there is that reference again to God’s smiting of the chaos monster (compare 9:8, 13)—that remnant of stories as to how God brought order out of chaos, piercing the fleeing serpent, and blowing apart the waters, causing the firmament to come; the great thunder in the clouds, and the heavy rain clouds that just hang there before they burst forth. Zophar and Eliphaz have been trying to hammer Job with the greatness of God. Job does not use hammer-blows here: he is saying, ‘Sense the greatness of all of that. But that is just the outskirts of His ways. The true power, and thunder, of God—who can understand that?’ This shows that Job has great discernment.

LOOKING AT IT FROM GOD’S POINT OF VIEW

After Job has said that, there is silence, as there rightly should be. So he speaks again:

- 27:1 Job again took up his discourse and said:
- 2 ‘As God lives, who has taken away my right,
and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter,
 - 3 as long as my breath is in me
and the spirit of God is in my nostrils,
 - 4 my lips will not speak falsehood,
and my tongue will not utter deceit.
 - 5 Far be it from me to say that you are right;
until I die I will not put away my integrity from me.

In that, Job is not just trying to be faithful to himself, but faithful to God, and to God’s upholding of him.

- 27:6 I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go;
my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.

That is not a change of face for Job: we have already seen that he admits he is a sinner. It is that righteousness that comes from God that he will not let go—his rightness before God—and his integrity: the fact that, as a justified person, his heart does not reproach him.

- 27:7 May my enemy be like the wicked,
and may my opponent be like the unrighteous.
- 8 For what is the hope of the godless when God cuts them off,
when God takes away their lives?
 - 9 Will God hear their cry
when trouble comes upon them?
 - 10 Will they take delight in the Almighty?

- Will they call upon God at all times?
11 I will teach you concerning the hand of God;
that which is with the Almighty I will not conceal.
12 All of you have seen it yourselves;
why then have you become altogether vain?
- 13 This is the portion of the wicked with God,
and the heritage that oppressors receive from the Almighty:
14 If their children are multiplied, it is for the sword;
and their offspring have not enough to eat.
15 Those who survive them the pestilence buries,
and their widows make no lamentation.
16 Though they heap up silver like dust,
and pile up clothing like clay—
17 they may pile it up, but the just will wear it,
and the innocent will divide the silver.
18 They build their houses like nests,
like booths made by sentinels of the vineyard.
19 They go to bed with wealth, but will do so no more;
they open their eyes, and it is gone.”

Job may be saying there that the wicked man can be ruined overnight, or that one morning he may wake up and find himself dead!

- 27:20 Terrors overtake them like a flood;
in the night a whirlwind carries them off.
21 The east wind lifts them up and they are gone;
it sweeps them out of their place.
22 It hurls at them without pity;
they flee from its power in headlong flight.
23 It claps its hands at them,
and hisses at them from its place.”

That does show that Job can be as orthodox as the next man, and probably has a better grasp of it all. He does acknowledge that judgment comes to the wicked. What he is doing here is setting it out from the perspective of God. When he does that, he sees that all he has said about the wicked prospering in their lifetime does come to amount to nothing when God judges it. That is not the position from which the others were arguing. They were trying to say, ‘It is a fact of experience that the wicked always get their just deserts’. Job removes it from that and says, ‘It is not a fact of experience that the wicked get their just deserts, but I desire to come before God, and let’s have a look at it from God’s point of view, and then what you see there is that of course the wicked, like any one, will perish’. It seems to me, however, that the way Job presents it is so much more expansive and all-encompassing—read it again and see if you agree with me—than the way the comforters were trying to set it up to match their view of the way the world should be. That should be a lesson to us not to try to ‘teach our grandmother to suck eggs’!—as perhaps Zophar was trying to do with Job.

Father, You have given us hearts and minds to think and to see and to attempt to understand all that is in this life. You have given us great minds, which are capable of knowing You. We pray that, in all our dealings with life, and in our attempting to understand the things of God and the things of living, we may use our minds rightly: that we may give them to You, and seek to see things with the eyes of hearts that have been opened by You and anointed by Your Spirit. We thank You for Your servant Job as presented to us here, under great pressure to argue back at the lower level. He turned his eyes to You, and attempted to turn the eyes of

those with whom he was speaking, to see things in that perspective. We pray that we may not get so caught up in the things of this world, and in our own concerns, that we may lose that vision. We thank You that Your Spirit has come to us, and we pray that, in all the things that we need to know, more and more, we may discern Your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Eleven

THE FAITH OF JOB—I

We have now heard what each of the comforters had to say, and we have heard Job's rejoinders to them.

As all these attacks were coming on Job, what was Job's faith? What was he maintaining all through? What was sustaining him in that? We need to remember the context: this was a testing time, not just for Job, but for God. Satan had challenged God's righteousness, and God, in letting Satan have his way with Job, was undertaking to sustain Job in that faith and that trustful righteousness of his, no matter what should come. So now we are going to look at Job's faith. This is one of the most significant areas of our study in the Book of Job.

JOB RIGHT ALL ALONG

Remember in 42:7 God said to the comforters, 'You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.' God was telling the comforters that Job was right all along. Coming at the end of the book, that takes us by surprise. It often seems that the comforters were speaking orthodox truth, and that Job was saying some pretty outrageous things. Having read that at the end of the book, and then going back to what the comforters said, we have been able to see where they were going astray. But when we come at it cold, it takes us by surprise.

Some of the things that Job says strike us as being very bold, even outrageous. Perhaps God does not mind that, if we are on the right track. Perhaps He does not mind us shooting off our mouths, if it is to Him that we are speaking, and it is on Him that our hope is fixed. We may say some pretty outrageous, even some stupid things, crying out to God. But God can handle that, if He knows where our heart is. Having heard that again, let's go back now and see how Job was really right all along.

A CONSISTENT ATTITUDE

We have looked a number of times at these words in 1:20–21:

Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshiped. He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.'

That is a wonderful expression of Job's faith and understanding of the ways of God and of life. And in 2:9–10:

Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.' But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

That is Job's basic attitude right through this book. The poetry, which begins in chapter 3, starts a new section of the book, and because of that some commentators say, 'Well, the first two chapters were written by someone, and then someone else wrote the chapters on from chapter 3, because that is written in poetry and this is written in prose, and there is a break there, so you can say the attitudes in chapters 1–2 are not the same as the attitudes you find in the poetry chapters'. I warn you of that, because if you start reading commentaries on Job, that is what you will come up against. If you accept what these commentators say, then it means that you are starting to break the book up, and if there are things that you do not quite

understand or cannot quite come at, then you can explain them away, because, well, someone said this and someone else said that, and you can play them off against each other. That is one way of approaching the Bible. But it ends up being that you make of the Bible what you will, and the Bible ends up being fitted to the limitations of your understanding or your preferences. I have found it much more valuable and much more rewarding just to try and take it as it is. And where that challenges me or puzzles me or confronts me, then maybe it's I who need to change, and not the Bible. So our approach to the Book of Job has been that the whole book is a consistent whole. So we can say that Job's attitude right through the book is consistent with what he says in chapters 1 and 2. That is the basis on which we have been expounding Job, and the treasures and riches that come out of it when you do that are quite amazing.

JOB AND HIS 'COMFORTERS'

Let's just recap on what the three comforters were saying. Eliphaz said that human beings cannot be righteous or pure before God: God is great, a human being is a worm, and must knuckle under when suffering comes, and put up with it. God is remote and indifferent, says Eliphaz. So, if God is making Job suffer so much, Job must have done very terrible things to attract that kind of attention. Eliphaz ended up accusing Job of terrible things—maligning him. Bildad said, Good is rewarded, evil is punished—that is strictly the way it is; there is no grace allowed; there is no compromise. That was his whole system, and he stayed locked inside it. Zophar, the youngest of the three, thinks that he can tell Job a thing or two, but is himself arrogant and rude. From the start he counts Job as guilty, accuses him, and counsels him to change his ways.

Out of all this we have seen that Job had a better and a deeper understanding of God and of the real world than any of them did. Not only that, Job, of all of them, is most conscious of being directly before God, of being dealt with personally by God. In fact, he is the only one of them for whom that comes through so strongly. The others speak of God in good theological words, but it is Job in his suffering that is again and again confronting them with reality, with the direct action of God in his own life. It is that, as much as anything, that silences them in the end.

RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD?

What is Job's faith-claim? Unlike Eliphaz, he claims it is possible for a human being to be righteous before God. The hope and conviction he expresses is that he will be such a one. Eliphaz said, 'Can mortals be righteous before God? Can human beings be pure before their Maker?' (4:17). And he thinks, 'No, that is totally impossible'. But Job says, 'No! It is possible for a person to be righteous before God, and I shall be such a one'. That is what angers his comforters—they call it gross presumption. We might be tempted to do the same.

I wonder if we are tempted to agree with the comforters? I'm an Anglican, so I'll just speak for the Anglicans. I have found that Anglicans especially are reluctant to say that they will appear righteous and upright in the presence of God. I guess they would not be alone in that. Ask them if they *know* that they are going to heaven, and they will say, Well, I *hope* so! But they will not be definite or sure about it. They may go on to say, 'Well, I've certainly tried my best'. And that gives the game away. That shows that they are expecting to get into heaven on the basis of what they have done. That is the highest and most blatant form of presumption and pride—that it is their efforts that count in getting to heaven! So their unsureness about whether they'll be there or not is not genuine humility. They may count it so, but it is not. Actually, it is a thin veil or cloak for a most perverse form of pride. If we had

less of that kind of timid self-deceiving uncertainty, and more of the boldness and gutsy courage and conviction of Job, then we would be much better off.

ON WHAT JOB HAS DONE?

On what then does Job base this strange hope of his that he will appear righteous before God? On a superficial reading, some may conclude that he bases his faith on his own righteousness—the things he himself has done right. Let's read Job's final claim for himself in chapter 31. We have already looked at chapters 29 and 30. Chapter 29 we looked at right at the beginning. It showed Job in his prosperity and security, what great respect he was held in there, what a fine figure of a man he was. In chapter 30 he speaks of where he has come to, where his prosperity and his family and all his possessions are gone, and he is a laughing-stock, buffeted by people and by circumstances. Chapter 31 is Job's final claim for himself.

Listening to chapter 31, it might sound from it that Job is basing all his claim for righteousness on what he himself has done. As we go on, we will see that is not the case.

RIGHTEOUSNESS IN PRACTICE

Let us see how Job understood what righteousness is. This chapter is very instructive. It is a wonderful chapter:

31:1 'I have made a covenant with my eyes;
how then could I look upon a virgin?'

That reminds us of what Jesus said in Matthew 5:27–28: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart'—that if you look at a woman lustfully, you have already committed adultery with her in your heart. Job knows the wisdom of not leaving it till then, but settling the matter beforehand. 'I have made a covenant with my eyes'—I have undertaken that I shall never treat a woman in that way. A friend of mine once put it rather crudely: 'I doesn't matter how much you go window-shopping, as long as you don't touch the merchandise!' That is letting it slip. Job did not have that attitude. He said, I have made an agreement with myself that I will never let my eyes wander, or think of a woman in that way. not because he has a fetish about it, but because he fears God:

31:2 What would be my portion from God above,
and my heritage from the Almighty on high?"

—if I allowed myself to stray into those ways? Job knows that God in His faithfulness has something really wonderful for us that is not to be detracted from by trying to get those kinds of things for ourselves against His commandment.

31:3 Does not calamity befall the unrighteous,
and disaster the workers of iniquity?"

Job's true hope is in God, and he knows that sin does not go unpunished, and he knows that everything he does is before the eyes of God:

31:4 Does he not see my ways,
and number all my steps?"

It is all before God.

31:5 If I have walked with falsehood,

and my foot has hurried to deceit—
6 let me be weighed in a just balance,
and let God know my integrity!—”

Job is asking to come before the Judge of all.

31:7 If my step has turned aside from the way,
and my heart has followed my eyes,
and if any spot has clung to my hands;
8 then let me sow, and another eat;
and let what grows for me be rooted out.

There are echoes of what Job is saying in many other parts of the Scriptures. I think particularly of Proverbs 4:20–27:

My child, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
Do not let them escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
Keep your heart with all vigilance,
for from it flow the springs of life.
Put away from you crooked speech,
and put devious talk far from you.
Let your eyes look directly forward,
and your gaze be straight before you.
Keep straight the path of your feet,
and all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil.

That is very much the spirit in which Job is speaking here: ‘If my step has turned aside from the way . . . then let me sow, and another eat; and let what grows for me be rooted out’—it would be my just deserts for nothing in my life to be fruitful, and that is what I would ask for.

NO PLACE FOR ADULTERY

Job goes on:

31:9 ‘If my heart has been enticed by a woman,
and I have lain in wait at my neighbour’s door;
10 then let my wife grind for another,
and let other men kneel over her.

The grinding of grain was perhaps the most menial task a woman could do. Job is saying, If I commit adultery with my neighbour’s wife, then let the same thing happen to me. Not just because he’s afraid he would get caught out. It is because he knows God. It is because he fears God, and he knows the destructiveness of that kind of conduct:

31:11 For that would be a heinous crime;
that would be a criminal offence;
12 for that would be a fire consuming down to Abaddon,
and it would burn to the root all my harvest.

Look at the trouble that came upon king David's household as a result of his adultery, and how that affected his 'harvest', his children, and his whole family. Job had no desire to be a part of that.

There are many wonderful warnings, particularly against adultery, in the early chapters of the Book of Proverbs, as these in Proverbs 5:

My child, be attentive to my wisdom;
incline your ear to my understanding,
so that you may hold on to prudence,
and your lips may guard knowledge.
For the lips of a loose woman drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
but in the end she is bitter as wormwood,
sharp as a two-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death;
her steps follow the path to Sheol.
She does not keep straight to the path of life;
her ways wander, and she does not know it (Prov.5:1–6).

It talks about the loose woman here, but we have plenty of loose men in our community too, so the boot can be on either foot.

And now, my child, listen to me,
and do not depart from the words of my mouth.
Keep your way far from her,
and do not go near the door of her house;
or you will give your honour to others,
and your years to the merciless,
and strangers will take their fill of your wealth,
and your labours will go to the house of an alien;
and at the end of your life you will groan,
when your flesh and body are consumed,
and you say, 'Oh, how I hated discipline,
and my heart despised reproof!
I did not listen to the voice of my teachers
or incline my ear to my instructors.
Now I am at the point of utter ruin
in the public assembly' (Prov. 5:7–14).

Then it goes on to commend the married state:

Drink water from your own cistern,
flowing water from your own well.
Should your springs be scattered abroad,
streams of water in the streets?
Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for sharing with strangers.
Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
may you be intoxicated always by her love.
Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another woman
and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?
For human ways are under the eyes of the LORD,
and he examines all their paths.

The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them,
and they are caught in the toils of their sin.
They die for lack of discipline,
and because of their great folly they are lost (Prov. 5:15–23).

So Proverbs goes on in chapters 6 and 7:

a prostitute's fee is only a loaf of bread,
but an adulteress stalks a man's very life (Prov. 6:26).

An adulterer likewise. I draw these passages to your attention because of the prevalence and apparent acceptability of adultery in our community. Those words from Proverbs can come to us as a wonderful protection in all of that. It is good that we read these words, and that we read them to our children, so they can know those things too.

That was something that Job was clear on.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INDUSTRIAL EQUITY

Remember that Eliphaz had said to Job back in 22:6–11: 'You have exacted pledges from your family for no reason, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The powerful possess the land, and the favoured live in it. You have sent widows away empty-handed, and the arms of the orphans you have crushed. Therefore snares are around you, and sudden terror overwhelms you, or darkness so that you cannot see; a flood of water covers you.' Eliphaz made those accusations to Job, and we are going to see that they were quite baseless, quite unfounded. Eliphaz felt he had to say that to fit in with his scheme of understanding: that all this suffering has come on Job, so he *must* have done those things. But Job holds fast his integrity in those areas of social justice and industrial equity:

31:13 If I have rejected the cause of my male or female slaves,
when they brought a complaint against me;
14 what then shall I do when God rises up?
When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?
15 Did not he who made me in the womb make them?
And did not one fashion us in the womb?

Those are incredible words. You would not find words like that anywhere else, perhaps, in the ancient world. The idea that a slave could actually bring a complaint against the master, and be heard, and be treated on the same footing as the master! That is where Job has come to in his understanding of who God is. This is something that James warns us about in his letter:

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted [because they have been lying around rather than bee spread around], and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you (James 5:1–6).

In James's day, in the New Testament, he needed to say those things to the rich. Those things still need to be said to the rich today, including perhaps to ourselves. As far as Job was

concerned, he ran his business and his industry on the basis of strict equity and justice. Because he knew God: 'When God rises up': if I have been unjust to my workers, if God came to judge me, where would I stand? That is the basis of it.

Verse 15 is an amazing verse, is it not? 'Did not he who made me in the womb make them? And did not one fashion us in the womb?' God made me, God made my workers—we are both the same! No difference between us.

Job goes on to talk about his treatment of the poor:

31:16 If I have withheld anything that the poor desired,
or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail,
17 or have eaten my morsel alone,
and the orphan has not eaten from it—
18 for from my youth I reared the orphan like a father,
and from my mother's womb I guided the widow—

Job has obviously taken the orphans into his own home and made them part of his family, against what Eliphaz said in 22:9.

31:19 If I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing,
or a poor person without covering,
20 whose loins have not blessed me,
and who was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep;
21 if I have raised my hand against the orphan,
because I saw I had supporters at the gate;

—the 'gate' is where the elders gather, and if Job were to have had his eye on the main chance, to 'get in good' with them, by putting this person down—no, Job is not going to be any part of that—

31:22 then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder,
and let my arm be broken from its socket

—the arm, that had withheld these things.

31:23 For I was in terror of calamity from God,
and I could not have faced his majesty

—if I had not cared for the poor.

Again, some wonderful things in the Book of Proverbs, which has a lot to say about the treatment of the poor: 'Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker'—the poor person has been made in the image of God, and you have been made in the image of God; if you oppress the poor, you are insulting God—'but those who are kind to the needy honour him' (Proverbs 14:31). 'Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full' (Proverbs 19:17). See how the Lord identifies Himself so closely with the poor! We can see what Jesus was getting at in Matthew 25:31–46: 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Proverbs 21:13: 'If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard.' Proverbs 22:22–23: 'Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.' That is what Job knew. he wanted to be able to face God's majesty. We also know from Isaiah 11:4 that when the Messiah comes, 'with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.' I guess 'the poor' is all of us, really: we are all the needy before God, we acknowledge ourselves to be meek before Him, and then we receive His strength.

Job knew that he was in no different position from the poor, as far as God was concerned, and he knew God's care for the poor—he knew God's care for him—and he cared accordingly. It is not a patronising or condescending way in which he cares for the poor (verses 16–21). It is on the basis of that equity: we are all before God in that way, and that is the way God deals with us, so that is the way we deal with the poor. It is simply straightforward: it is not us from our great height pouring our largesse upon the poor unfortunate people. It is just that they are there, and we are there, and we are together in that. So we need to be together in that.

GOD THE GIVER AND MAKER IS TO BE WORSHIPPED

We read on:

31:24 If I have made gold my trust,
or called fine gold my confidence;
25 if I have rejoiced because my wealth was great,
or because my hand had gotten much;

We have seen how wealthy Job was—perhaps the most wealthy man in the whole country—but he never depended on that for who he was, or for his righteousness. His trust was in God, because he knew it all came from God.

He has not indulged in idolatry—sun worship or moon worship:

31:26 If I have looked at the sun when it shone,
or the moon moving in splendour,
27 and my heart has been secretly enticed,
and my mouth has kissed my hand

—towards those wonderful shining lights. He knows that they have been made by God, and God is to be worshipped, not them. Sun-worship and moon-worship were rife in the area where he lived in those days—

31:28 this also would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges,
for I should have been false to God above.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Job continues:

31:29 If I have rejoiced at the ruin of those who hated me,
or exulted when evil overtook them—
30 I have not let my mouth sin
by asking for their lives with a curse—

What did Jesus say, in Luke 6:27–28? 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.' That is an incredible thing, that I don't know many of us who have ever lived up to, but here is Job right up there with Jesus, so many years before, in his understanding and in his practice of his care for his enemies. Why is that? maybe he had an inkling that while we were still the enemies of God, God's grace in Christ has come to us (see Romans 5:6–11). We are going to see that Job was a man of grace, and that he knew God's grace, and so it figures that this is the way he would treat his enemies, as he knows how he has been treated by God.

THE HOMELESS AND THE REFUGEE

In the same vein:

31:31 If those of my tent ever said,
 ‘O that we might be sated with his flesh!’—
32 the stranger has not lodged in the street;
 I have opened my doors to the traveller—”

Whether Job knew the Book of Deuteronomy or not, at least he knew the spirit of it, where God says to the Israelites: ‘For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (Deuteronomy 10:17–19). See how all God’s laws come from the character of God Himself, and are spoken to us who are in the image of God, in relationship with Him, to live in keeping with the way He is. That is the way God is towards the refugees and the homeless—that is how God has actually treated you, when you were a homeless refugee—so that is how you will be.

PEOPLE-PLEASING?

It is the healthy fear of God, not the self-serving fear of others, that motivates Job:

31:33 If I have concealed my transgressions as others do,
 by hiding my iniquity in my bosom,
34 because I stood in great fear of the multitude,
 and the contempt of families terrified me,
 so that I kept silence, and did not go out of doors—”

He says, I have nothing to hide: everything I have done has been open and above board, and I am prepared to answer for that, to anyone who wants to claim otherwise.

31:35 Oh, that I had one to hear me!
 (Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!)

He is saying to his friends, I do not have to answer to you. It is God that I want to come before to be judged.

I wonder if we can be that bold? ‘It is God that I want to come before, to be judged!’ But who else would we want to be judged by?

Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
31:36 Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
 I would bind it on me like a crown;
37 I would give him an account of all my steps;
 like a prince I would approach him.

I want to come before the court. I would be glad to give a full account of all my actions—that is my integrity—I would be glad to have them judged.

ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

One final little bit:

31:38 If my land has cried out against me,
 and its furrows have wept together;

Job knew about conservation and care for the environment before the ‘greenies’ were ever heard of! He knew that you don’t over-use the ground. Again, we are not sure if he was aware of the laws that were given to Israel about letting the land rest every seven years, and get its breath, before you go ploughing it up again (see Leviticus 25:1–7).

31:39 If I have eaten its yield without payment,
and caused the death of its owners;’

—if I have exploited the people who work there, and not given them just returns—

31:40 let thorns grow instead of wheat,
and foul weeds instead of barley.”

Again, Job asks for those just consequences.

THE FEAR OF GOD, IN A FAITH-RELATIONSHIP

The words of Job are ended.

That is the note on which Job closes. It may make us feel that Job is claiming there that he has done the right thing, and so he can come before God. But behind what he is saying here is this: ‘I have a fear of God, in my faith-relationship with Him, and that is what has sustained me in all of this right behaviour’. We will see that it is not those things in which he is putting his trust, and that he acknowledges that he is a sinner. He is not claiming sinless perfection. So it is God that he is depending on, to come before Him as righteous.

Lord God, we thank You for the wonderful ways in which You sustain us, by revealing to us Your righteousness, and enabling us to walk in it. Yet we acknowledge, Lord, that this is nothing of us, and all of You. We thank You, Lord, that when we have failed to walk in the ways of Your righteousness, then Your mercy and Your grace have done that deep work which enables us to walk free, and still come before You in the righteousness of Christ. So, Father, we pray that Your Spirit will continue to work in our lives, and in the lives of those whom we love and are close to us, that Your ways may be known on earth, and Your praise amongst all the nations. Amen.

Twelve

THE FAITH OF JOB—II

What is Job's faith-claim? He claims it is possible for a human being to be righteous before God. The hope and conviction he expresses is that he will be such a one. That is what angers his comforters—they call it gross presumption. But the highest and most blatant form of presumption and pride is to think that it is our efforts that count in getting to heaven. Getting us to heaven is something that God does, not something that we do. Job is sure of coming before God, not because he is sure of himself, but because he is sure of God. Our unsureness about whether we will be there or not is not genuine humility. It is a thin veil or cloak for a most perverse form of pride. As I said, if we had less of that kind of timid self-deceiving uncertainty, and more of the boldness and gutsy courage and conviction of Job, then we would be much better off.

Job is right in line with what the New Testament has to say. For example, the opening words of the Letter to the Ephesians: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world *to be holy and blameless before him* in love' (Ephesians 1:3–4). How is that different from Job's hope? It is the same thing.

THE BASIS OF JOB'S HOPE

On what does Job base this strange hope of his, that he will come as righteous before God? In the previous section we looked at Job 31, and saw how wonderful that chapter is. It is Job's final claim for himself, before God and before his comforters, and on a superficial reading we may conclude that Job bases his faith on his own righteousness—the things that he himself has done right. That is certainly the way his comforters take it, and Elihu, whom we are still to meet. What we saw reading that is that Job had very high and strong moral integrity, well in advance of much in his own day, and much in our day indeed. For instance, verses 13–15:

If I have rejected the cause of my male or female slaves,
when they brought a complaint against me;
what then shall I do when God rises up?
When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?
Did not he who made me in the womb make them?
And did not one fashion us in the womb?

An incredibly wonderful basis for industrial relations, that I still don't think we've quite caught up with yet! But Job knew that. Verse 38, where we said that Job knew about conservation before the 'greenies were heard of:

If my land has cried out against me,
and its furrows have wept together . . .

Soil degradation is today one of our most pressing problems. But Job knew how to treat the land well.

We also saw that Job is unimpeachable in terms of sexual morality, and social justice. He is right up there, we found, with the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

He is laying this all before God. He is open and above board about it all, he is glad to give a full account of himself, and to be judged by God. Verses 35–37:

Oh, that I had one to hear me!
(Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!)
Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
I would bind it on me like a crown;
I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him.”

It is with great conviction that Job is desiring to bring his whole life before God for the judgement.

On a superficial reading of that, we may conclude that Job is saying: ‘Look, God, I’ve done all the right things, and so You’ve got to vindicate me!’ We are going to see that is not the case, but that is certainly the way his comforters took what he was saying, so we should not be surprised if it comes across to us that way too. In 11:2–6, Zophar, for instance, said:

Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
and should one full of talk be vindicated?
Should your babble put others to silence,
and when you mock, shall no one shame you?
For you say, ‘My conduct is pure,
and I am clean in God’s sight.’
But oh, that God would speak,
and open his lips to you,
and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!
For wisdom is many-sided.
Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.

Zophar and the others thought that Job is saying: ‘I am clean, I am right; it is on that basis that I come before God’. Zophar says: ‘Oh, no—you are a terribly guilty man, and God is letting you off lightly’. But it is like trains going past each other on opposite lines, missing each other. The comforters are not on the same wavelength as Job is.

Remember the story Jesus told of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9–14). The Pharisee stood up and said, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ He is standing there and he is actually boasting before God, commending himself to God on the basis of what he has done. If we look at it carefully, we can sense that there is a difference between that and what Job is saying here.

In chapter 31, and indeed right through, Job is holding fast to his integrity. He is prepared to lay himself on the line, and we have no reason to expect that anything he says in chapter 31 is untrue. Just think back to chapters 1 and 2: has not God already called him ‘a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil’? If that is God’s judgement of Job, why should ours be any different? We do not have to think here that Job is boasting. Job is beyond that, as we shall see. He has nothing to gain by boasting, because he believes he is about to die anyway. He is simply stating facts. He is saying to his comforters, ‘Despite what you say, I have been loyal to God and His law. What is happening to me now has no connection with what you claim to be my sin’. Being loyal to God and to God’s law is certainly a part of fearing or having a respect for and faith in God—that is how it shows in our lives. What Job bases his faith on is not what he has or has not done. He leaves that entirely out of his consideration, and that is why they are not meeting when they try to talk with each other. Despite what his detractors say, Job does not regard himself as having sinless perfection. He is fully aware of what sin and its consequences are in his own life. We need to look closely at that now.

JOB AS A SINNER

Look at 10:14–15:

If I sin, you watch me,
and do not acquit me of my iniquity.
If I am wicked, woe to me!

Job fully acknowledges that sin has its consequences, and if he sins he is rightly answerable to God, and it is woe to him. In the face of that, he says:

If I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head,
[for] I am filled with disgrace
and look upon my affliction.

In the Hebrew, there is no ‘for’ there: it simply says, ‘I am filled with disgrace’. In other words, ‘I cannot balance anything good I do against the evil of my sin, and hope that somehow that is going to make up for it’. That is out of the question, as far as Job is concerned.

We turn back to 7:20–21:

[If] I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?
Why have you made me your target?
Why have I become a burden to you?

This verse begins with the word ‘If’. But, again, that word ‘If’ is not there in the Hebrew. It is often quite instructive to see how even a translation can bring a slant, depending on what the translator feels is the context or understanding. If even the translators, who are soaked in these words in the original languages, cannot quite come at what Job is saying here, a little word like ‘If’ will be slipped in to try and make sense of it for them. But that word ‘If’ is not there. Job simply says, ‘I sin’. For Job, there is no question about that.

I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?
Why have you made me your target?
Why have I become a burden to you?

Job is saying, For sure, I am a sinner. But what is the reason for this incredible suffering that has come upon me now? I can’t see that it comes out of anything that I have done or not done. He would be right. We know from chapters 1 and 2 that the suffering that has come upon him has nothing to do with whether he sinned or didn’t sin. In fact, it comes upon him because he is righteous, and is being tested.

Why do you not pardon my transgression
and take away my iniquity?

So Job also knows God as a forgiving God. Why else did he take care to offer the sacrifices for his children as his normal practice, in case they had transgressed and offended against God? He knew God as the God of forgiveness, and he knew himself as a sinner. What Job cannot understand, because he has not been privy to what we have been shown in chapters 1 and 2, is why this suffering, now?

For now I shall lie in the earth;
you will seek me, but I shall not be

We need to bear in mind, as we have seen, that Job is very conscious of impending death.

CLINGING TO GOD

Let's look at 13:26. We are seeing how Job fully admits he is a sinner, but remember he is a wise man, who has learned from early mistakes, we may suppose, and is living in peace and in faith with God. But he knows that in his youth he probably did some pretty stupid things. Don't we all?

For you write bitter things against me,
and make me reap the iniquities of my youth.

Let's read the whole of that passage:

13:13 Let me have silence, and I will speak,
and let come on me what may.
14 I will take my flesh in my teeth,
and put my life in my hand.
15 See, he will kill me; I have no hope;
but I will defend my ways to his face.
16 This will be my salvation,
that the godless shall not come before him.
17 Listen carefully to my words,
and let my declaration be in your ears.
18 I have indeed prepared my case;
I know that I shall be vindicated.
19 Who is there that will contend with me?
For then I would be silent and die.
20 Only grant two things to me,
then I will not hide myself from your face:
21 withdraw your hand far from me,
and do not let dread of you terrify me.
22 Then call, and I will answer;
or let me speak, and you reply to me.
23 How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make me know my transgression and my sin.
24 Why do you hide your face,
and count me as your enemy?
25 Will you frighten a windblown leaf
and pursue dry chaff?
26 For you write bitter things against me,
and make me reap the iniquities of my youth.
27 You put my feet in the stocks
and watch all my paths;
you set a bound to the soles of my feet.
28 One wastes away like a rotten thing,
like a garment that is moth-eaten.

Look particularly at verse 16:

This will be my salvation,
that the godless shall not come before him.

Job hopes to appear blameless and upright before God, and he believes that God is going to make sure that this happens. Verse 18:

I have indeed prepared my case;

I know that I shall be vindicated.

All through, Job is clinging to God. It is on God that he bases his hope. The thing that Job most fears is the loss of that direct contact with God: 'Why do you hide your face?' In fact, when he says, 'Only grant two things to me, then I will not hide myself from your face': again, with this translation, that may not be what it says. The Hebrew perhaps means, '*Don't* grant these two things, that my face should be hidden from you . . .' It is not always easy to work these things out, and I don't envy the translators their job at all—we are very glad that they have done what they have done. But we can see that the whole thrust of what Job is saying here is, 'I don't ever want to be separated from you!' Even after he has been through all this—'withdraw your hand far from me, and do not let dread of you terrify me. Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me'—'We want to be face to face: I want to be together with you. Even if I have got iniquities and sins, let me know all that, but do not hide your face from me, or count me as an enemy.' That is the last thing that Job has ever wanted, because his whole life has been one that has walked with God. That has been his life and his strength, and he knows that without that, he cannot be. Nothing makes any sense, without that.

Yet Job knows that he is quite helpless before God. 'Will you frighten a windblown leaf and pursue dry chaff?'—like the dead, dry leaves rattling through the wind: they can't go anywhere but where they are blown. Job knows that he cannot stand against that wind, or against the things that are happening in his life, and to his body.

Verses 18–19: 'I have indeed prepared my case; I know that I shall be vindicated. Who is there that will contend with me? For then I would be silent and die.' That reminded me of some words from the Book of Isaiah about the suffering servant of the Lord. There are points where the sufferings of Job and the sufferings of the servant of the Lord, which prefigure the sufferings of Christ himself, seem to have a lot to do with each other. In Isaiah 50:4–9, the servant says:

The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.

Was that not like what Job used to do?

Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

Job had said, 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' (2:10).

The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.

This was the faith of the servant. That is the faith that Job himself was groping towards: 'I know the Lord God helps me—that is where my faith is! Not in anything I have or have not done—that is of no account—but I know that the Lord God helps me':

Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.

'I know that no one can stand against God. I know the Lord God helps me so that I will be able to stand before Him holy and blameless—who then will speak against Him and declare me guilty?' That is Job's faith.

That was, in fact, the faith of Christ, where it says in 1 Peter 2:23: 'When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he *entrusted himself to the one who judges justly*.' Isn't that wonderful!

I WILL TRUST IN HIM

Look again at Job 13:15. It says in this translation:

See, he will kill me; I have no hope;
but I will defend my ways to his face.

If you have an Authorised Version, you will find the wonderful translation:

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.

In a church building where I was serving there was a stained glass window depicting Hope. Hope is a woman standing there, holding firmly to a cross, with these words underneath: 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him'. Someone asked me, 'Where do those words come from?' I tried to find them in this New Revised Standard Version (*NRSV*) translation, and it didn't sound quite the same. Again, it is a case of the translators deciding, What kind of slant can we put on these words that we have in front of us? They have read them as being, in a sense, defiant of God: 'He's going to kill me, I've got no hope, but I'll stick up for myself anyway'—that kind of thing. One of the commentators I read has gone into what all the other commentators have said, and concludes that the Authorised Version is the one that should stand, if you understand what Job is really on about: 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him'.

We saw earlier that Job is very conscious of death. If we take it the way it is written in this *NRSV* translation—'he will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face'—it is almost going back to what Job's wife said in 2:9: 'Curse God, and die', which is the very thing Job refused to do. We have seen how conscious Job was of death: there were times when he longed for it, when he prayed for it, particularly when he began his laments in chapter 3. It is clear here that he fully expects it to come: He will slay me. He expects that he will die in his sufferings, and maybe he does not have much more time left—in fact he hopes he hasn't, because that will bring his sufferings to an end. Perhaps that is why he is so brutally frank in everything he says—he has nothing to lose. But it is clear also that his hope is not confined to this life. Unlike some of the comforters, who want to see a one-to-one

correspondence in this life between virtue and reward, sin and punishment—especially Bildad, and Zophar too—for them it was all closed off and all tallied up in this life. They just had to see that that's the way it was. They couldn't see any differently. Job, as we saw, pointed out that it is not like that in this life: the wicked get away with murder, and the righteous suffer. Often that is the way it ends up—in this life. Yet even though Job thinks he is going to die, he fully expects to be vindicated.

What does that tell us about Job's faith? As long as we are alive, we can theoretically do something about our sin and our virtue. We can try to make up for what has gone wrong, we can strive to do better. Death puts an end to all of that. That is the cut-out point: once we are dead, there is nothing more that we can do. That is the point at which all our effort cuts out and counts for nothing. Hebrews 9:27 says: 'it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment'. That is the point at which any possibility of self-justification ends. We can do nothing to put anything right that we have done wrong, and if we have been depending on that to be right with God, death puts an end to that. We can do nothing more to try and build up some 'store of goodness'—we have already seen that Job says that is of no account before God: you cannot work it that way to balance off your sins. So if that is what you are trying to do in life, death spells the end of that. 'It is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment.'

It is not just in death itself. We have 'little deaths' along the way. For instance, when, as a pastor, you are called to go to another parish, and to leave the parish where you are: it is a time when you are very conscious of the things you haven't done that you should have done, the things that you have done that you shouldn't have done, but you are just going to have to leave it. There is nothing more you can do about it. It was with that in mind once that I wrote a song:

Where would we be?
Where would we be
Without grace?
Always too little,
Always too late
Without grace.⁵

That is the way our whole life is. We kid ourselves if we think it is not that way. Death simply makes that very clear.

So if we are going to be vindicated beyond that point, it is something that will have to be done by God Himself. There is nothing more that we can do—if we ever could. So why not, from the start, put our trust in our vindication as something that God will do. Job is sure that he will come before God as a godly man: not because he is sure of himself—we have seen that he is not—but because he is sure of God. He holds to that.

HUMAN LIFE AND HUMAN GLORY

Look at what Job goes on to say in chapter 14. This is in three parts. Verses 1–12 talk about the transitoriness of life: how life has its set limits, and you cannot go beyond those, but that there are indications in this life that, say, if you chop down a tree it will shoot again—that happens—there are times of hope. In the middle section, verses 14–17, there is a magnificent prayer of hope, even in the face of death. Then, by contrast to that, the final section, verses 18–22, talks about the way the mountains and the rocks and the hills are eroded, and they are not built back up again. So if you try to put your hope in the things of this life, it is not going

⁵ *New Creation Hymn Book*, Volume 1, Number 207.

to be well-founded. A beautiful chapter, containing some of the best poetry in the whole of the Book of Job (which is crammed full of it anyway!):

- 14:1 A mortal, born of woman, few of days and full of trouble,
2 comes up like a flower and withers,
flees like a shadow and does not last.
3 Do you fix your eyes on such a one?
Do you bring me into judgment with you?
4 Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?
No one can.
5 Since their days are determined,
and the number of their months is known to you,
and you have appointed the bounds that they cannot pass,
6 look away from them, and desist,
that they may enjoy, like labourers, their days.
- 7 For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again,
and that its shoots will not cease.
8 Though its root grows old in the earth,
and its stump dies in the ground,
9 yet at the scent of water it will bud
and put forth branches like a young plant.
10 But mortals die, and are laid low;
humans expire, and where are they?
11 As waters fail from a lake,
and a river wastes away and dries up,
12 so mortals lie down and do not rise again;
until the heavens are no more, they will not awake
or be roused out of their sleep.
13 Oh that you would hide me in Sheol,
that you would conceal me until your wrath is past,
that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!
14 If mortals die, will they live again?
All the days of my service I would wait
until my release should come.
15 You would call, and I would answer you;
you would long for the work of your hands.
16 For then you would not number my steps,
you would not keep watch over my sin;
17 my transgression would be sealed up in a bag,
and you would cover over my iniquity.
- 18 But the mountain falls and crumbles away,
and the rock is removed from its place;
19 the waters wear away the stones;
the torrents wash away the soil of the earth;
so you destroy the hope of mortals.
20 You prevail forever against them, and they pass away;
you change their countenance, and send them away.
21 Their children come to honour, and they do not know it;
they are brought low, and it goes unnoticed.
22 They feel only the pain of their own bodies,
and mourn only for themselves.”

Just reading that, I feel very inadequate. What can you say that is equal to such a vision of human life and human glory? But to look at one or two points.

We may be familiar with the opening words of this chapter, from the old funeral services: 'Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.' We tend not to have passages like that in modern funeral services any more. Job is speaking as a man who is face-to-face with death, and has had his fill of life, so he can say these things without any qualms, because that is the way it is. The transitoriness of life, like a flower, like a shadow, even. Yet God's eye is upon ones who are so frail and transitory as that, to bring us into judgement. There is no one we know, that can bring a clean thing out of an unclean. We know that God is in charge of our lives: He numbers the months we live—when we are born, when we die—that is all in His hands. Job is praying, 'While we have this little span of time which is our lives, don't be too hard on us: let us enjoy them'.

There is that scent of water that makes the stump sprout again. We are very aware of that in Australia: we have many plants that lie dormant, or almost dead, for years, in the desert conditions. Then just a sprinkling of rain, and up they come! Have you ever seen the deserts in the north full of wildflowers after a rain? Those seeds have been lying there for fifteen to twenty years without sprouting, waiting for rain just at that right time. There are some seeds that wait for rain, say, in the second week of May, and if they don't get rain then, they will stay there till they get it. Others come up if there is rain in July—or whatever. It's amazing! That is something that God has given us in His creation.

HOPE AFTER DEATH?

It seems, on the outward appearance, that human beings die, and that does not happen with them. No shoot appears: 'mortals lie down and do not rise again'. Job is facing the real issues here: we cannot have false hopes. But he says: 'Very well, I am going to die. But I want You to take me there'—to 'hide me in Sheol', the place of the dead. It is almost a picture of God putting Job carefully in this place, to hide him there: 'that you would conceal me until your wrath is past'—let that be a release for me from what I am suffering now. And *then*: 'appoint me a set time, and remember me!' Where have we heard those words before? Remember the thief on the cross, in Luke 23:42: 'Jesus, *remember* me when you come into your kingdom.' What does Jesus say? 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.' It is the same thing: 'I want to have that hope, *after* I die—in your kingdom, with you!' A thief said that, and he knew he had no right to enter the kingdom of God, because a thief cannot inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:10). Yet he said that to the Lord who was dying alongside him: 'Remember me!' He did not say: 'I want to sneak in the back way and somehow make it'. He said, 'I want to come before you, in your kingdom'. So where is his trust? Certainly not in himself or any merit that he has, but in this one who is dying for him. Who has done something about his sin, so that he can come into God's kingdom. Not as a thief any more, but as a godly man, and be remembered, and be with him in paradise.

Job has not seen his Lord dying on a cross and raised from the dead. But it is still the same faith-longing that he has:

If mortals die, will they live again?
All the days of my service I would wait
until my release should come.

Job had said, 'Do not human beings have a hard service on earth?' (7:1). Here he is saying: 'This is my hard service in death, but all that time I would wait, until my release comes'. How would that release come?

You would call, and I would answer you;
you would long for the work of your hands.

Where is Job's faith? In God who has made him, who has gone to all the trouble of making him, and who will not just put him into death and leave him there, and that's it. 'You would long for the work of your hands'—even after I have gone to that place. 'For then you would number my steps,' (the Hebrew does not have the word 'not' there) 'you would not keep watch over my sin': even in death, 'Your eye will be upon me'. It will not be like when God was watching him before in 13:27: 'You . . . watch all my paths; you set a bound to the soles of my feet'—that is the kind of eye of God to which he is saying 'Look away from me!' in 7:19 and 14:6. Job is now saying: 'In that place You will be watching me, but You will not be watching over my sin. All "my transgression would be sealed up in a bag"'—the word here is 'rebellions': all my rebellions will be tied up in this great big bag—and you would cover over my iniquity': it will be finished and gone. That is Job's hope: in the forgiving God.

Of the verses that remain in this chapter, some say, 'He reaches this high point, but then collapses in despair'. That is to be a little bit too literal, I think. He is saying: 'By contrast to what I have just said, try and put your hope in anything else, and what hope is there? The great mountains, the rock?' We even call God a mountain and a rock in the Scriptures. But the mountains and the rocks are getting worn away by erosion. Uluru ('Ayers Rock') has been there for a long time, but it is not something that you can finally set your hope on—it is being worn down every time there is a rain or a wind. So to think that in this life you can resist death: that kind of hope is destroyed, and you end up in loneliness and sorrow. Job has a hope for something more than that: a hope that is based on God Himself.

Father, we thank You that one day, we shall see You face to face, and then our hearts will beat as one. Father, we pray that our hope may be set on nothing less than Jesus Christ, and his righteousness, which will bring us to that place. We thank You, Father, for Your servant Job, who was bold to speak the truth, and see the whole state of humankind, and to see in that Your wonderful care and love for the creatures You have made. Keep us in that faith, and in that love, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thirteen

THE FAITH OF JOB—III

In the last section, we were looking at Job's faith as it related to life after death. We saw that Job was very conscious of death: there were times when he longed for it in his suffering, and prayed for it. He expected it to come very soon—he expected to die in his sufferings. So it is clear that his hope was not confined to this life. Where the comforters tried to tie everything up neatly this side of death, with a one-to-one correspondence in this life between virtue and reward, sin and punishment. Job had pointed out that it does not work that way. And even though he thinks he is going to die, he fully expects to be vindicated. We saw that must mean that Job's hope is not at all in himself, in his own merit or deserving. Death is the point at which we can do no more, if we ever could, for ourselves. Job's hope is entirely in God. If his hope is for vindication after death, then that has to be so. If we are going to be vindicated beyond that point at which we can do no more, then it must be, all along, something that God is going to do.

Let us remind ourselves of those great verses at the centre of chapter 14, from verse 13:

Oh that you would hide me in Sheol,
that you would conceal me until your wrath is past,
that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!

‘After I have gone to the place of the dead, remember me!’

If mortals die, will they live again?

That is a question that is not answered, but obviously he hopes, very surely, to be vindicated after death:

All the days of my service I would wait
until my release should come.

And here is the heart of it:

You would call, and I would answer you;
you would long for the work of your hands.

That even in death, God can call to the one He has loved, and the one He has loved can answer in response.

For then you would number my steps,
you would not keep watch over my sin;
my transgression would be sealed up in a bag,
and you would cover over my iniquity.

All that wrong would be dead and gone, and the person would be alive to God.

DOES JOB HAVE NEW TESTAMENT FAITH?

We must be careful not to say that what we read here of Job's hope and Job's faith is full-blown faith in the resurrection of the dead as it is presented in the New Testament. That can be a rather glib way of using the Scriptures: to say for instance that Job is saying here

everything that Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 15 or 2 Corinthians 5 about the resurrection and the resurrection body. Yet what we have here is full blown faith in God, death notwithstanding. That fully comports with the revelation that was given to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 5, based on our experience of the actual resurrection of Christ. When Job spoke, Christ had not been raised, and Job knew nothing of that, so we cannot expect him to have the same kind of belief in the resurrection of the dead as Paul did. Paul not only knew that Christ is risen, but in the things that had been shown him, perhaps when he was 'caught up to the third heaven' (2 Corinthians 12:2), he received a revelation of that life to come, the resurrection body—otherwise I don't think he would have been able to tell us some of the things he says about that.

We need to be aware that some people coming to the Old Testament—especially as we have these days professors or specialists in the Old Testament—sometimes want to cut off the Old Testament from the New Testament. That is their area of speciality, so they are inclined just to focus on that, and want to make it an entity in itself. The Christian church has never regarded the Old Testament as an entity in itself. At the time of the apostles, as Geoffrey Bingham has said many times, their job was to interpret the Old Testament in the light of the events of Christ, and the events of Christ in the light of the Old Testament. So the Old Testament, as we see it, is never complete in itself. Sometimes also some scholars see the Old Testament in a particular light. They say, 'People could not have believed in something like the resurrection of the dead early on in the Old Testament—that's something that came much later'. They may say, 'It came from the Persians at the time of the exile', or some such. We need to take that with a pinch of salt too, and realise that is not the only possible point of view, that belief in resurrection was something that came very late in the experience of Israel. A quote from Francis Anderson's commentary on Job (Tyndale Series, p. 169): 'Scholars influenced often by their *a priori* belief that the idea of resurrection arose quite late in Israel's thought . . . we believe that this opinion commonly held by Old Testament scholars is mistaken. On the contrary, belief in the continuation of personal human life with God after death was, we believe, part of Israel's distinctive faith from its beginnings. We cannot prove this here, but some idea of the new approach needed can be gained from Nicholas J. Trompe, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (1969).' So it is interesting that the earlier commonly-held view is now disputed. Jesus was quite clear that resurrection was there right from the beginning. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection of the dead, and this was the big argument that Paul had with them: he was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees accepted the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures and the references to resurrection that are there, but the Sadducees believed only in the first five books of the Old Testament, and they said they did not find resurrection there. Jesus, arguing with them, went right back to the book Genesis and showed them that when God said to Moses, 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', who by that time were dead and gone, Jesus said that they are not dead to God, 'for to him all of them are alive' (Luke 20:37–38). So he says, 'Why do you say there is no resurrection of the dead?' As far as Jesus was concerned, the reality of the resurrection was there from the beginning. It is good to see some scholars catching up with that these days!

HOW ARE WE TO READ THE BIBLE?

Just to say a little more about the way we approach Scripture: I have found it very helpful to see three elements in this. Some say the only way you can read Scripture, like this in the Old Testament, is to look at it in its original context and see what it meant to those who wrote it. That is the full gamut of its meaning. Others come to the Scriptures and say, I will open the Scriptures at a passage and see what God is saying to me now. Never mind what it meant

originally—the Holy Spirit will bring it straight to me now. I guess we have all had experiences of how the Scriptures have suddenly spoken to us directly in that way, with something that pertains to our life, that concerns us in the present. Between those two, there is a missing link somewhere. I think it is because we disregard the work of the Holy Spirit in the writing and bringing together of the Scriptures. Those who originally wrote the Scriptures were obviously writing them for their own time, and in their own context. But we believe the Scriptures were written under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit. Look at 2 Peter 1:20–21:

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God

Whatever the writers understood by what they were writing, and the context in which they were writing it, the Holy Spirit was operating in what they wrote, and in the fact that what they wrote was preserved, and in the fact that what was preserved was included in the Scriptures. They knew what they were writing, to a certain extent, but the Holy Spirit had a plan, which encompassed the whole of what God was going to do in history, and in the gathering of these Scriptures. Even those who wrote those things sensed this. Turn back to 1 Peter 1:10–12:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory.

While these great prophets and others were writing these things—such as the servant songs of Isaiah—they would have said, What am I really saying here? I know this is going beyond my own time: when is it going to be fulfilled? How will it come to pass? They were longing to see the full dimensions of what they were talking about:

It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!

There were things being revealed through them that even the angels did not know or understand, but which have now come to us in the gospel of grace.

That is why I am bold in speaking of the Book of Job to speak of things like the resurrection of the dead in connection with the hope that Job had. I hope that is not too complicated for you to follow. That is a good framework to have. The three elements of looking at the Scriptures are:

- First we must understand what they mean in their original context. For that we need all the help we can get from the biblical scholars.
- Then we must attempt to see what the Holy Spirit intended by them in the context of the whole plan of God, from beginning to end. For that we need to be soaked in the Scriptures and their whole mindset, and know them through and through.
- Then, with that work done, we can receive God's direct word for us now, today. For this we need, with open Bibles, to wait prayerfully on the Holy Spirit of God.

That, I believe, is a full use of the Scriptures. I trust that comes through with what we are doing in the Book of Job.

This is consistent with the constant thrust of the New Testament. Paul in Romans 3:21, when speaking of the grace of justification, says it is something that goes beyond the law of

God, but the law and the prophets (of the Old Testament) bear witness to it. Job was one of those prophets. There are constant longings, hints, glimpses, through the Old Testament, of what God would do in Christ, with faith and hope set on that, even while it remains yet unknown.

While we are in the New Testament, it would be good to look at the reference to Job in James 5:10–11:

As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

The endurance or steadfastness of Job, the purpose of the Lord, the compassion and mercy of the Lord, are fully testified to in the Book of Job, as James says here.

At the end of Hebrews 11, where there is that great roll-call of the men and women of faith, it says that these all set their faith on what God was going to do which has come to us now (verses 39–40):

all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Isn't it wonderful to see how we fit with the great saints Abraham, David and Job; and yet they were waiting and longing for what we know; and they sensed there was something still to come that would not be complete until we were here to be a part of it! It is a great place to be, to know where we are in all of that.

TO GOD ALONE I TURN

We saw in chapter 14 of the Book of Job that he spoke of his death: there was the hint of the release and the resurrection to be effected by God Himself. Even if that was not a coherent thing in Job's own mind, that is where his faith and hope were set. Look now at chapter 16, that we have looked at before. Notice here the contrast with the friends, the comforters. In chapter 15 Eliphaz has just set forth his faith and said that the wicked come to an end and there is no hope there, there is complete despair. Eliphaz does not mention God much at all: he says that the wicked have stretched their hand against God and bidden defiance to the Almighty, but he does not say that God brings them to this. He just says that is what they do, so this is what happens to them. It is Job all the time who brings it back to the direct personal relationship and action of God. Listen what he says about God (*italicised here*) in 16:7–17:

Surely now *God* has worn me out;
 he has made desolate all my company.
And *he* has shrivelled me up,
 which is a witness against me;
my leanness has risen up against me,
 and it testifies to my face.
He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me;
 he has gnashed his teeth at me;
 my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.
They have gaped at me with their mouths;
 they have struck me insolently on the cheek;
 they mass themselves together against me.
God gives me up to the ungodly,
 and casts me into the hands of the wicked.
I was at ease, and *he* broke me in two;
 he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces;

he set me up as his target;
his archers surround me.
He slashes open my kidneys, and shows no mercy;
he pours out my gall on the ground.
He bursts upon me again and again;
he rushes at me like a warrior.
I have sewed sackcloth upon my skin,
and have laid my strength in the dust.
My face is red with weeping,
and deep darkness is on my eyelids,
though there is no violence in my hands,
and my prayer is pure.”

Job allows the action of no one else but God in his sufferings. So to whom else can he turn for release from suffering and for vindication but to God? 16:18–21:

“O earth, do not cover my blood;
let my outcry find no resting place.
Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven,
and he that vouches for me is on high.
My friends scorn me;
my eye pours out tears to God,
that he would maintain the right of a mortal with God,
as one does for a neighbour.”

If all is the action of God, to whom else can we turn but to God for mercy and vindication. Job is saying, ‘God is the one who is doing all this to me’. A bit like the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:39: ‘See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.’ So, Job says, ‘my witness is in heaven . . . my eye pours out tears to God, that *he* would maintain the right of a mortal with God, as one does for a neighbour’—even though he expects soon to die.

‘HE WOULD GIVE HEED TO ME’

Turn now to chapter 23. Here is the longing of Job that he will come before God. It is a very strong and a very confident longing:

23:1 Then Job answered:
2 ‘Today also my complaint is bitter;
his hand is heavy despite my groaning.
3 Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his dwelling!
4 I would lay my case before him,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
5 I would learn what he would answer me,
and understand what he would say to me.
6 Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.”

Remember back in 9:13–21, where Job was particularly feeling the pressure of his sufferings, and was aware of the unchallengeable power of God:

God will not turn back his anger;
the helpers of Rahab bowed beneath him.
How then can I answer him,
choosing my words with him?

Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.
If I summoned him and he answered me,
I do not believe that he would listen to my voice.
For he crushes me with a tempest,
and multiplies my wounds without cause;
he will not let me get my breath,
but fills me with bitterness.
If it is a contest of strength, he is the strong one!
If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?
Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me;
though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.”

There is almost a hopelessness there, that he could ever get any way with God if he was face to face with Him, because of God’s great power; that even if he did come before him, even what he tried to say about himself would come out sounding perverse and condemnatory, and he would not be able to get anywhere with God. There are times, too, when Job speaks out of turn, and God has a word with him about that later on. We can understand the kind of pressure he is under there. But in chapter 23 he seems to have come to a position of greater sureness and certainty. Earlier, in answer to his question in verse 6, ‘Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?’ Job knew jolly well that if He did, Job would not stand a chance. Now he says, ‘No: God is so much greater in power than I am, but *He will not use that advantage that He has against me*. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No! He would give heed to me!’ What a wonderful understanding of the relationship that he had with this great God! And the tenderness of that great God, and the readiness of the great God to speak and to listen to the one whom He has made, and whom He loves:

23:6 Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; but he would give heed to me.
7 There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.”

There is a great sense there of the nobility of a human person: that what is true of God He has made also to be true for us, what is just and right for God is just and right for us, what is upright for God is upright for us. We can address God in the same moral framework that He operates in. That is where He has placed us, and that is the way He has made us. That also is a wonderful thing: that God and we speak the same language, which is God’s language, with regard to those things.

HOPE THAT IS NOT SEEN

The next few verses, however, indicate that in his present sufferings Job cannot see his way forward to that. That is what his hope is, and that is what his faith is, but he cannot see his way forward to that. ‘Hope that is seen is not hope’ (Romans 8:24).

23:8 If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
9 on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.”

We can understand that, too. Christ had the same experience on the cross: though he was sure that he would rise the third day from the dead, in the midst of his suffering all he knew was, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’—‘I have no understanding of this, and I

cannot see my way out of it'. Yet that faith is there. Even in the midst of that, when he says, 'I cannot see him', Job still says:

23:10 But he knows the way that I take.

A lot has been made of those words, often in a pious or sentimental way. It is probably better translated, 'He knows his way with me.' He knows what He is doing. That is why Job goes on to say in verse 14, 'He will complete what he appoints for me; and many such things are in his mind.' Even though I do not understand what He is doing, and I cannot see my way clear of it right now, He knows what He is doing, and that is where I will place my hope.

23:10 But he knows the way that I take;
when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.

It seems that here Job has reached the point where he has understood something of what was going on in chapters 1 and 2, as to the reason why his suffering has come to him. He says against his comforters: 'No, it is not punishment—that is not in order—and it is not chastisement—God trying to straighten me out—it is testing. I do not understand why, but that is what it is.' We have seen that is exactly what it is. But it is not God testing Job so much as God testing God, letting Himself be put to the test, to see and to show that God's faithfulness will win in the end and will sustain Job in his suffering, so that, through it all, Job will remain blameless and upright. Job's very statements here testify that God is in fact doing this right up to this point. Job says, 'I shall come out like gold.' Gold is gold when you put it in the fire, and it is gold when it comes out. That is why you put it in the fire. If it was going to get burned up, you would not be putting it through. Job is saying: 'God is putting me through this to prove something'. As we have seen, it is mainly to prove that God is faithful: to prove and test Job's faith, but it is faith in the faithfulness of God, and in God being able to complete His appointed purpose for Job. It is good that Job knows that. It is good for us to know that in such circumstances; and all that time not to depart from the commandment of His lips, and to treasure in your bosom the words of His mouth:

23:11 My foot has held fast to his steps;
I have kept his way and have not turned aside.
12 I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured in my bosom the words of his mouth.

Some translations translate verse 13 as 'He is unchangeable', but it literally says, 'He is in one'—He is one. 'Unchangeable' suggests something unfeeling or inflexible, but here Job is saying much the same as Deuteronomy 6:4: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one' or 'The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.' He is the one from whom *all* things have come. There is no division in God. So what God does to bring suffering is not over against any purpose of His that He might have to bring release and salvation. God is one:

23:13 But he stands alone and who can dissuade him?
What he desires, that he does.

It is good to know that. If we are not happy with what God does, then we will say 'What he desires, that he does' in a grim and resentful tone, and put up with it. But that is not at all the tone in which Job is saying this. That is more like what the comforters were saying. Job is thrilled that what God desires, that He does, because that is his hope.

23:14 For he will complete what he appoints for me;

and many such things are in his mind.

Meanwhile, as we have seen, none of this is evident in what Job is presently going through. Job's faith must be entirely reliant on the sustaining faithfulness of God to him, in the darkness:

23:15 Therefore I am terrified at his presence;
when I consider, I am in dread of him.
16 God has made my heart faint;
the Almighty has terrified me;
17 If only I could vanish in darkness,
and thick darkness would cover my face!

I SHALL SEE GOD

We have seen before that the highest expression of Job's faith is in chapter 19. Before we come to that, let us hear again from Francis Anderson's commentary, page 209:

What Job is seeking is confirmation from God, in contradiction of what his friends have been saying, that his right relationship with God, which, throughout his whole life had been grounded in 'the fear of God' and not in the merit of his own good deeds, was unimpaired. Job's expanding faith will now embrace his sufferings as something between himself and God within that right relationship.

The thing that has been most important to Job right through, in the days of his prosperity and now even more urgently in the days of his adversity, was his relationship with God: the fact that he had always loved and feared God and had known God relating with him. That is the very thing that he never wants to let go of, or never wants to think that he will ever lose, even in death. What he wants God to show him and reassure him is that this relationship is still unimpaired: that God is still God, and Job is still Job, and God and Job are still at one, as they were before, and as they will be in the time to come. That leaves way behind any consideration of whether Job has been right or wrong, or has been a sinner or a virtuous man. That relationship is everything to him, and he believes that God, in that relationship, can even deal with his sins—wrap them up in a big bag and throw them away. It is that relationship that is important to him, and that he is appealing to. So we read in chapter 19:

19:23 O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!
24 O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock forever!

Job wants to put it down in writing and leave a lasting written record, so that even if he dies, it can be said, 'This is Job's faith, and it is still there':

19:25 For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
26 and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
27 whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.

Many translations have a number of little footnotes through this text. That indicates that the text is often very difficult to decipher, and that there are variant readings. We could look at some of them: 'I know that my Redeemer [or *Vindicator*] lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth [or *upon the dust*]; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my

flesh [or *from* or *without my flesh*] I shall see God [the note says: The meaning of the Hebrew in this verse is uncertain], whom I shall see on my side [or *for myself*] and my eyes shall behold, and not another.' Even though there is that 'static interference' in the text, the thrust of everything that comes through is very clear. Job believes that he is going to be face-to-face with God, and it will be he and not another, and he will not be a stranger or foreigner to God, he will be with God, and he will be known to God, and God will be known to him. It will be Job in his full personality: even though skin has been destroyed, yet Job will still be Job, entire in his flesh. He will see God as his redeemer, as the one who vindicates him, who says that Job is in the right, even in the right all along: 'My favour and goodness is for him'. This God will stand upon the earth, I shall see Him for myself—it will be I—or I shall see Him on my side, or with me, and He will be for me. Knowing what we know about the resurrection from the dead, we can say it is all there, but looking at the text as it stands we could say, 'We are not sure whether it is all there or not, but the lines of it are all there'. That is Job's faith at its highest: '*I shall see God*'. This is the stand he takes against his friends:

- 19: My heart faints within me!
28 If you say, 'How we will persecute him!'
and, 'The root of the matter is found in him';
29 be afraid of the sword,
for wrath brings the punishment of the sword,
so that you may know there is a judgment.

FAITH IN A SAVING GOD

I am sometimes asked, What about the people who did not know about Christ or do not know about Jesus: are they saved? That is not a question that we have to give an answer to. Whether you are interested in that question or not, Jesus told this parable in Luke 18:9–14 to delineate what saving faith is all about:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.

That is a good description of the attitude that the comforters were having; not that they trusted that they were righteous: they thought that is what Job was doing and despising them, but we have seen that is not the case. They did come to a position of despising Job.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Sometimes that parable can be taken perversely to say that if you really crawl to God and humble yourself to Him, if you say, 'God, I am a terrible person', then God will say, 'Good on you! Yes, I will justify you.' That is not what is happening here. Look at the prayer of the tax collector: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' It is a very clear, open, honest prayer. It has tremendous faith: it is saying, 'God, be propitious, be favourable, to me, a sinner'. In a sense, it is asking God to do the impossible. How could God ever look favourably on a sinner? God can only look favourably on a sinner if He is propitious—if He Himself does something to propitiate the wrath He must have against sin, and to pay it all out. 'God be propitious to me, a sinner.' The tax collector does not say, 'through Jesus Christ our Lord'. But he is praying, in effect, to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He does not know how God is going

to do it, but he says: 'God, I believe—my faith is—that You can do something to make Yourself propitious to me, and I am trusting You to do it'. Is not that exactly what David did, so many years before Christ? He believed in the total forgiveness of sins, and in Psalm 51 he said: 'God, *You* do something; *You* make me clean'. David perhaps had no idea how God would do that, but he trusted that God would do it. Abraham had the same faith: he believed in God, and was justified. He believed in the God who, in His historical purpose, that He was beginning to set out before Abraham, would bring something to bear that would make propitiation for sinners. That was the basis also of Job's faith, however incoherent it might have been, however dimly perceived, yet it was there, and it was strong: 'God, be propitious to me, a sinner. And I am sure that You are such a God that You can do that, and receive me before You, upright and blameless, face to face, with great joy.'

This is the faith that has now been opened out to us in the preaching of the apostles, and in the gospel of grace that has come to us, and so we stand with Job, and with all those who have gone before as well. As we hear these things, we can have the same conviction that Job had, on perhaps even surer grounds than were available to him at the time—though God was still the same God then as we know Him to be now. This is what John writes in his first letter, 1 John 5:13–15, 20:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him . . . And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Fourteen

TRUE WISDOM

We come now to chapter 28. We have been going from one part of the Book of Job to another, jumbling them up, and we could lose a sense of what is happening in the whole book. So it would be good just to look at where we have come to so far. Chapters 1 and 2 tell the story and set the scene. chapters 3–27, where we have done most of our looking, is the dialogue between Job and his three companions. That happens in three rounds: Job speaks, then Eliphaz and Bildad and Zophar each in turn, and Job responds after each one. Chapters 3–14 are round one, chapters 15–21 are round 2, where the same thing happens. In round three, chapters 22–27, only Eliphaz and Bildad speak, and Job responds. Bildad does not have much to say, and Zophar does not speak at all, so round three is rather short. So by the end of chapter 27, we come to the end of the discussion with the three friends. Chapters 29–31 we have looked at: those are the chapters in which Job rests his case. In chapter 29 he talks about his former prosperity, in chapter 30 he talks about his present adversity, in chapter 31 he sets out the denial of whatever accusation has been made against him and his appeal to be judged accordingly.

Before that comes this remarkable chapter 28. It stands on its own, and it is a real treasure. It is a poem on wisdom. I discovered this chapter when I was at school. We had a public speaking prize, and anyone who was game to apply for winning this prize had to front up before the whole school. There were two parts to the competition: first was the reading of a chapter from the Bible—there were a certain number of set chapters that you could choose from to read—and the other was giving a speech on a topic of your choice. Among the set passages was 1 Corinthians 13 on love, and that is what most of the students chose. By the end of the afternoon you were sick of hearing 1 Corinthians 13 seven times! One of the readings listed, that I had never heard before, was Job 28. I read it through, from the old Authorised (King James) Version, and I was stunned. I thought, This is great! I am going to read Job 28. So I stood up before the whole school and read Job 28 from the Authorised Version. I think I did it pretty well! And it had the advantage of coming freshly on the ears of the students. When it came to giving my prepared speech, just before the end of it I went blank, and there was a silence for what seemed like about a minute and a half, so I missed out on the prize. But if it had just been on reading Job 28, I think I might have got it! Because I was so rapt with the wonder of it.

CHAPTER 28: WHERE DOES IT BELONG?

This chapter is quite distinct. It does not relate directly to what comes immediately before it, or after it, in the Book of Job; though it has everything to do with the whole theme of this book about Job, especially to do with Job's faith that we have been thinking about.

The scholars always like everything to fit into their tidy patterns—don't we all? So they come to chapter 28 and they scratch their heads and they say: 'Well, maybe it has been put in later, or maybe it should be somewhere else', or 'Who spoke it: was it Job or someone else (Zophar, even, to square things up?)', or 'Has it been imported from a completely different work?' These things occupy their minds, and parts of their commentaries. But human beings do not fit into tidy little patterns, and nor does life. Especially with those who are born of the Spirit: Jesus said, 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit' (John 3:8). You cannot expect to predict where they are coming from, or where they

are going to, because they are flowing with God, and God cannot be contained in neat and tidy patterns. Neither can human beings, or human life. So I am glad that chapter 28 is plonked here in the middle of the Book of Job, and that the scholars cannot quite make head or tail of how it came to be there, or what it is doing there. There are questions like: 'Who is speaking in this chapter?' It is just after chapter 27, where Job has been speaking, and there is nothing to say that someone else picks up speaking at this point, so just reading it naturally, you would think that this is something that Job is saying. It is, however, in some contrast with the agitation of Job and the friends, and the tension that is there. This chapter is quite free from any tension or agitation: it is serene, it is tranquil. This is not to say that it was not Job who said it, for it was certainly something that Job knew. Sometimes people say: 'Maybe it is the story-teller coming in, and in the middle of this just putting in this beautiful poem on wisdom, to say something about where none of them have got to so far, but where we are heading in the end'—that may be it: an interlude.

HUMAN INGENUITY AND DETERMINATION

Leaving those questions aside, let us see what it actually says first of all, and then see how it relates to the rest of the Book of Job.

- 28:1 Surely there is a mine for silver,
and a place for gold to be refined.
2 Iron is taken out of the earth,
and copper is smelted from ore.
3 Miners put an end to darkness,
and search out to the farthest bound
the ore in gloom and deep darkness.
4 They open shafts in a valley away from human habitation;
they are forgotten by travelers,
they sway suspended, remote from people.
5 As for the earth, out of it comes bread;
but underneath it is turned up as by fire.
6 Its stones are the place of sapphires,
and its dust contains gold.

7 That path no bird of prey knows,
and the falcon's eye has not seen it.
8 The proud wild animals have not trodden it;
the lion has not passed over it.

9 They put their hand to the flinty rock,
and overturn mountains by the roots.
10 They cut out channels in the rocks,
and their eyes see every precious thing.
11 The sources of the rivers they probe;
hidden things they bring to light.

Verses 1–11 are about mining, and wisdom is not mentioned until verse 12. The passage intrigues us, and makes us wonder what this is all about. It is a wonderful poem about the ends to which human beings are capable of going to get precious things. This really came alive to me when I was living at Coober Pedy, an opal mining town in the dry far north of South Australia. 'Miners put an end to darkness, and search out to the farthest bound the ore in gloom and deep darkness. They open shafts in a valley away from human habitation': Coober Pedy is miles from anywhere, and no human being would choose to inhabit that place. Even the Aboriginal people, when they were walking through there, never stopped at

where Coober Pedy is now—they just passed through. No one would want to stop there, especially in the middle of summer. But underneath all of that God put opal—I think because He had told the human beings to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ (Genesis 1:28), and even though there were some places people would not choose to go naturally, He made it so they would go there anyway! The miners dig deep shafts: they started digging them by hand, with pick and shovel; now they dig them with machines, and drill right down into the rock. Light comes where it has never come before, and the opal comes out into the light. When it is locked into the rock, it is black—it has never seen the light. When it comes out, all the ‘lights’ in the stone shine in the sunlight. Even before that, when they have their underground lights shining on the wall, trying to spot the opal. One of my mining friends, when he found some ‘colour’, would switch his machine off, shine his lights on it, and just marvel, before he chipped it out. He was looking at something that no one had ever seen before. I have been down there in those shafts.

The Stuart Highway is now bitumenised, and the cars and the busses go shooting over the top: tourists can go straight past and not know what is down there. They can see the tops of the shafts, and the mounds of dirt, but underneath, ‘forgotten by travellers’, the miners are at work. Also I have been on the winch that lowers you down the sixty-foot shaft: it is a narrow piece of board that you sit on, suspended in the darkness, as you go down: ‘they sway suspended, remote from people’! Further up the track, at Mintabie, they do not dig shafts there so much: they have open-cut mining. They get huge D9 Caterpillar bulldozers, and they shift mountains of hard rock: ‘They put their hand to the flinty rock, and overturn mountains by the roots.’ The whole of the country around Mintabie is devastated by enormous deep cuts and gougers from the bulldozers and the big scrapers. They scoop along the bottom of the cut, and people follow behind and watch for the opal: ‘They cut out channels in the rocks, and their eyes see every precious thing.’

So this is a hymn to the ingenuity and glory of human beings. It chooses mining, which was the most advanced form of technology, or where humans had to be so much more inventive than any other area in ancient days. That can still be the case: we are very aware of the power and determination of the mining industry, and the huge spending that people are prepared to risk on it. We let nothing escape us when we are after those treasures that are locked in the earth. We do ‘overturn mountains’. Once we have got it out, ‘Iron is taken out of the earth, and copper is smelted from ore.’ The smelting processes in the ancient world were quite ingenious: think of the great bronze objects that were made for the temple in Jerusalem in Solomon’s time, and the advanced technology that was involved in that. We have gone far beyond that now in our own day with how we process metals. It is a vast industry. Humans go far beyond the birds and animals: the falcon can see much further than we can, and its eyes are much sharper than ours, but it does not get under the earth where those treasures are, as we do. The lion is afraid of nothing, and has great courage, but it does not match the kind of courage that is engaged in mining enterprises. In the older days—copper-mining at Burra or gold-mining at Ballarat—they went right under the earth, into rickety shafts, and often suffered considerably. There are still mining accidents today, but still we go in, to get out what is there.

BUT WHERE IS WISDOM?

Human beings are amazing creatures. There is no disparagement of mining here, nor of human ingenuity. The point being made here, however, is that, with all that power and wit and ingenuity, we still cannot find wisdom. If this poem was being written in the twentieth century, it might say something like: We have put a man on the moon, and that is a magnificent achievement, but are we still any wiser as to the true ways of living and loving?

This sums up that century in which we saw such tremendous advances, and such horrific turmoil in human relationships. So where is wisdom, and how are we to have it?

28:12 But where shall wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding?
13 Mortals do not know the way to it,
and it is not found in the land of the living.

You can search high and low:

28:14 The deep says, 'It is not in me,'
and the sea says, 'It is not with me.'

That reminds us of the writer of Ecclesiastes, who searched through everything: he tried all the riches of wealth, and all the advances of human technology; he did mighty works and built great buildings; he tried every form of pleasure, and examined every form of wisdom—he read all the books and went right through every kind of education that there was—and he thought that wisdom is pretty good, but the conclusion he came to was that you can search high and low, but you will never get to the end of it 'under the sun': 'He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end' (Ecclesiastes 3:11 *RSV*). We shall see that the conclusion this poem comes to is: 'Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding' (verse 28). We cannot ever know wisdom without relating to God. That is our problem: that we try to find wisdom everywhere else. We search high and low, but:

28:14 The deep says, 'It is not in me,'
and the sea says, 'It is not with me.'

Again, that reminds us of what God says in Deuteronomy 30:11–14, where it says you can search high and low, but wisdom is closer than you think: 'For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?"' Maybe if we can send a space probe through the solar system, if it keeps on transmitting, we will get to the end of what true wisdom is about. But God says, 'No, you do not have to do that. That might be a good thing to do, but that will not get you wisdom.' 'Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?"' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.' What is that word? It is the word of God, the word of His commandment—the word of His relating to us, and us to Him.

CHRIST OUR WISDOM

That is picked up in the New Testament, when we see that Christ has come from the heights and gone to the depths and returned to the heights again, and fills all things. If you really want to know what wisdom is all about, you will need to know him. Ephesians 4:7–10: 'But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)' It then goes on to say about the gifts he has given to us in the church. In another place it is said of Jesus, 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of

wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3). He is the one who has gone higher than the heights and lower than the depths, and he fills all things, So if you want to know the sum of all things, and all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, it is Christ you need to go to, and it is Christ you need to relate to: the one who has come from God, and who has done most fully all the will of God, in grace and truth. Paul in Romans 10:6–9, when he is quoting Deuteronomy 30: 'the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.' The word of Christ—of relating to him—that comes to us in the gospel of grace: this is true wisdom So 'Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified' (1 Corinthians 1:22–23), 'in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'.

That is going beyond what Job 28 strictly says, but it is good to relate this to the whole of the Scriptures, and see how it coheres together.

WISDOM, MONEY, AND DEATH

What price wisdom?

- 28:15 It cannot be gotten for gold,
and silver cannot be weighed out as its price.
16 It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir,
in precious onyx or sapphire.
17 Gold and glass cannot equal it,
nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold.
18 No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal;
the price of wisdom is above pearls.
19 The chrysolite of Ethiopia cannot compare with it,
nor can it be valued in pure gold.

Wisdom is not something that can be bought and sold, or bartered for, no matter what price is offered. The whole knowing and exercise of wisdom is of a different order from that. So where is it to be found?

- 28:20 Where then does wisdom come from?
And where is the place of understanding?
21 It is hidden from the eyes of all living,
and concealed from the birds of the air.

Sometimes people look to nature: perhaps the birds know what it is all about, for they seem very free and happy. But they are simply being birds!

- 28:22 Abaddon and Death say,
'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.'

That is interesting: that death may help to bring wisdom near. But it will not be wisdom itself. When we begin to sense the limitations that death places on our lives, that leads us to look beyond those limitations, beyond everything that is just 'under the sun'. We certainly found that Job, who expected death to be very close to him, and who even desired it at times, with the wisdom that he had, and the freedom and the lack of the need to 'pussyfoot around' that this gave him, meant that his wisdom was certainly above that of the comforters, who were

still trying to sort it all out this side of death. Ecclesiastes 7:4 says on that score: 'The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.' If we are going to be wise, we need to take death into account, and give some thought and consideration to it, and not just ignore it. You will not be wise if you seek to ignore the reality of death. But even though death may help us to be wise, if death itself were true wisdom, that would be a very nihilistic and depressing outcome.

GOD'S WISDOM AT WORK IN CREATION

The answer finally comes in verse 23; but not in a light or facile way:

28:23 God understands the way to it,
and he knows its place.
24 For he looks to the ends of the earth,
and sees everything under the heavens.
25 When he gave to the wind its weight,
and apportioned out the waters by measure;
26 when he made a decree for the rain,
and a way for the thunderbolt;
27 then he saw it and declared it;
he established it, and searched it out.

God knows wisdom, and He knows it by virtue of the way He has made everything and sees everything. All wisdom is with Him, especially with regard to creation: what He has made, and His act of making and sustaining and ordering it. Proverbs 8:22–31, another lovely wisdom poem, is worth comparing with this, where wisdom itself is speaking, while God is creating the earth:

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

Wisdom was there from the beginning, before anything was made, and as things were being made, so everything that is made by God is structured and measured according to wisdom. Wisdom delights in all that has been made, and especially in the human beings: for they, above all have been structured according to wisdom, in the image of God.

We get a similar taste of that in these verses from Job 28. It is talking about things like the vast heavens, and the wind with its mighty force, and the waters of the oceans around the earth with their surgings, and the rain with its beating, and the lightning with its fearsome thunder, and it says God is making all these things. When we are in the middle of these things, they are frightening. All the elements of the storm are there—the tempest, over which we have no control—for us, it is like chaos breaking loose, when we are in the middle of, say, a fierce storm at sea. But look at the words that are used in regard to that. ‘When he gave to the wind its *weight*’: I’ll measure this out for you, wind—that is how heavy you will be. ‘When he . . . apportioned out the waters by *measure*’: Oceans, you will be so big, but no bigger; you will come so far up the land but no further; you are very big, but you will only be able to go so high when the waves come. ‘He made a *decree* for the rain’: so He tells the rain when to rain and when not to rain—the Bible is full of instances of that. ‘He made . . . a *way* for the thunderbolt’: lightning seems quite erratic, this is saying that there is a way channelled out for it, and then it follows that way—that is the way ordained for it by the wisdom of God. We are talking about the elemental forces here, but they are all governed by the wisdom of God. That is a wonderful thing to know, when you are in the middle of a storm—whether a literal storm or a metaphorical storm. That is wisdom.

When Jesus came up against rejection and failure in his ministry in the towns around Bethsaida and Capernaum, his own home base—they ended up totally rejecting his ministry, except for the few that he called out from there, like Peter and James and John, Andrew and Matthew—he prayed: ‘Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will”’ (Luke 10:21)—that was Your wisdom. When we come up against that kind of failure, that kind of tempest and disruption, we can know, as he did, that this is structured and ordered according to the wisdom of God. It is following those channels that He has carved, and it is all according to His measuring out. These are great measures, but governed by God. When we know that, we are starting to know wisdom. We are beginning to fear the Lord.

FEAR GOD

Ecclesiastes comes to the conclusion, right at the end:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone [*literally* the whole of being human]. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13–14).

We try to explain that term ‘the fear of the Lord’ in many ways. We say it is an awe of God’s awesomeness, or it is a healthy respect for God, or it is reverence. But I do not think we can ever really get away from that word ‘fear’. Fear the Lord—fear His judgments. That is what Ecclesiastes is saying here. God knows everything, from before the beginning to after the end, and Christ has plumbed all of those heights and depths, so all wisdom is with God: fear God. There is nothing you will ever hide from Him: fear His judgments. Have a good, strong love and fear of God, and you will begin to be wise.

Job 28 concludes:

28:28 And he said to humankind,
‘Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
and to depart from evil is understanding.’”

To hear God’s commandments, and live by them in direct relationship with God: that is wisdom, and understanding.

Note that God does not just say, 'Ha! You will never find it out'. If this last verse were not there, and we were left simply with the raging elements and God's governance of them, it might be saying that, and we might think all of that is all too much for us and we will never understand it. No: God actually communicates it to us. After He has done all of this—after He has made all of creation and structured and ordered it according to wisdom, measured and right in all its dynamic movements and forces—He then speaks to us, to humankind, and He says: 'Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom'. That word 'Truly' is literally 'Behold!'—look, and see! God hides nothing from us. 'And to depart from evil is understanding': I will make clear to you all my commandments, so you can know the way life is really structured, and how you can live and love wisely. God does not leave us wondering—He actually communicates this to us.

A CLEAR GLIMPSE

Now we have read this wonderful chapter 28, we can return to the question, What is its place in the book? Francis Andersen has this to say (p. 224):

The tranquillity and detachment of this poem, its almost scientific objectivity, matches the suspense in which the reader's thought is held at this point. The debate is done. Nothing is settled. The wit of men is exhausted, and God is still silent. The question does not have to be stated to enter our minds: 'Where can we find wisdom?'

'Its almost scientific objectivity': as when it is talking about creation, and the lengths to which humans will go in their enterprises. 'The debate is done. Nothing is settled. The wit of men is exhausted'. Mortals do not know the way to wisdom: the counsellors have been arguing, Job has been arguing. Job has been getting caught up into it emotionally, and so have they, but they have not reached any conclusion—we do not know the way to it. 'God is still silent.' We know that God is going to speak before the end of the book, but at this point He has not spoken yet.

So this chapter shows us the impasse that has been reached, where these great men—remember that Job's counsellors were great men and great theologians too—had come to these tremendous issues of life, and had reached no conclusion as yet that they could agree on. This poem is placed at this point to highlight that. However great we are—however strong our intellect and mighty our enterprises as a human race—we will not come to the answer of these great issues of life.

Chapter 28 also takes us to where we are going. The very things that it says here—'God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth, and sees everything under the heavens', and how God created and governs the elements by wisdom—all of this is what God is going to show Job before the end of the book. In the wonders of creation, and His measured control of all its mighty forces, God will show to Job and the counsellors His true wisdom. The end of this poem is an indication of where we are going to come to by the end of the book. But we are not there yet. This is part of the skill of this writing, and why it is so true to life, that it does not swing in the answers in a pious or easy way. We could say, Oh yes, we know the answer to that: 'God knows the way to it! Fear the Lord—that is wisdom! To depart from evil is understanding!' We could say that in a very light way, as clichés. Is not that what the counsellors were doing? 'You've got to fear the Lord, and you've got to depart from evil, you wicked man!' They were telling him that, but they themselves still had not got to the bottom of it. We could do the same.

Here in chapter 28 we have a small vignette or overview of the whole book, showing where it has come from, where it has got to, and where it is going. But this is not the final word. It is inserted rather like some of the visions in the Book of Revelation. There are great

turmoils and tribulations throughout that book, in the cut and thrust of human life, and in the middle of it the martyrs are crying out to God as to why they are there, and why they have been killed, and how much longer this suffering is going to be continued, and where is the kingdom of God in all this (see Revelation 6:9–11)? Every now and then in the book of Revelation are put in visions of where we are heading to, and what it is all about. Chapters 4 and 5: ‘I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open!’—which gave admission to the worship in heaven. Chapter 7: ‘I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands . . . They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’ Chapter 14: ‘I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders.’ Then, after each of these, it goes back to the unfolding of all the judgments on the earth. Right at the end of the book is the wonderful vision of the heavenly city, that these earlier visions have been preparing us for, to show us what has really been going on all the time.

Similarly, chapter 28 of the book of Job, in the middle of this cut and thrust and turbulence, tells us not just where we are going, but what the whole thing is all about. The visions in the Book of Revelation do not tell us the way it is going to end up in the sense that, ‘Well, you are going to have to put up with this now, but it will turn out all right in the end! They are not saying, ‘Hold the fort, for I am coming!’—hang in there as long as you can! Those visions in the Book of Revelation tell us what is really happening all along. The same can be said of chapter 28 of the book of Job. It shows us where wisdom is really to be found, and what is going on all the time, from the beginning of creation right to the end, and so gives the context for understanding what has been happening to Job and his friends, as far as God is concerned. That is why it is such a wonderful piece.

It is not a pious answer. That is what the counsellors were trying to give. Their piety was shattered against the reality of Job's suffering, and the reality of God. This is not a pious interjection, closing off the argument. It is a vignette, or overview, of the whole scene, and its outcome.

We go on from there, because Job still has his final words to say. Then we come to a very interesting character called Elihu, whom we shall meet in the next section. We are back, then, in the cut and thrust and the murky confusion of it all, before God finally speaks. Here, for one clear and breath-taking moment, we have been given to see beyond all that, at the whole of the landscape that we are traversing.

Father, we thank You that You hold back from us nothing that is necessary to accomplish all the purposes of your kingdom of love and of grace, and that You sustain us in that by your word. We thank You that, in the times we cannot see our way clear, and when we are in confusion and puzzlement, the wisdom of your word comes to us, setting out the way things are, even though we may not be able to see them as such at the time. We thank You for this chapter of the book of Job, for all that it speaks to us of the wonderful way in which You have made humanity, and of the even more wonderful way You have brought us to Your wisdom, and brought Yourself to us, in Christ our Lord. Amen.

Fifteen

ELIHU—I

So far we have seen Job's sufferings, and how they came about; we have heard the words of Job's three friends, and Job's answer to each of them; we have recognised Job's faith, and the pleading of his cause before God. Next we would expect to find God's own reply to Job. That comes, but before that happens, someone else speaks. It is someone we have not heard of before, though apparently he has been there all along, because he has been listening in on everything that has been happening. He is someone who, after he speaks, is not acknowledged again. His name is Elihu, and what he has to say takes up chapters 32–37.

THE ANGRY YOUNG MAN

Here he is introduced:

32:1 So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. **2** Then Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became angry. He was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God; **3** he was angry also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, though they had declared Job to be in the wrong. **4** Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job, because they were older than he. **5** But when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouths of these three men, he became angry.

We do not have to take what is written here at face value. It is written from Elihu's point of view. Four times it says that he was 'angry'. Elihu is the 'angry young man', so his viewpoint is likely to be distorted, because we never see things clearly from the point of view of our anger. Thus, when it says in verse 1 that the three friends ceased to answer Job 'because he was righteous in his own eyes', that is how Job was misunderstood by his three friends. We know that Job did say that before God he has walked blameless and upright, but we also know that Job did not say he was not a sinner. He was saying, 'In my sufferings I have not spoken against God, or cursed Him, or blamed Him with wrong'. Also Job was saying, 'There is no good reason for my suffering, and I want God to come and say, if there is anything, what it is. But I believe that, when I come before Him, there will be no good reason for my suffering.' That did not mean that he was totally 'righteous in his own eyes', and arrogant and proud with it. That was a misunderstanding on the part of Job's three friends. They thought that is what he was saying, and they treated him accordingly.

Elihu sees the same thing. In verse 2, it says Elihu 'was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God'. We have seen very clearly that Job looked to God to justify him, and to justify Himself as God. Verse 3: 'He was angry also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, though they had declared Job to be in the wrong.' That makes it sound a bit like the whole thing was an intellectual discussion rather than the outworking of life's great issues. That is a bit of a clue to Elihu's approach: he is saying, 'You guys have been arguing about the problem of suffering, and you have not come up with any conclusion'. Whereas we have seen, right from the start, that Job himself was deeply affected by what was going on. It was no intellectual argument for him. If we approach the whole book of Job as an intellectual argument, then we have not got to the level of where it is at. But that seems to be where Elihu is.

HOLDING FAST, AND PRESSING ON

Elihu reminds me of a young theological student. For theological students, these are great issues: they are discovering wonderful things about God, they are opening up the Scriptures and the great doctrines! I can remember when we were at theological college, and we would stay up until one or two o'clock in the morning thrashing these things out—all up in our minds! That is, perhaps, what Elihu does. We see here that he is young: he had waited to speak because the other three were older than he was. But he says, as we shall see, that he thinks that he knows better than the old—that he has got it all worked out, and that he can tell them a thing or two. We saw that Zophar was a bit like that: he was young and brash, and plain rude with it. Elihu is even younger than he is, but he is more in the nature of one who has his whole theology worked out, and can tell anyone anything—or thinks he can. Anderson's commentary describes it rather well: 'He speaks with that combination of deference and cocksureness'—deference to the aged, but sure that he knows better than they do—'that captures the pose of a youth that sees little, but sees it clearly.' Elihu has some great things to say, but it is also clear that he has misunderstood a lot of what has been said, or is just picking it up and repeating it as if it is something that he has thought of himself. But the things he does see, he sees with great perception, grabbing hold of them very well.

I once had my whole theology worked out. I was well down that track: I started to set it out in a series of teaching booklets, which since have been largely abandoned—though there was good stuff in them, and I have since pulled out from them things that I use in my teaching now. These booklets were doing very well: they were in great demand in other parishes. If anyone would ask me, I would know! I told a few people things that they did not ask me—I volunteered them some information for their benefit! But then I started to see other things that I had not seen before, and I saw them very clearly, and my theology began to change. So then, again, I started laying about with my new knowledge, and telling more people things that they had not asked to know! As I have gone on, I have seen that even the things I thought then, when I had thought that they were everything, were not everything: they were partial, they were able to be filled out, and in places corrected—believe it or not! Also, I found that I was not the first person to think these wonderful things: others had long had a better grasp of these things than I had. Not that the things I knew or had thought before were worthless or useless—there were many valuable insights there—but I needed to realise that they were partial, selective, and often second hand.

How do you get out of that? Perhaps we never will, before we know as we are known (as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12), face to face with God, when our love for Him will be as His love for us has ever been, and we will know ourselves as He knows us. Maybe till then we shall always be in this provisional, transitional mode, even though we come to great insights in all of that.

What do we do about that? It is good to keep talking to others, and not to close off anything that you think you know. It is good to bounce your mind and what is in it off other better minds. I like doing that: putting something together and then throwing it at someone—perhaps a visiting lecturer, or an experienced teacher—and they say, 'Yes, OK', but then they throw it back to me with some insights of their own, and it comes back to me in better shape. It is good to submit what you teach to the discussion of others, and be humble enough to say, 'That is as far as I think have got with that, and let others say, 'Yes, but what about this and that?' And you can say, 'Ah, yes!' and readjust what you think and teach, and end up a little wiser as a result. Still without letting go the things that God has made clear to you in your experience of life. Never write all of that off, because God has been working with you in that right through. Paul in Philippians 3:12–15 was looking towards the resurrection of the dead, when he would rise again in Christ, and these things would no longer be big important issues

to be worked through, and had these good words to say: 'Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.' A mark of maturity is the recognition that you still have further to go, and more to learn. Do not worry if you have not got it all together, or even if you try to give expression to that before it may be fully formed, because if it is deficient God will show you that as you go along—and that will be good!—and you will learn some more. But if God has shown us something, let us not let it go, or compromise on that, but be sure of it, and claim it. If there is more that we need to know, God will show us that too, as the time comes.

This is good to know for ourselves, and also as we come to consider Elihu. Even though he is young, and thinks he is perfect—he is 'full of words', and they keep coming and coming and coming!—let us also see that he too, like the others, has a heart for God and, even more, God has a heart for him.

'I AM FULL OF WORDS'

Elihu says first why he has not spoken up to now, and why he is going to speak:

32:6 Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite answered:

'I am young in years,
and you are aged;
therefore I was timid and afraid
to declare my opinion to you.

This is his deference, which does not last very long!

32:7 I said, 'Let days speak,
and many years teach wisdom.'

8 But truly it is the spirit in a mortal,
the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding.

9 It is not the old that are wise,
nor the aged that understand what is right.

10 Therefore I say, 'Listen to me;
let me also declare my opinion.'

He is bursting to speak, and to give the final answer. He says, 'You can be very old, and can still not have learned a lot'. It is what you learn from the breath of the Almighty: the spirit in you makes you understand. So he says, 'This spirit is what I have: I have my own opinion or knowledge, and I want to tell this to you'.

32:11 See, I waited for your words,
I listened for your wise sayings,
while you searched out what to say.

12 I gave you my attention,
but there was in fact no one that confuted Job,
no one among you that answered his words.

13 Yet do not say, 'We have found wisdom;
God may vanquish him, not a human.'

14 He has not directed his words against me,
and I will not answer him with your speeches.

Elihu is saying to these three, 'I have been listening to everything you say, and I held my tongue while you said it, but none of you have really answered Job! Here he is, saying these incredible things, and you have not answered him. You might sit back and say, Well, it's not up to us—God will fix him. But if we have something to say, then we ought to say it! So that is what I am going to do: I'm going to say it! When I answer him, even though he hasn't spoken to me, I will answer him, but it will not be with the kind of thing you were trying to dish up. I'm going to give him the proper answer!' Well, let's see if he does. He is almost scornful of these other friends:

- 32:15 They are dismayed, they answer no more;
they have not a word to say.
16 And am I to wait, because they do not speak,
because they stand there, and answer no more?
17 I also will give my answer;
I also will declare my opinion.
18 For I am full of words;
the spirit within me constrains me.
19 My heart is indeed like wine that has no vent;
like new wineskins, it is ready to burst.
20 I must speak, so that I may find relief;
I must open my lips and answer.
21 I will not show partiality to any person
or use flattery toward anyone.
22 For I do not know how to flatter—
or my Maker would soon put an end to me!"

So this is Elihu: I am full of words—I am busting to speak! We can commend him, that he has not spoken through the first thirty-one chapters, but he is certainly letting fly now!

Have you ever been so full of what is on your mind that you do not really hear what other people are saying? Or, if not, have you ever been speaking to someone like that? You are only waiting for the opportunity to say what *you* want to say. Fair enough: it is very important to you. But it does not always make for clear hearing. Elihu has picked up some things they have said, but he has not always got it right.

In verse 22, he is no respecter of persons. He is not going to beat around the bush, he is not going to flatter people or butter them up: he is going to come straight out with it. Eliphaz might be old and hoary, and Job might be a very honoured and respected man, but that is not going to stop Elihu from saying what needs to be said! 'I don't know how to flatter people', he says. Being no respecter of persons can sometimes mean that you are no respecter of feelings either, and can make you a little bit insensitive.

Those words, 'I . . . will declare my opinion . . . I am full of words', or, as he says later, 'one who is perfect in knowledge is with you' (36:4), sum up Elihu. He is fit to burst with what he has to say.

That might sound a bit like Jeremiah 20:8–9, but it is very different. Jeremiah was commissioned by God to speak the word of the Lord. He found that a real trial and a struggle for him, because it was a word that the people did not want to hear. It was a word also about God's people that seared Jeremiah himself, and cut him to the core: the things he was saying about what would happen to God's people were not something that he wanted to have to say, because of his love for God's people. Jeremiah says, 'For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,"—if I try to take the easy way out, and not speak this word that is so difficult to speak

and to hear, then, he says, that will not be the easy way out. That will make it harder—‘then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.’ So Jeremiah had no choice but to speak the word of the Lord. Not because he wanted to, but because the word itself in him demanded to be spoken, and would not let him rest until it had been spoken. That is rather different from what Elihu is saying. He is speaking because he wants to speak. He has got his own opinion, and he wants to get it across. Jeremiah did not necessarily want to speak, but had to. Elihu certainly wants to speak, and nothing is going to stop him.

In verse 14 he says, ‘I will not answer him with your speeches’. It is interesting that when he does answer, the things he comes up with are pretty much the same as the comforters themselves had spoken, with some modifications. He has virtually just picked up what they were saying, and does not really take it any further than they have.

MISREPRESENTING JOB?

In chapter 33, Elihu begins a little self-consciously:

- 33:1 But now, hear my speech, O Job,
and listen to all my words.
2 See, I open my mouth;
the tongue in my mouth speaks.

You can almost hear it flapping!

- 33:3 My words declare the uprightness of my heart,
and what my lips know they speak sincerely.
4 The spirit of God has made me,
and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.
5 Answer me, if you can;
set your words in order before me; take your stand.
6 See, before God I am as you are;
I too was formed from a piece of clay.
7 No fear of me need terrify you;
my pressure will not be heavy on you.”

He is sure of his own rightness, he is sure of the uprightness of his heart, and of his own sincerity—which we must allow him. He is sure of his divine inspiration, although in verse 4 he may be referring to what he says in verse 6: ‘I too was formed from a piece of clay’ (compare Genesis 2:7, when ‘the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being’, which appears to be known here to Elihu). Elihu is saying: ‘I am a creature, made that way, the same as you are, Job, and so I should be able to speak as you do: we are both before God on an equal footing, and so I have a right to speak, and you should listen to what I have to say’.

This results in his being a little patronising towards Job. Just imagine this young whipper-snapper talking to such a fine old man, and saying: ‘Job, you don’t have to be afraid of what I am going to say to you—it’s all right: I won’t be too hard on you! I will deal very gently with you, in my great wisdom!’

- 33:8 Surely, you have spoken in my hearing,
and I have heard the sound of your words.
9 You say, ‘I am clean, without transgression;
I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me.
10 Look, he finds occasions against me,
he counts me as his enemy;

11 he puts my feet in the stocks,
and watches all my paths.”

That is sort of like what Job had been saying, and we could look up various passages to see that this is the case, such as 9:20–21, when Job had said: ‘Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse. I am blameless; I do not know myself; I loathe my life.’ That was when Job was coming before God and thinking that it was going to be hopeless trying to say anything really, even if he was innocent—one of Job’s more despairing moments. In 10:5–7, asking of God: ‘Are your days like the days of mortals, or your years like human years, that you seek out my iniquity and search for my sin, although you know that I am not guilty, and there is no one to deliver out of your hand?’ In 16:17, Job had said, ‘there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure’. In 23:7, again, coming before God, Job has said: ‘There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.’ We have looked closely at those passages, and we have seen and sensed the feeling of what Job was saying there. Remember also the whole of chapter 31, where Job asked to come before the Lord, and said all the things that he had been accused of, and denied them, and called on God for just judgement and justification. Elihu has heard these things, and certainly there is a sense in which Job has said, ‘I am clean, without transgression’—although we have also looked at the passages where Job did not deny his sin—but Job never said: ‘I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me’. That is an implication that Elihu has picked up and put on Job. It is an exaggeration.

It is easy to set up a straw man, to knock him down. That is what Elihu is tending to do here. Sometimes we can say: ‘Oh, so-and-so is just this, this, and this’, and then to knock them down, without actually hearing what they are saying, or seeing what they are on about. Be wary of that. It is an easy thing to do. It is harder to come to grips with the true situation, with what someone like Job is really saying, as we have taken some pains to do.

THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Here comes Elihu’s answer:

33:12 But in this you are not right. I will answer you:
God is greater than any mortal.”

We have actually heard that before. It is pretty obvious, and if that is the best he can come up with, then things have not been taken further. It is true: God is greater than we are. Maybe it is something that Elihu has just come to realise: perhaps he has just had a great experience of God to make him realise this, and now he wants to convey it to the others. This is a bit like Eliphaz. This was the line that he took: God is greater than human beings; therefore do not think that what you are going to do, one way or the other, is going to affect God.

GOD SPEAKS

The implications that Elihu draws from this, however, are different from what Eliphaz said. Elihu says that God in His greatness communicates with us:

33:13 Why do you contend against him,
saying, ‘He will answer none of my words’?
14 For God speaks in one way,
and in two, though people do not perceive it.
15 In a dream, in a vision of the night,
when deep sleep falls on mortals,

while they slumber on their beds,
16 then he opens their ears,
and terrifies them with warnings,
17 that he may turn them aside from their deeds,
and keep them from pride,
18 to spare their souls from the Pit,
their lives from traversing the River.

This is one of the strong positions that Elihu takes up. He has got it all sorted out. He says: 'You are saying that God is not answering you, but I know that God does answer people. Let me tell you how God does answer prayer: He speaks in one way, or two. Maybe you are so thick, Job, that you cannot hear Him speaking to you! But I know that God speaks: He speaks in dreams, and visions of the night, when deep sleep falls upon us, and he opens people's ears, and terrifies them with warnings, to turn them around, and rescue them.' One of the things that Elihu had grasped was that, when God acts, He does it to save and redeem—to correct, rather than just punish and wipe out. Maybe there he is in advance of what Bildad said: the good gets rewarded, the bad gets punished, and that's it. Elihu does say that, but he says that God brings chastisement to redeem people and to take them on to something better. That may be Elihu's saving grace, for in this we see Elihu himself being taken on further, to a certain extent, by God.

How does God answer prayer? How does God speak to us? He does speak to us in all those ways. But there are times when he is deliberately silent. Job was going through one of those times when God was deliberately silent. We know why that was, from the setting in chapter 1. It wasn't that Job was being thick, and could not hear God speaking. This is one of the things we need to learn in wisdom.

PRAY FOR HEALING!

Elihu also sees that God deals with people through suffering:

33:19 They are also chastened with pain upon their beds,
and with continual strife in their bones,
20 so that their lives loathe bread,
and their appetites dainty food.
21 Their flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen;
and their bones, once invisible, now stick out.
22 Their souls draw near the Pit,
and their lives to those who bring death."

That could be a good description of what has happened to Job. So Elihu appreciates that. But, he says, there is a way out of that. There are prayers for healing, and you can be saved from sickness:

33:23 Then, if there should be for one of them an angel,
a mediator, one of a thousand,
one who declares a person upright,
24 and he is gracious to that person, and says,
'Deliver him from going down into the Pit;
I have found a ransom;
25 let his flesh become fresh with youth;
let him return to the days of his youthful vigour.'
26 Then he prays to God, and is accepted by him,
he comes into his presence with joy,
and God repays him for his righteousness.
27 That person sings to others and says,

‘I sinned, and perverted what was right,
and it was not paid back to me.
28 He has redeemed my soul from going down to the Pit,
and my life shall see the light.’

That is a wonderful experience to have, when God delivers you from sickness, and when He actually teaches you something in that sickness and in that deliverance. This is the kind of experience that Elihu is referring to.

In verse 23, ‘a mediator, one of a thousand’: some say this is Elihu preaching the gospel to Job, and putting him on the right track. But I don’t think it is Christ he is talking about there. He is talking about the great company of angels that are here to serve the redeemed. Somehow, through those, God brings to this person who is suffering the opportunity to pray for healing, and so he prays. Perhaps Elihu is a bit of a charismatic! He has seen prayers for healing, and they have worked, so he says to Job: ‘That is all you have to do! Pray, and the Lord will lift you out of that, and it will be good for you!’ We know that often that does happen. But there can be circumstances, like Job’s situation, of testing and trial, where that is not the answer. Paul had the same thing: three times he besought God that his ‘thorn in the flesh’ be removed, but God said, No: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness, (see 2 Corinthians 12:7–9). Elihu refers to a genuine experience, and tries to apply it across the board, but that is not necessarily where it belongs. Nevertheless, he says:

33:29 God indeed does all these things,
twice, three times, with mortals,
30 to bring back their souls from the Pit,
so that they may see the light of life.
31 Pay heed, Job, listen to me;
be silent, and I will speak.
32 If you have anything to say, answer me;
speak, for I desire to justify you.
33 If not, listen to me;
be silent, and I will teach you wisdom.’

I’m not sure how long he stopped there, to listen to Job, to see if he did have any answer. There is none forthcoming, and so he speaks on.

It is interesting that Elihu says to Job, ‘I desire to justify you’ (verse 32). There is a temptation when we see someone in suffering to try to put them in the right, or to explain what is happening to them, or to show them the way out of it, rather than, as we said before, simply being with them, and letting what is happening to them have its impact on you. Sometimes trying to justify someone out of their situation can display your own discomfort with it, and unwillingness to face it in its full depth. Perhaps that is why Elihu comes out with these testimonies to God’s great goodness to people in suffering, and urges Job to take them up. Again, not always in a sensitive way: Job knew all these things that Elihu is telling him. It had been many times his experience of answered prayer before—that is why he was so bemused by his suffering this time. He had, more perhaps than two or three times in his life, heard God speaking to him in great consoling and blessing ways, bringing him back from the Pit. Job knew constantly the need to go to God with the sacrifices for forgiveness, and to walk in fellowship with God. Perhaps Elihu was one who had recently had a wonderful conversion experience, and had been rescued from the Pit, whereas Job perhaps had always been in the light of God’s fellowship. We do not know. While the things that Elihu is talking about here are very real, they may be out of place in being put to Job. Job does not reply.

Sixteen

ELIHU—II

MIS-HEARING JOB

Elihu next speaks to the friends, and to anyone else who might be listening. He wants their sympathetic hearing, and ranges himself with them: Let us wise people, he says, get together and sort this out, choose what is right, determine what is good, and see whether Job is on the right track or not. He aligns himself with the other three, against Job.

- 34:1 Then Elihu continued and said:
2 'Hear my words, you wise men,
and give ear to me, you who know;
3 for the ear tests words
as the palate tastes food.
4 Let us choose what is right;
let us determine among ourselves what is good.
5 For Job has said, 'I am innocent,
and God has taken away my right;
6 in spite of being right I am counted a liar;
my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression.'
7 Who is there like Job,
who drinks up scoffing like water,
8 who goes in company with evildoers
and walks with the wicked?
9 For he has said, 'It profits one nothing
to take delight in God.'

He ends up being a little unfair, and unkind, to Job. Verse 9 is quite a barb for Job, because we know that Job's whole delight was in God, and that is what was causing him his deepest distress. In 21:13–15, Job had said exactly the opposite to what Elihu is attributing to him here. Speaking about the wicked, he had said:

- They spend their days in prosperity,
and in peace they go down to Sheol.
They say to God, 'Leave us alone!
We do not desire to know your ways.
What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?
And what profit do we get if we pray to him?'

There he was saying: 'That is what the wicked say, that they do not delight in God, or see any benefit from doing so'. That is not what Job was saying at all. Job had not said, 'It profits one nothing to take delight in God.' He had just said: 'Trouble comes to the good and the bad alike'—it is not as cut-and-dried as Bildad was making it out to be.

Listening in to the conversation, Elihu has picked up one or two things. Verse 3 is a direct quote from what Job himself had said. It sounds very wise: 'the ear tests words as the palate tastes food'. Job had said the same thing in 12:11. By it he meant: 'I have listened to what you are saying, and it is distasteful to me'. Elihu is using it to say something else: 'Let us put our words together, and see if we can come up with some wise sayings'. He is going almost into rhetoric mode, in which words are appreciated for their own sake.

Elihu is going to put these friends right. He is going to uphold God, when he considers that they could not—he's going to put in a plug for God! Good old Elihu, coming round and

giving God a hand! Also, he misunderstands when he quotes Job again in verses 5–6: ‘I am innocent, and God has taken away my right; in spite of being right I am counted a liar; my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression’. That is a partial quote from where Job in 27:2 had said:

As God lives, who has taken away my right,
and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter

That was when Job felt he had no comeback, and so that is what he said. But Job had not said, ‘I am counted a liar’. That is a construct by Elihu. Job was simply saying: ‘God has not laid any charge against me, and I want to have that out with Him’. But Job never says that God is calling him a liar. On the contrary, Job was saying: ‘God will bear me out in what I am saying’. So, again, Elihu has put something of his own understanding into this, and put that onto Job. He considers, as Eliphaz and Zophar did, that Job ‘goes in company with evildoers and walks with the wicked’, for saying these things that he is saying. Really, Elihu goes no further than the others have gone.

HAVE WE HEARD THIS BEFORE?

Elihu goes on with some very good theology:

34:10 Therefore, hear me, you who have sense,
far be it from God that he should do wickedness,
and from the Almighty that he should do wrong.
11 For according to their deeds he will repay them,
and according to their ways he will make it befall them.
12 Of a truth, God will not do wickedly,
and the Almighty will not pervert justice.
13 Who gave him charge over the earth
and who laid on him the whole world?
14 If he should take back his spirit to himself,
and gather to himself his breath,
15 all flesh would perish together,
and all mortals return to dust.

He is saying that of course God will not do wrong, but he does not take us any further. Verse 11 is the very question under discussion: ‘For according to their deeds he will repay them, and according to their ways he will make it befall them.’ But Elihu says, almost as Bildad had done: ‘That is the way it is’. For sure, ‘God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice’—no one has said that He will. But this still leaves the question: Is might right? Is God right just because He can take away our breath and we all die (verses 14–15)? What is the nature of the justice of the Almighty? Is it just that God is so big that you cannot question Him, and you’d better not try? That is not what Job was saying, That is what some of the comforters were saying. That seems to be a bit like what Elihu is saying here too: ‘God is bigger than we are; might is right; don’t argue’.

Elihu goes on to say to Job:

34:16 If you have understanding, hear this;
listen to what I say.
17 Shall one who hates justice govern?
Will you condemn one who is righteous and mighty,
18 who says to a king, ‘You scoundrel!’
and to princes, ‘You wicked men!’;
19 who shows no partiality to nobles,

- nor regards the rich more than the poor,
for they are all the work of his hands?
20 In a moment they die;
at midnight the people are shaken and pass away,
and the mighty are taken away by no human hand.

In other words, 'God has great control over His whole creation. He does not favour one against the other. Everyone comes to death, even the mighty and the princes.' That is a wonderful understanding of God. But it is not something that we have not heard before.

- 34:21 For his eyes are upon the ways of mortals,
and he sees all their steps.
22 There is no gloom or deep darkness
where evildoers may hide themselves.
23 For he has not appointed a time for anyone
to go before God in judgment.
24 He shatters the mighty without investigation,
and sets others in their place.
25 Thus, knowing their works,
he overturns them in the night, and they are crushed.
26 He strikes them for their wickedness
while others look on,
27 because they turned aside from following him,
and had no regard for any of his ways,
28 so that they caused the cry of the poor to come to him,
and he heard the cry of the afflicted—
29 When he is quiet, who can condemn?
When he hides his face, who can behold him,
whether it be a nation or an individual?—
30 so that the godless should not reign,
or those who ensnare the people.

31 For has anyone said to God,
'I have endured punishment; I will not offend any more;
32 teach me what I do not see;
if I have done iniquity, I will do it no more'?
33 Will he then pay back to suit you,
because you reject it?
For you must choose, and not I;
therefore declare what you know.
34 Those who have sense will say to me,
and the wise who hear me will say,
35 'Job speaks without knowledge,
his words are without insight.'
36 Would that Job were tried to the limit,
because his answers are those of the wicked.
37 For he adds rebellion to his sin;
he claps his hands among us,
and multiplies his words against God."

Elihu is really having a go at Job here, and bringing the heavy guns to bear. He is saying: 'OK Job, you have been asking for God to keep times of judgment. You want to come before Him and have your case answered'. In chapter 24 Job had said: 'Why are times of judgment not kept by the Almighty, and why do the wicked get away with it?' Elihu is saying: 'You are asking a bit much, Job, to make an appointment with God for judgment'. In verses 23–25 he says: 'For he has not appointed a time for anyone to go before God in judgment. He shatters

the mighty without investigation, and sets others in their place. Thus, knowing their works, he overturns them in the night, and they are crushed.’ In other words, ‘Judgment is immediate, and right on target, so you are being presumptuous to ask if you can arrange to come before God. He is going to work those judgments anyway.’ So Elihu then details what happens to the wicked, especially the powerful wicked, who cause the cry of the poor to come before God. When that happens, He acts, and makes sure the godless do not reign, or ensnare and enslave the people. We have heard this before, and Job has already countered it. Again, in verse 29: ‘When he is quiet, who can condemn? When he hides his face, who can behold him, whether it be a nation or an individual?’ So: ‘Job, don’t you try coming before God: if He has decided to hide His face, you haven’t got a chance! You won’t see Him, just by asking.’ Job believes otherwise, that he will see God.

Elihu cannot see that. Nevertheless, he has a great grasp of the sovereignty of God, and the dealings of His justice. He is urging Job to come to his senses, and to say: ‘I have endured punishment; I will not offend any more; teach me what I do not see; if I have done iniquity, I will do it no more’ (verses 31–32). In other words: ‘Come to repentance, Job. You are rejecting that, and that is your choice, but if you do, all those of us who are wise and understanding will gather around me and say that you are not on the right track. You are speaking without knowledge, your words are without insight. And if that is the case, Job, then I hope that your punishment goes right through to the end, that your trial is pursued to the end, because you are answering like a wicked man, you are rebelling against God, clapping your hands amongst us, and multiplying your words against God.’

Thus Elihu has aligned himself fairly and squarely with the comforters, particularly Eliphaz and Zophar, who were accusing Job. He is locked into that: Job is to blame, God is not answerable to anyone. Some of the verses are not easy to understand, because the text is somewhat obscure, especially verses 29–33, and the translators have to do the best that they can. But the gist of it comes through.

LOGIC AND TRUTH

There is still no reply, and so Elihu goes on:

35:1 Elihu continued and said:

2 ‘ Do you think this to be just?

 You say, ‘I am in the right before God.’

3 If you ask, ‘What advantage have I?

 How am I better off than if I had sinned?’

4 I will answer you

 and your friends with you.

5 Look at the heavens and see;

 observe the clouds, which are higher than you.

6 If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him?

 And if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to him?

7 If you are righteous, what do you give to him;

 or what does he receive from your hand?

8 Your wickedness affects others like you,

 and your righteousness, other human beings.”

Can you remember how you have heard those words too, that God is so high—the heavens are so high above the earth—how can what we do here make a difference to God? Whether we are right or whether we are wrong. It is going to come back on you, and affect others, but do not think that it is going to have any impact on God. That is very like what Eliphaz was saying, and Elihu is articulating it very clearly, perhaps even more clearly than the others did. God is impartial, he says. God does not favour one against the other. Elihu draws the

conclusion in logic that God is indifferent. Elihu likes logic, as all young men do, because that means you can work things out for yourself! But it does not always take you to the right places. God is indeed impartial—He does not favour one against the other: all are equal before Him. That does not mean that He is indifferent, that He does not care, or that it makes no difference to Him whether we are righteous or wicked.

That is what happens when you take truth for a ride in your own mind. It presses on into untruth. It needs always to be personal. It needs to be real, and it needs to be humble.

UNANSWERED PRAYER?

Elihu now gives Job a lesson in how to pray properly, and addresses the question: Why does God not answer prayer?

- 35:9 Because of the multitude of oppressions people cry out;
they call for help because of the arm of the mighty.
10 But no one says, 'Where is God my Maker,
who gives strength in the night,
11 who teaches us more than the animals of the earth,
and makes us wiser than the birds of the air?'
12 There they cry out, but he does not answer,
because of the pride of evildoers.
13 Surely God does not hear an empty cry,
nor does the Almighty regard it.
14 How much less when you say that you do not see him,
that the case is before him, and you are waiting for him!
15 And now, because his anger does not punish,
and he does not greatly heed transgression,
16 Job opens his mouth in empty talk,
he multiplies words without knowledge."

Elihu has his own answer to the question: Why does God not answer prayer? He says: 'It is because you are not praying properly. If you are going to pray, this is the sort of thing you should pray. You should recognise that God is your Maker. You should recognise that God gives you joy in the darkness. You should realise that God has given us more than the beasts of the earth and made us wiser than the birds of the air, and has a special care for us. You pray that way, and you will be heard! The reason why you are not heard is because you are not praying that way. You still have pride: you have not humbled yourself before God in that way. You have not realised His great love for you. In fact, you are almost demanding that God speak to you, but you cannot even see Him! How can you ever pray if you say you can't even see God?'

Sometimes there are those who say: 'The reason why you are not getting through is because you have not done it in the right way, or your faith is not strong enough. Just pray with more faith! Or, get your doctrine right! Then God will hear you.' If all our prayers had to be that correct before we prayed them, God may be waiting all day to listen to us, and never hear a word! Job knows that he may be speaking out of turn and saying some things that in his better moments he would not have descended to, but he still knows that God is there and that God is his God, and that, however he puts it, God is going to hear him.

Elihu has this confidence no doubt because he has prayed this way himself and has had experiences of answered prayer, and known close fellowship with God. But what he knows may not be able to be applied across the board, if God is working some different purpose from the kind that he has experienced so far. So he says: 'Just because God holds back His anger, and does not take too much heed of this great transgression that Job is indulging in,

then that is why Job thinks he can get away with it, and has been saying all these foolish things.

Andersen has a helpful word here about prayer, which sums up what I have been trying to say (p. 256):

It is always possible to think of a reason for unanswered prayer. The trite explanation, which we hear all too often, is that you did not have enough faith, or you prayed from the wrong motive, you must have some hidden, unconfessed sin. This diagnosis is always applicable. Everyone who prays is aware of the weakness of his faith. Everyone with a scrap of self-knowledge knows that his motives are always mixed. Everyone who searches his conscience can find no end of fresh things to be dealt with. If no prayers could be offered, and none answered, until all these conditions were satisfied, none would ever be offered, and none answered. The Elihus of this world do not care about the cruelties of their perfectionist advice and its unreality. Their theory is saved, and that is what matters.

INSIGHTS MISPLACED

Elihu is not finished yet:

36:1 Elihu continued and said:

- 2 Bear with me a little, and I will show you,
for I have yet something to say on God's behalf.
- 3 I will bring my knowledge from far away,
and ascribe righteousness to my Maker.
- 4 For truly my words are not false;
one who is perfect in knowledge is with you."

There you are! The modesty of the man is overwhelming!

- 36:5** Surely God is mighty and does not despise any;
he is mighty in strength of understanding.
- 6 He does not keep the wicked alive,
but gives the afflicted their right.
 - 7 He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous,
but with kings on the throne
he sets them forever, and they are exalted.
 - 8 And if they are bound in fetters
and caught in the cords of affliction,
 - 9 then he declares to them their work
and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly.
 - 10 He opens their ears to instruction,
and commands that they return from iniquity.
 - 11 If they listen, and serve him,
they complete their days in prosperity,
and their years in pleasantness.
 - 12 But if they do not listen, they shall perish by the sword,
and die without knowledge.

Again, this is a bit like Bildad, saying that God will favour the righteous, and He will take the wicked to task. Note here, however, that he does have that sense of God as being one who chastises to bring people through that to repentance and instruction and turning from iniquity, and so bringing them to prosperity. Just like Eliphaz had urged Job at the end of his last speech to repent and come before God. We said that is a good thing to do, only he did not need to say that to Job, because Job knew that already. This is the same thing happening here.

- 36:13** The godless in heart cherish anger;
they do not cry for help when he binds them.

- 14 They die in their youth,
and their life ends in shame.
15 He delivers the afflicted by their affliction,
and opens their ear by adversity.

That is a great insight: 'He delivers the afflicted *by* their affliction'. Compare Psalm 119:71: 'It is good for me that I was humbled, so that I might learn your statutes'. God is not averse to delivering us by affliction, opening our ear by adversity. That is a good thing to know.

- 36:16 He also allured you out of distress
into a broad place where there was no constraint,
and what was set on your table was full of fatness.

I am not sure exactly what he is referring to there: it does not apply to Job just yet.

- 36:17 But you are obsessed with the case of the wicked;
judgment and justice seize you.
18 Beware that wrath does not entice you into scoffing,
and do not let the greatness of the ransom turn you aside.
19 Will your cry avail to keep you from distress,
or will all the force of your strength?
20 Do not long for the night,
when peoples are cut off in their place.
21 Beware! Do not turn to iniquity;
because of that you have been tried by affliction.
22 See, God is exalted in his power;
who is a teacher like him?
23 Who has prescribed for him his way,
or who can say, 'You have done wrong'?

Again, Elihu is trying to urge Job not to think these thoughts of death. Job had been longing for the night and for death. He says: 'Don't think that way!' But his remedy for that is: 'Turn away from iniquity, which you have chosen'. That is the very thing Job is saying that he has not chosen.

WONDERMENT AT GOD

Elihu here begins to move into a mode of great wonderment at God:

- 36:24 Remember to extol his work,
of which mortals have sung.
25 All people have looked on it;
everyone watches it from far away.
26 Surely God is great, and we do not know him;
the number of his years is unsearchable.
27 For he draws up the drops of water;
he distils his mist in rain,
28 which the skies pour down
and drop upon mortals abundantly.
29 Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds,
the thunderings of his pavilion?
30 See, he scatters his lightning around him
and covers the roots of the sea.
31 For by these he governs peoples;
he gives food in abundance.
32 He covers his hands with the lightning,
and commands it to strike the mark.

- 33 Its crashing tells about him;
he is jealous with anger against iniquity.

Whatever our shortcomings and whatever our deficiencies and our failures, when we turn our face to God, and to the greatness of His creation and His works in history, then we are closer to truth than we ever were before. In this, Elihu comes alongside Job. Job himself has said much the same sorts of things. Job has had a great understanding of the works of the Almighty. He has been able to put it better and more directly than any of the comforters. Now Elihu, rather than standing over against Job, though that is still his purpose, perhaps comes alongside Job and sees as Job does the glories of God's creation. Once he starts to speak about those, then he is really coming into wisdom. He sees God's great power in the weather—in the storm and in the lightning—and sees these as God's instruments of judgement on the earth. This mode of adoration and wonderment at God is one in which we all stand in the same place. The good and characteristic insights that Elihu has grasped are coming through now.

THE GATHERING STORM

This serves as a build-up for chapter 37. This is a fascinating chapter. It is almost as if, while the four or five of them are sitting there together, a great thunderstorm is gathering around them. The presence of God is manifesting itself, it would seem, in this great storm. All of them are humbled and awed by that, and Elihu is the one who gives the commentary as to what is happening. For immediately after chapter 37, God Himself speaks 'out of the whirlwind'. Elihu's words are like an increasing musical crescendo, leading up to when God finally speaks with the crashing in of the full orchestra! So, in spite of Elihu's youth and silliness, God is showing him, as He is showing all of us, something of His own majesty, something of His own glory, and putting Elihu in a place where he can see it happening and give the commentary on that:

- 37:1 At this also my heart trembles,
and leaps out of its place.
2 Listen, listen to the thunder of his voice
and the rumbling that comes from his mouth.
3 Under the whole heaven he lets it loose,
and his lightning to the corners of the earth.
4 After it his voice roars;
he thunders with his majestic voice
and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard.
5 God thunders wondrously with his voice;
he does great things that we cannot comprehend.
6 For to the snow he says, 'Fall on the earth';
and to the shower and the rain, 'Be strong.'
7 He seals up everyone's hand,
so that all may know his work.
8 Then the animals go into their lairs
and remain in their dens.
9 From its chamber comes the whirlwind,
and cold from the scattering winds.
10 By the breath of God ice is given,
and the broad waters are frozen fast.
11 He loads the thick cloud with moisture;
the clouds scatter his lightning.
12 They turn round and round by his guidance,
to accomplish all that he commands them

- on the face of the habitable world.
- 13 Whether for correction, or for his land,
or for love, he causes it to happen.
- 14 Hear this, O Job;
stop and consider the wondrous works of God.
- 15 Do you know how God lays his command upon them,
and causes the lightning of his cloud to shine?
- 16 Do you know the balancings of the clouds,
the wondrous works of the one whose knowledge is perfect,
- 17 you whose garments are hot
when the earth is still because of the south wind?
- 18 Can you, like him, spread out the skies,
hard as a molten mirror?
- 19 Teach us what we shall say to him;
we cannot draw up our case because of darkness.
- 20 Should he be told that I want to speak?
Did anyone ever wish to be swallowed up?
- 21 Now, no one can look on the light
when it is bright in the skies,
when the wind has passed and cleared them.
- 22 Out of the north comes golden splendour;
around God is awesome majesty.
- 23 The Almighty—we cannot find him;
he is great in power and justice,
and abundant righteousness he will not violate.
- 24 Therefore mortals fear him;
he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.

That is a magnificent passage. It is a great description of the thunderstorm—whether it is a literal storm building up over them, or whether it is just Elihu setting out the way things happen when this does occur. He does go into all the ‘departments’ of the weather: the snow and the ice, and also the drought, where the skies are brassy, all the clouds have gone, and the hot sun beats down, and there is great stillness and intolerable heat, ‘hard as a molten mirror’.

Elihu says: ‘How can you speak in the face of that?’ Even Elihu himself, who is ‘full of words’, is calmed and silenced by that. He is still making his point to Job—he is still drawing the moral: ‘Don’t ever expect that you could speak to God, or have him speak to you in that’. The lie is about to be given to that, as God actually speaks to Job, but we sense that Elihu himself is awed by the great majesty of God. Although he still has a lot to learn (don’t we all?), he is certainly on the right track. Let’s hope that we are too, with him.

In the end (verse 24), ‘Therefore mortals fear him; he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit’: it is as if we have gone through chapter 28 again, on wisdom, where we come to the conclusion, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.’ We have come back to that place, and we are ready, in all humility, to hear what God has to say.

ELIHU IN THE BOOK OF JOB

What is the place of Elihu’s speeches in the whole book? As we have said, he has not appeared before, and he does not get mentioned afterwards. God in the end speaks to Job and the three friends, but He does not speak to Elihu at all. Why is that? Was it because, unlike the friends, Elihu ‘got it right’, and did not need to be rebuked? But then, neither is he commended either—only Job is. Maybe God was speaking to the older ones, because they should have known better: ‘You are older and wiser, and you should have known better than

to say those things that you said'. Maybe God thought of Elihu: 'Well, that is just Elihu, and that is all right: we don't have to bother with him! We don't have to rebuke him at all—we'll just let him say what he has to say, and that is fine, and he will grow up, and that is good!' That could have been how it is.

Scholars are divided on this. They have a lovely time with Elihu's speeches: they say these were written later, or they were put in by someone else, and they completely disrupt the whole thing—that is what scholars like to do. I think we have seen how Elihu follows on from what has gone before, and leads on to what is to come. It is not for us to tell authors how they should have written their books, who they should have put in and who they shouldn't have! Let us just take it for what it is, and get the benefit from it. That is what we have been trying to do.

Andersen says (p. 51) that at the end of the discussion: 'Elihu give the human estimate; Yahweh gives the divine appraisal', rather like two persons having a go at the end. But I do not think that is quite it, because that almost puts Elihu and God on an equal footing. That is not the way it actually is: we have seen that Elihu is a very fallible young man. Also God, when He comes, does not enter into the argument at all. He just shows Himself—as God!

It is wonderful how at the end of Elihu's speeches the clouds have cleared, and there is a brightness coming into the sky that, according to Elihu's words, you cannot even bear to look at: 'Out of the north comes golden splendour; around God is awesome majesty.' 'Now, no one can look on the light when it is bright in the skies': there is this wonderful blazing golden light shining out, according to his description, and maybe he was privileged catch that glimpse of God coming to speak to Job and the others. That is a great thing.

Prayer:

Dear heavenly Father, we recognise Elihu in ourselves, and we thank You for Your loving goodness towards us, Your tolerance of us, Your drawing us on, Your showing us of Yourself, in brilliant glory. We pray that, being humbled by that, we may take with gladness and sureness all the things that You have shown us, and that we may, in the things in which we are deficient, look to You to make those up, when we need to know them, at the right time, through the experiences that You take us through, that we may be serviceable men and women in Your gospel and kingdom, and in the lives of other people. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Seventeen

GOD SPEAKS TO JOB

Here, finally, God speaks to Job.

GOD SPEAKS

It is because of chapter 38 that I have a special affection for the Book of Job. It is through this chapter that I had one of those times when God spoke to me, in a very real way, as I read it. It had a great impact on me. It was in my first or second year of ministry—1971 or 1972—at Mount Gambier, in the south-east of South Australia. One of the things I had to do one dark, wintry Sunday night, was to go down to the little church at Port MacDonnell, a small fishing town south of Mount Gambier, and take Evensong there—the Anglican evening service. There were about four or five people in the church, with me, and my wife Vivien (or fiancée she might have been then). In the Anglican service of Evensong in those days we would read a whole chapter from the Old Testament and a whole chapter from the New Testament. The whole of Job 38 was set for the Old Testament reading. I was about to read it out. We had not done a lot on Job in theological college—not nearly as much as we are getting here—so I did not have then the understanding of the Book of Job that I have been sharing with you here. I had the impression that, throughout the book, Job had been trying to get justice from God: he had a bit of a bone to pick with God, and fair enough, too, because he had been a bit hard done by, and God should answer for Himself. Then, in this chapter, my impression was that God does answer Job, but does it by bringing down His heavy hand to put him back in his place, by saying: ‘Well, I am so much bigger than you are, so what would you know about it anyway?’ As I introduced this chapter, I introduced it more or less in those terms! I am sure I was much more respectful than that, being in God’s employ, but that was the gist of what I said. Then I read the chapter. As I read out the chapter, in that little church, it was as if God Himself was speaking to me, just as He had spoken to Job. I was quite changed by the end of it.

[Read the chapter through]

When I had finished reading that chapter, I did not feel ‘put back in my box’ at all, even though I had been a bit of an upstart in my introduction. I was ennobled by wonder, and by the greatness—by God Himself! After the service, I went walking with Vivien on the jetty, out over the dark sea, surrounded by the sea and the wind and clouds and the stars and the dark night. I said to Vivien: ‘*Everything I read in there was true!*’

WHAT WAS JOB ASKING FOR?

This is the Lord’s answer to Job. What was Job asking for? Let’s turn back to chapter 7. This is early on in Job’s lament. In verse 16–21 he says:

I loathe my life; I would not live forever.
Let me alone, for my days are a breath.
What are human beings, that you make so much of them,
that you set your mind on them,
visit them every morning,
test them every moment?
Will you not look away from me for a while,
let me alone until I swallow my spittle?
[If] I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?
Why have you made me your target?

Why have I become a burden to you?
Why do you not pardon my transgression
and take away my iniquity?
For now I shall lie in the earth;
you will seek me, but I shall not be.

Remember at that time Job was asking God: ‘Just, please, leave me alone. Remove Your hand from me.’ As always happens when we are in deep suffering, he became very conscious of his sin. He said: ‘Why don’t You just pardon me and my transgression? Why have you aimed your arrows at me? Why have I become a burden to You? *Why are You paying so much attention to me?*’ Job was asking for relief from this, first of all.

Then in 13:13–23 he was asking that he might come before God:

Let me have silence, and I will speak,
and let come on me what may.
I will take my flesh in my teeth,
and put my life in my hand.
See, he will kill me; I have no hope;
but I will defend my ways to his face
[Or *Though he kill me, yet will I trust in him*].
This will be my salvation,
that the godless shall not come before him.
Listen carefully to my words,
and let my declaration be in your ears.
I have indeed prepared my case;
I know that I shall be vindicated.
Who is there that will contend with me?
For then I would be silent and die.
Only grant two things to me,
then I will not hide myself from your face
[Or *Do not hide yourself from my face*]:
withdraw your hand far from me,
and do not let dread of you terrify me.
Then call, and I will answer;
or let me speak, and you reply to me.
How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make me know my transgression and my sin.

There Job is saying: ‘I want to come before God, I want to give an account of myself to Him, and I am prepared to do that—I will take my life in my hands and come before Him—and I want to be vindicated by Him’. He also says: ‘If there is any sin in me, let Him show it to me’. It is interesting that *this is the one thing God does not do*. God does not show him his sin. Because, as far as God is concerned, that has been dealt with. It is finished. Job is a man of faith. Job has put his trust in God, right back before all this began, and that trust is still holding firm. The righteous will be justified by their faith. Job already knew the mercy and forgiveness of God. Remember how he drew on that for his children in the sacrifices, because he knew it for himself. Even though this suffering brings Job’s sins to remembrance as far as he is concerned, it does not bring them to remembrance as far as God is concerned. That is finished. Remember, that is what the friends were trying to do. They were trying to load that onto Job. Eliphaz and Zophar and Elihu all end up telling Job how very wicked he is—even for wanting to come before God in this way. Bildad sort of implies that, but he is not big enough to say so. They are all against him there. But God, when He speaks to Job, says nothing of that. That is a dead issue. In 31:35–37, during Job’s final words in the whole dialogue, he says:

Oh, that I had one to hear me!
(Here is my signature! let the Almighty answer me!)
Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!
Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;
I would bind it on me like a crown;
I would give him an account of all my steps;
like a prince I would approach him.

Job is sure that he can be justified before God, and he wants to come before Him, and wants God to answer him in those terms.

GOD ANSWERS

The question is: Does Job get an answer to that? Or is he perhaps asking the wrong question? We know the intent of Job's heart, which is to seek God, because he cannot see Him through all this suffering at the moment. But the way Job frames his questions is not a way God picks up at all. Interesting.

38:1 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:
2 Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
3 Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me."

Is this answer from God Job being put back in his place? Saying: 'Listen Job, you are getting too big for your boots. Let Me show you what is what.' Actually, that is what the friends were trying to do, in very much these terms. Look back at Zophar in 11:1–12:

Then Zophar the Naamathite answered:
'Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
and should one full of talk be vindicated?
Should your babble put others to silence,
and when you mock, shall no one shame you?
For you say, 'My conduct is pure,
and I am clean in God's sight.'
But oh, that God would speak,
and open his lips to you,
and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom!
For wisdom is many-sided.
Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves.

Can you find out the deep things of God?
Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?
It is higher than heaven—what can you do?
Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?
Its measure is longer than the earth,
and broader than the sea.
If he passes through, and imprisons,
and assembles for judgment, who can hinder him?
For he knows those who are worthless;
when he sees iniquity, will he not consider it?
But a stupid person will get understanding,
when a wild ass is born human.

Zophar there is saying some of the same things that God is saying in chapter 38. But with a very different intention: it is to put Job back in his place, to put him in his box, to tell him that

he is out of place, and out of order in trying to speak to God. So he is trying to overwhelm Job with God's greatness and magnificence and power. That is not what God does. When God speaks to Job, He says: 'Stand up on your feet like a man, and speak with Me, face to face.' That is a very different thing.

Have a look at what Eliphaz tries to do in 15:4–8. Wise old Eliphaz tries to do the same thing to Job:

But you are doing away with the fear of God,
and hindering meditation before God.
For your iniquity teaches your mouth,
and you choose the tongue of the crafty.
Your own mouth condemns you, and not I;
your own lips testify against you.

Are you the firstborn of the human race?
Were you brought forth before the hills?
Have you listened in the council of God?
And do you limit wisdom to yourself?

There, again, is Eliphaz trying to do the same thing. But in an attempt to put Job down, not to raise him up.

Job himself is not unaware of these things, that they are trying to tell him. in 9:3–12, he puts it better than they do:

If one wished to contend with him,
one could not answer him once in a thousand.
He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength
—who has resisted him, and succeeded?—
he who removes mountains, and they do not know it,
when he overturns them in his anger;
who shakes the earth out of its place,
and its pillars tremble;
who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
who seals up the stars;
who alone stretched out the heavens
and trampled the waves of the Sea;
who made the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the chambers of the south;
who does great things beyond understanding,
and marvellous things without number.

Those are the same constellations of stars that God mentions in chapter 38. So Job knows that. He knows God's power over the stars and the heavens. But here is Job's problem:

Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him;
he moves on, but I do not perceive him.
He snatches away; who can stop him?
Who will say to him, 'What are you doing?'

Job is not unaware of these things, but his problem is that in these things he cannot see God this time, in his suffering. He agrees with Zophar that if God chooses to do something, He will do it! And so what bothers Job is that he knows that if God chooses to continue to hide Himself, nothing that Job can do will be able to break through that, or do anything about it, if God does not reveal Himself. Hence Job's great joy and satisfaction in 42:5, when he says at the end: 'Now my eye sees you'—which is what Job has longed for all along. When God

speaks to Job, it is not to put him back in his box. In 38:3 He says, 'Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.' I am not speaking this so I can silence you. I am speaking this to you so that we can speak to each other. 'Man-to-man', if you like, or rather, God to man, Person to person. How ennobling it is, to be directly addressed by God, in a way the friends never thought was possible. They were saying to Job: 'No—don't you do that! He might hear us! Play it safe!' Job said: 'No'. Here is Job's vindication: God will speak with Job, face to face. What a wonderful thing!

GOD AND HIS CREATION

When God does answer Job, what does God say? There have been in this book great questions asked, great issues of human life being thrashed out: Are the wicked punished? Are the righteous rewarded? Where is God in all of this? What is actually going on when humanity suffers? God answers none of that. He does not address it. He does not even explain to Job the business from chapters 1 and 2 about Satan coming to God in the heavenly place, and a test being imposed upon Job to see if his faith in God is just self-interest. God does not show Job anything about the limits that He placed on Satan's activity—God could have said to Job: 'You think you've been getting it bad, but I've been holding back Satan for you, actually'. That does not come into it. That is not the way God works. Job never knows what we know in chapters 1 and 2, about Satan and the testing. He does not need to know. We do not need to know the reasons for everything that happens in our lives. Even if we got an explanation, that would not satisfy us, necessarily—if an explanation can be found. God does not give Job an explanation. An explanation will not satisfy. Only God Himself will. And if you know God Himself, you know everything you need to know.

When God comes to Job, what does He give him? He gives him a personal conducted tour of all the wonders and mysteries of creation. What a wonderful thing! We need to be much stronger and deeper in our understanding of God's creation. Geoffrey Bingham sometimes asks, 'What is the primary thing in all history?' Being good evangelicals, we would say: 'The Cross of Christ!' And he says: 'No. *God's creation* is the primary thing in all history.' That is what God is on about. That is why His Cross is at the centre of creation: to restore the creation and the whole universe, and to bring it to the glory that God has intended for it. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' In the end, God says, 'I make all things new.' There are new heavens and a new earth, that God has been preparing through all history. The Cross is necessary for that, but that is God's goal—the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth—from the time when He first created the heavens and the earth. That is what God is on about in all history: His creation. He loves it! He has gone to a lot of trouble for it.

When we lived at Coober Pedy in the dry far north of South Australia, we would go out to the Breakaways, magnificent low hills that have been broken away from a plateau with a hard-crust top. Where that hard-crust top has been weak, it has been eroded away. It has taken thousands of years for this to happen. You go to the base of one of these hillocks, and you pick up a stone, and it is full of colour! Beautiful mauves, and soft yellows, with very subtle greys and colourings. I went out there with my brother one day, and I picked up a stone, and I just looked at it and said, 'Someone has gone to a lot of trouble!' It became a sort of catch-cry with us. You only have to look around and say, 'Someone has gone to a lot of trouble!'—in this great creation. That is what God is on about.

Surely we are preaching the Cross all the time, and that is the heart and power of the gospel. But what is the gospel for? To bring about a new creation! It is because of His love for His creation that God gives His Son for it. It is through His Son that He has made all creation, and everything has his mark on it. We have a print of one of Hans Heysen's

paintings, of a big gum tree by a track winding back, with Mount Barker in the background. You only have to look at that, and you can say: That is a Hans Heysen. Everything you see about it speaks that of his creative artistry. Down in the bottom corner you can see his name signed: 'Hans Heysen'. But you do not need to look at that to see it in the picture. That is true of Christ: all things were made through him, and everything bears his signature. You can read about it here in the Scriptures, where his name is actually signed, but you look at it there in creation, and you are seeing it no less.

We are in the creation, and we are surrounded by it, and we are part of it, but the fact is, we do not understand it. Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us: 'He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.' We are in the creation, but unless God shows us what He is actually doing in all of this, none of it will, in the end, make any sense to us. We cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end by seeking it out, or trying to observe it. It goes on to say in verse 14: 'I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has made it so, in order that all should fear before him.' What God is doing endures for ever—that is really what we need to know. That can only come as God shows it to us in His creation.

This is what we need to know particularly in times of suffering: what God is doing in His creation. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:19: 'Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to'—a faithful Redeemer? No, to—'a faithful Creator.' For if God is the Creator and he is faithful to His creation then He will redeem it. That is why He redeems it: he is a faithful Creator—He won't let it go. He will see it through to the goal He has for it. 'Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator.' There is a song which expresses this well:

Brethren, do not be dismayed when trials come to you,
Remember whom the Father loves He disciplines, it's true.
God's purpose for His family, He has made very clear,
That we might grow in grace and love, and serve Him without fear.

*So entrust yourselves to a faithful Creator,
who is working out His plan
To change us into the glorious likeness
of the Son of Man.*⁶

That is how God reveals Himself to Job. The Book of Job is not the only place where that happens. When Jesus Himself wants to speak to us of the loving greatness and care of our heavenly Father, what does he say? 'Look at the birds of the air . . . Consider the lilies of the field'. Someone's gone to a lot of trouble! Matthew 6:26–30:

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Jesus here is giving us what we need to know by getting us to look at the creation. He says in Matthew 10:28–31:

⁶ Kay Carney (nee Robinson), *New Creation Hymn Book*, 155.

Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Again, in that desperate situation, where there are those who may be trying to kill us, and Jesus speaks to us in that, what does he tell us? 'Look at those sparrows, flying around in the sky. You are of more value to God than they are, and not one of them drops to the ground without the Father's will.'

If we look in Romans 1:19–21, we see how the whole of creation speaks to us of God. Often we do not want to hear it, and we have suppressed that knowledge, but we cannot get away from it.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen *through the things he has made*. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.

That is what we have made to be our state, so that, even surrounded with the glories of creation, we will refuse to see them and stand in wonder. A friend of mine was having an argument with a particular man, and this man came to see him, and my friend lived on the side of a lake, over which the sun was setting. My friend was standing looking over the lake, and seeing this glorious sunset before him, reflected in the waters of the lake, and in front of him was this man who was very angry with him, ranting and raving, and he thought: 'If I can just turn around, then he will see what I can see'. So he tried to move around, and get the other man facing the sunset too, but the man stood firmly with his back to the sunset, and would not move until he had got everything he wanted to say off his chest. Then away he went, and he never saw it. We really need that resistance to be dealt with in us. We need that revelation of God, before we see the whole creation speaking the glories of God. God Himself needs to show that to us, against our senseless minds, our darkened, futile thinking. Maybe that is something of what God is doing to Job here, and to us: 'Who is this that *darkens* counsel by words without knowledge?'

Psalms 19:1–6 speaks of the same thing:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

Those words made quite an impression on Paul the apostle. He quotes them in Romans 10:18, in speaking of the gospel itself going out. These words are saying that even though creation does not speak with words, what creation says is as good as having someone speak to you about God. The message of His nature, His eternal power and deity, is going out every day. Every time the sun comes up, every time the night comes down, they are passing it on to one another. The day says to the night, and the night says to the following day: Hey, have you heard about God? Look at all this! See how the psalmist rejoices in the coming up and the going down of the sun:

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

It is as if the sun itself is rejoicing in being created by God, and in shining all that light on what God has made. The first half of Psalm 19, interestingly, is about God speaking to us in creation; the second half is about God speaking to us in His law, His word, and it virtually says these are one and the same thing. 'The heavens are *telling* the glory of God.'

HUMAN GREATNESS

Also in Psalm 8 the same thing is drawn to our attention:

O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.

How does He do that?

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet.

Sometimes, because of our perverseness, like the perverseness I had when I first started reading out chapter 38 all those years ago, we think God shows us the heavens and the work of His fingers, the moon and the stars and the universe and endless space to make us feel small. The question 'What are human beings?' can be taken to imply that, compared with the vastness of creation, we are nothing more than microbes on a speck of dust. That is not what this psalm is saying at all. The vastness of creation, far from diminishing humanity, actually enhances our great value and dignity. Psalm 8 is saying: 'If God has gone to all that trouble in making this vast creation, what then are *human beings*, that You are mindful of *us*? You have made all of this, and have placed us in charge of it all with You!' What a wonderful creature is a human being, that this should be so!

That is the experience that God is seeking to bring through to Job: 'Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me'—'Look at the greatness of this creation, and rise to the full measure of your humanity, face to face with Me, that is My gift to you!'

Dear heavenly Father, We thank You that You speak to us, and that You have established this vast creation. We are speechless in the face of it, yet You desire to speak with us, and have us speak with You. Teach our hearts, Father, by Your Holy Spirit, what that means for us, in Your regard of us, and in Your great plan for us, in Your wonderful love for us, now and for ever. Amen.

Eighteen

GOD'S WONDROUS COMMAND OF THE CREATION

So now to God's personally conducted tour of Job through the wonders and mysteries of creation.

THE ORIGINS OF THE EARTH

God takes Job straight to the mystery of the act of creation itself, which even our scientists are still trying to fathom, and probably never will, as they look back through their radio telescopes across the light years to where the 'big bang' happened—if that is the way it was:

- 38:4 Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
5 Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
6 On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
7 when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?

Have you ever seen that illustration by William Blake, where God is reaching down through the clouds with a compass, measuring out the span of the earth? This is where he got it from, and it is a striking illustration. Think of the things we are now discovering about our universe, in terms of its measurements, and what holds everything in place. The force of gravity itself is a great mystery. No one knows really what it is. And light: is it a wave, or is it a particle, or is it both? And how is that related to time and space and everything else, as in the theory of relativity? We are only on the edges of all of this. We can never know it all. We make our intelligent guesses. We were not present at the creation of the universe. All the 'heavenly beings' were watching, and rejoicing at what they saw, but no doubt it was all beyond them too. There is so much about it all that we will never know, and certainly it is something beyond what we could ever do.

God says: This is what I know, because this is what I have done, and maybe you don't know it, but then, you don't have to. But let Me just tell you that I do.

THE BOUNDS OF THE SEA

- 38:8 Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—
9 when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,
10 and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,
11 and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped'?

Have you ever been on the beach in a fierce storm? It can be even more scary when you are out at sea in a storm, surrounded by the waves, and completely at their mercy. We can imagine the ancient peoples, like ourselves, looking at the sea when it is raging, could easily have thought: 'What would happen if it came up over the land?' Our children have asked us if we would be safe where we lived if a tidal wave came up over Adelaide! Often we take it for granted that the sea ends at a particular point and the land begins there. As set out here,

those bounds have been set by God. King Canute was prevailed upon to set his throne up on the beach, and command the tide not to come in: 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther!' But he and his nobles got their feet wet, and it was clear that the king did not have command over the sea. But that is what God does, and the sea obeys. That contrast is what is being pointed out here. The bounds of the sea are not something that we have set, and it is not something that we could ever control if it broke out of those bounds. That is something that is set by God, and is under His control.

We know the story of the Flood from Genesis, where God held back those controls, and the waters came up from below and down from above, and the earth was covered. We still have that happening on small scales around the world now, and there is very little we can do to stop floods from happening.

THE DAWN OF THE DAY

- 38:12 Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,
13 so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?
14 It is changed like clay under the seal,
and it is dyed like a garment.
15 Light is withheld from the wicked,
and their uplifted arm is broken.

One of most magic times of the day must be the dawn of the morning. Some of us hardly ever see it—but think of what we are missing! Those times when we have been up to see it, we know that it is a magic time. At Coober Pedy, in the northern deserts of South Australia, we used to have a dawn service on Easter morning, on top of the hill, to greet the resurrection morning in that way. Many of us will have had similar experiences.

Here God says: 'Are you the one who told the sun to come up? No—but I do that every morning. I cause that dawn to come.'

There is a beautiful description here of the coming of light across the earth: 'It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment.' The shadows in the morning sun, and in the evening too, are quite fantastic. Every little corrugation in the earth is highlighted by the shadows. 'It is dyed like a garment' may be referring to suddenly the colour coming into everything as the sun spreads its rays over the surface of the earth. The original Hebrew says: 'they stand forth' like a garment. That reminds me of the folds in the hills that get highlighted by the slanting sun. One of the special things that always amazes me when we drive past them are the lower Flinders Ranges, near Port Augusta, looking from the highway, near Horrocks Pass, where the hills are just like folds of a garment, and in the evening sun particularly, or in the morning sun, you see them as if they have been just draped over the countryside, intensified by the shadows.

That is what God is reminding Job of there. That is something that God does every day, that we could never do. Why would we ever want to do that? God is doing a very good job of it Himself.

It is not just the bringing up of the sun, but also the controlling of the wickedness on the earth, the moral control of the wicked. The wicked mostly get about their dirty work under cover of darkness, but when the sun comes up they have to stop, because they will be seen. So, when the sun comes up, it is like God taking the earth and shaking it like a garment, and out they all go! Because the light is there, and they are exposed. Paul uses the same figure of speech in Ephesians 4–5, when he says that when anything is exposed to the light it becomes light. So the wicked have to stop what they are doing: 'their uplifted arm is broken'. God is

reminding Job of that: You have suffered at the hands of the wicked—you have had all your herds and flocks stolen by the raiders—but God is in control of all of that. He can just give the earth a flick like that, and the wicked have to stop what they are doing, when the sun comes up, when the light shines.

THE GREAT DEEPS

- 38:16** Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
17 Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
18 Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.

The depths of the sea! God here is speaking of places where we have not gone, and we could never go, but places which are still there. These are known to God, and He is there. The depths of the sea must be some of the greatest mysteries on the earth. Only recently have we begun to probe these with our submarines and bathyscapes, but we do not know the half of it.

Associated with the depths of the sea and the depths of the earth were also the deep regions of death, so that gets a mention there also. have you been to the extremities of life? Do you have an understanding of death, and the deep mystery that it is? Just as you do not know the nether reaches of the sea, what do you understand of the nether reaches of human life, or of death? And yet God is there.

This reminds us very much of Psalm 139:7–12:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

We can imagine Job coming out of these things that he has been shown by God, saying a prayer in exactly such words: 'There is nowhere I can go, nowhere I can be taken, where You have not gone before, or where You are not there, with Your hand leading me'. Job had said: I want to be covered by the darkness, I want to go down into death. But 'even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast . . . even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.'

'Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?' How could we ever comprehend the expanse of the earth? Yet it is comprehended by its Creator.

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

- 38:19** Where is the way to the dwelling of light,
and where is the place of darkness,
20 that you may take it to its territory
and that you may discern the paths to its home?

21 Surely you know, for you were born then,
and the number of your days is great!

This may be a picture of where God packs away the darkness during the day time, and brings it out again in the morning! This is all beautiful poetic language, and does not necessarily imply that this is what the ancients thought actually happened.

Light and darkness are some of the most fundamental mysteries of our life, are they not? Whether we take them literally, or metaphorically. Yet God packs away the darkness, brings it out again, and brings the light out. Even if we want to take it at a purely scientific level: we still do not understand what light is. There are times when it obeys the laws that seem to apply to particles, and then there are times when it seems to obey the laws that apply to waves. So is it waves, or is it particles, or is it both, or is it something which includes neither, that we have not understood yet? Scientists are still trying to nut that out. The honest scientists stand in awe of it.

‘Where is the way to the dwelling of light?’ How could you bring out light? But God is the One who said, ‘Let there be—light’. The very first word of creation that was spoken. One of the basic building blocks of the universe. We have only just realised last century, through the genius of Einstein, that $E=mc^2$: that mass and energy and the speed of light are all tied up together, that energy and mass are basically the same thing, but it depends on how fast they are travelling, and so on. The speed of light—what is that? How does that affect the way everything is made? That, too, is a deep mystery. God knows it, but Job does not. Neither Job nor we were there when God said, ‘Let there be light’.

THE WEATHER

38:22 Have you entered the storehouses of the snow,
or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,
23 which I have reserved for the time of trouble,
for the day of battle and war?

God has these great storehouses, where He stacks away His snow! We store grain, and gold, and silver, and those sorts of things—He stores snow and hail! And then He brings them out when He needs them. There is reference here to hail as one of God’s weapons in war. In the Book of Joshua chapter 10, talking about the conquest of the promised land, when Joshua was fighting at Gibeon, they routed the enemy, and the enemy was retreating over a particular area, and suddenly a hailstorm fell on them. The comment is made: ‘There were more that died from the hailstorm than the men of Israel killed with the sword.’ We think we are going great guns with our mighty military battles, but it is God who determines the outcome of battles, and just one kink in the weather can change all that, and say what is going to happen one way or the other. For sure, Joshua had a fairly effective battle-plan, and that had worked, but it was the hailstones that really did the job. They still do: months after a ‘freak’ hailstorm in Sydney, rooves were still awaiting repairs, and cars still needed panel beating. The tomato-growing glasshouse owners up past Bolivar are in fear and trembling of the hailstones. One hailstorm can wipe out a crop. We also know how God used hail as one of the plagues in Egypt, where the countryside was devastated by hail. Is it not a relief that most of the time that does not happen, and that the seasons and the climate stay on a fairly even keel, under God’s hand, in service of us?

38:24 What is the way to the place where the light is distributed,
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?

The 'light' here may be referring to the lightning. The 'east wind' came in from the desert: it was a hot, sultry sort of wind. So this may be talking about the thunderstorms. We have sat outside on hot desert nights at Coober Pedy and watched incomparable displays of constantly flashing lightning filling the sky—much better than television! The whole matter of electricity in the universe is another great mystery. But God distributes that.

38:25 Who has cut a channel for the torrents of rain,
and a way for the thunderbolt,
26 to bring rain on a land where no one lives,
on the desert, which is empty of human life,
27 to satisfy the waste and desolate land,
and to make the ground put forth grass?

What that tells us, first of all, is that, when the rain falls, it is a channelled or an ordered thing. It talks here of having a channel for the torrents of rain; a little later it speaks of God tipping up the water-skins—the clouds—to empty them out. We might think that these 'primitive' people had naive notions about how the weather worked, and that we know much better now, with our Bureau of Meteorology! I think the Hebrews, and the ancients, and the people who wrote this sort of thing understood about as much as we do, and were probably in closer touch with it than we are now. We should not write them down as naive. They knew what poetry is, perhaps better than we do. So they knew there is not God up there tilting the water-skins. But it is a wonderful way of describing how the clouds empty themselves and dump their contents on the earth. They could see that God had not actually set up a conduit for the rain to come down, but they knew that when the rain falls it is by God's ordering.

Look where God makes it fall! He makes it fall on the just and the unjust, as Jesus told us (Matthew 5:45). He makes His sun shine that way, too. But He also makes it fall on the place where there is no one, just or unjust—where there is only desert! He makes it fall there as well, because He cares about the desert! It is true: out in the desert, in the centre of Australia, there can be tremendous rain storms that no one ever sees. When they fall, wonderful things happen to the desert. There was one time when we drove up through the Pitjantjatjara Lands to Uluru ('Ayers Rock'): it was after there had been rain, and the whole countryside was a carpet of wildflowers. Hardly anyone there to see them, but there they all were anyway! There was someone who lived on a station property out from Coober Pedy for about twenty years, and there were one or two species of wildflower that he had only ever seen once in that time, even though there had been rain at different times haphazardly during that period. It seems there are some wildflower seeds just under the ground waiting for, say, rain in the second week of July. When rain comes in the second week of July, up they come, saying: 'It's my turn now!' But if it does not come until August, they say: 'Well, we've missed out this year: even though the rain has come, we will wait until next time'. So only once in every twenty years or so some of these seeds might bloom—and there they are.

God sends that rain, 'to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass'. So God is saying here to Job: There is plenty that I do, that you never know about, and that you never need to know about. But that is what I do, in My creation.

38:28 Has the rain a father,
or who has begotten the drops of dew?
29 From whose womb did the ice come forth,
and who has given birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?
30 The waters become hard like stone,
and the face of the deep is frozen."

There are vast parts of the earth that just become frozen for a large period of the year, as in up in the northern reaches of Siberia. The whole ocean can become frozen. The ice, and the hoarfrost, can be grim, and frightening to us, but look at how God speaks of these elements: 'Has the rain a *father*, or who has *begotten* the drops of dew? From whose *womb* did the ice come forth, and who has *given birth* to the hoarfrost of heaven?' In other words, God 'fathers' the rain and dew, and 'mothers' the ice and the frost. It is a very gentle way of speaking about what appear to us harsh realities of nature, that God has that tenderness towards them, in bringing them forth.

THE STARS AND CONSTELLATIONS

- 38:31 Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades,
or loose the cords of Orion?
32 Can you lead forth the Mazzaroth in their season,
or can you guide the Bear with its children?
33 Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?
Can you establish their rule on the earth?

Each of those is the name of a constellation of stars. We know Orion, with three stars in his belt, and his sword: what we sometimes call 'the Saucepan' in Australia—not quite as romantic as the ancient Greeks were! The Mazzaroth and the Bear are more northern hemisphere constellations. The stars are a constant source of wonder. One of the sad things about living in the city is that you hardly ever see them. In the outback, they are just ablaze, those stars! You can see there why the Milky Way is called that. You know it is composed of individual stars, but there it is just a band or a glow of light, right across the heavens. The Milky Way is the extremities of our galaxy. once you start thinking about the distances involved, and how long it takes for light to reach us from the stars: the nearest sun, in our own home galaxy, is 4.3 light years away, and there are millions more further out. The way the stars hold their positions in the heavens, from out point of view, and the movement of the planets, and the whole swinging-around of the heavens as the earth turns! One night, after we had been in Oodnadatta with the family, we camped out under the stars. I don't like doing that much, because I don't get a lot of sleep! Every hour or so I would wake up, and sometimes, just to make sure, I would put my glasses back on so I could check where the Southern Cross was, as it swung around the celestial south pole. At one stage the Southern Cross was nearly above us, then it was round to the right, then it was almost down on the horizon. I had never stopped to observe all that, but it is going on all the time. That is when you realise that people who live under the stars would every night have marvels unveiled to them.

God says to Job: 'Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth?' He may not be saying that the stars necessarily have any influence on the earth, in the way many people believe. He may simply be saying: 'Do you know how to set all of that up? Do you know the laws that govern the earth and the stars and the universe? Can you operate those laws yourself?' It is God who calls them all out, and tells them where to go.

COMMANDING THE ELEMENTS

- 38:34 Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
so that a flood of waters may cover you?
35 Can you send forth lightnings,
so that they may go and say to you, 'Here we are'?
36 Who has put wisdom in the inward parts,
or given understanding to the mind?

- 37 Who has the wisdom to number the clouds?
Or who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens,
38 when the dust runs into a mass
and the clods cling together?

One of the things that is most important to us is the weather. It is a constant topic of conversation, and something that you can talk about with a complete stranger: if there is nothing else you can talk about, you can talk about the weather. The news on television is the most-watched program, and the weather at the end of the news is more watched than the news: we sometimes just turn it on for the weather, because we want to know what the weather is going to be. There is a whole thing about that: if we can know what the weather is going to be, then we can have some control of our uncertain destinies. That may be why we put a lot of money into the Bureau of Meteorology. It is important to know what the weather is going to be, for all sorts of reasons, but there can be almost mystical overtones to it, of wanting to know, wanting to somehow have control, over our future. In 'primitive' societies, there is the local rainmaker, who knows how to do the rain dance, to control the rain, whether effectively or not. It is good to have the Bureau of Meteorology on the job, and for the most part they get it reasonably right. But I also like it when they slip up and say: 'We didn't know that this was going to happen, but there it is!' We do not have the final word over what happens to the clouds, and over what happens to the high pressure and low pressure systems. Suddenly there can be a cold front coming in from nowhere, or a tropical rainstorm coming down from the north, which is quite unpredicted. But God says: 'That is all my business—that is what I do'.

I like that bit about the lightning, as if Job could stand there and say: 'OK, lightning: everybody out!' And all the lightnings run out and stand in a row and say: 'Here we are, Job! Where do you want us to go?' No way!

God is not saying this to put Job down, by saying: 'See? I can do it, and you can't!' He is saying: 'Just face facts: you don't do this, and you can't do this, but *I can*, and *I do*. So be reassured.' It reminds us of Deuteronomy 29:29:

The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.

God tells us everything we need to know, to do what we are supposed to be doing. Often it is because we don't want to do what we are supposed to be doing, that we want to know some other things, to get around that. But God says: 'No: there are secret things, that I am in control of, in my universe, and you do not have to worry about those—because you are not God! You are someone that I have made, that is a wonderful creature, and to whom I have given great powers and great responsibilities in the creation. But there are still things that I am looking after that you do not need to be concerned about. That is good to know, so that you can just get on with the things that I have given you to do.'

Also, I guess, just having these things drawn to our attention, let us know that God is Someone who is not us, and who, in a sense, is far beyond us. Job and the other comforters knew that. But it is something that we need to be reminded of, and that we need to grow into as well.

Once I was having a great discussion about prayer with a group of year seven students at the local church primary school. They would come over to the church building each week for a prayer service, and, at the end of it they would all kneel down, and were supposed to be saying some quiet prayers of their own and then the organ would start up, and they would go out. One of the children in Year 7 said: 'You know when we all kneel down and say our prayers: how can God hear all of those different prayers?' I guess it was thought that, when

we are all saying them together, He has only one lot of prayers to attend to, but when suddenly two hundred children all start praying different prayers, what has He got? Some kind of Communications Room, with all the messages coming in and being sorted out? They could not imagine how this could work. And I said: 'Well, maybe that tells us a little bit about the love of God, that it is so much bigger than our love. When you love someone, you listen to what they are saying, and pay attention to it. God's love is so great that He can do that with every single one of us.' That is when we start to realise, and are able to say to Him: It is good that You are God, and we are not! Because You are doing a great job of it.

Note God's attention to detail, also. He is talking about the clouds, the fantastic shapes that they take, the floods that come upon the earth, the lightnings, the mist, and the rain. Then, as if with a zoom lens, He comes down to where the rain is falling: 'when the dust runs into a mass and the clods cling together'. This detail is rather like the description of the rain in Psalm 65 (in the old Book of Common Prayer version): 'Thou waterest her furrows, thou sendest rain into the little valleys thereof: thou makest it soft with the drops of rain, and blessest the increase of it.' We all know of the times when rain first falls on the dry ground, and the fresh smell that comes from that, then the pattering down of the drops to make it muddy, and then the little pools, and the running of the water over the surface of the ground.

These wonders of creation begin to leave us breathless! Note that God does not say anything about the sun, or the moon, or the sky: we are touching only the fringes of His creation here; but He is giving Job, and us, just a glimpse enough to see something of His majesty, His sovereignty, His dependability, and His wonder.

CREATION AND COVENANT

God is not showing all this to Job simply to impress him, or overawe him. There has always been a close connection between God's creation and God's covenant. God is a relational God. As 1 John 4: 8 and 16 says, 'God is love'. God's covenant is His relational bond with all that He has made, especially with humanity, and particularly with His people⁷. There are other places where God's sovereignty and faithfulness with regard to creation is used to underscore the sureness of God's covenant, and all that it sets out to achieve. One classic passage is the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31. The whole chapter has to do with the restoration of God's people after suffering and exile. In verses 31–34, the promise of the new covenant is made—of inner knowledge and direct relationship in unbreakable loyalty, and of complete forgiveness of sins:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

These are things that we all need to know and participate in, including Job. But how are we to be sure of this wonderful outcome? The prophet continues in verses 35–37:

Thus says the LORD,
who gives the sun for light by day

⁷ See further in Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Love's Most Glorious Covenant*, Redeemer Baptist Press, Castle Hill NSW, Australia, 1997.

and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,
who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—
the LORD of hosts is his name:
If this fixed order were ever to cease
from my presence, says the LORD,
then also the offspring of Israel would cease
to be a nation before me forever.

Thus says the LORD:
If the heavens above can be measured,
and the foundations of the earth below can be explored,
then I will reject all the offspring of Israel
because of all they have done, says the LORD.

Is this not exactly what God is showing to Job? And is not this also the message of deep reassurance that is coming to him?

Heavenly Father, we thank You that You have placed us in this glorious creation, and that You have given thought to every feature of it, and that there are things about it, so many things, vast tracts, that we have no knowledge of, and that we need to have little knowledge of, because they are in Your hands. We pray that seeing all these things in Your hand may reassure us that You have things in hand as far as our lives also are concerned, and that we can get on with the things that You have shown us to do. We thank You that the place where You have put us is a place of high and noble dignity. We pray that, being drawn out by the things that You show us and reveal to us, that we may truly take our place among the wonders of all the things that You have made, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Nineteen

GOD AND THE ANIMALS

Now, God gets on to the animals. This is a delightful section:

ANIMALS IN THE WILD

- 38:39 Can you hunt the prey for the lion,
or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
40 when they crouch in their dens,
or lie in wait in their covert?
41 Who provides for the raven its prey,
when its young ones cry to God,
and wander about for lack of food?

At the beginning of Genesis, God had said:

‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ (Genesis 1:26–28 *RSV*).

All the creatures are given to our dominion. We have that authority over the creatures. The domestic creatures, and the wild creatures. That is why we can make such an impact on the earth, for good or ill. That is why, under the power of humankind, a number of species have become extinct, when we have mishandled that very real power and authority that we have. That is why we can set up animal and bird sanctuaries to preserve and reintroduce species, or pass legislation to save the whales, and encourage their propagation. We have that power, given to us by God. We have done much in the taming and training of animals in the service of humankind.

God here is talking about those animals that, even though we have this authority, we have not been able to get alongside. God has given us authority over the lions, but who among us would ever want to come face to face with a lion? But God does that. He makes sure that the lions have their prey, and that their little ones are fed.

The same with the raven. Whether it be big, bold lions, or humble ravens, little birds in their nest: He ‘provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food’. Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 6:26: ‘Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.’ And he went on to say, ‘Are you not of more value than they?’ Just pointing that out to Job would be a great reassurance, would it not?

- 39:1 Do you know when the mountain goats give birth?
Do you observe the calving of the deer?
2 Can you number the months that they fulfil,
and do you know the time when they give birth,
3 when they crouch to give birth to their offspring,
and are delivered of their young?
4 Their young ones become strong, they grow up in the open;
they go forth, and do not return to them.

This is the mountain goat. I remember going along the Murray River once on a houseboat, when there were some goats on a cliff on the bank, and they jumped down onto little ledges

halfway down the cliff, and then jumped up again. You think: How do they do that? What are they landing on? How do they see it? They are so sure-footed.

This is talking about something different from that: the actual processes of birth in a wild animal. This is something that we are only now, with all our scientific knowledge, starting to unravel. Only a few years ago was produced what is now a very famous film called 'The Birth of the Red Kangaroo'. Produced at Adelaide University, it showed the process of birth in the red kangaroo that no one had ever known or seen before. Unlike other animals, the kangaroo comes out of the womb almost in embryo form, and it clutches its way up to the pouch—completely exposed, this little worm of a thing—and then it gets into the pouch, and starts to suckle, and finishes its development there: its limbs form properly, and its hair grows, until, as a joey, it pokes its head out, and eventually can get out of the pouch. That is an amazing process. Every creature has its own birthing process, and each one is different. For how many months is an elephant pregnant? This is different from the way ants reproduce, or birds, or crocodiles, or snakes. That is an amazing thing—just that knowledge of how animals reproduce. God is asking Job: 'Do you know how that works? Can you make it happen? I oversee every one of those processes. I set them up in the first place.'

- 39:5 Who has let the wild ass go free?
Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass,
6 to which I have given the steppe for its home,
the salt land for its dwelling place?"
7 It scorns the tumult of the city;
it does not hear the shouts of the driver.
8 It ranges the mountains as its pasture,
and it searches after every green thing.

This is speaking again of the wild, uninhabitable places: God has His animals even out there. These are animals that we never end up controlling. They are just wild. But God runs them on His 'station'! As God says in Psalm 50:10: 'every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills'—'you have your little farms, and your sheep stations and cattle stations, and so on; you have your pet dog or your pet cat; but I have all the animals, in the forest, in the mountains, and on the plain'. The wild ass can never be tamed, and does not want to be. God provides for it 'every green thing'.

- 39:9 Is the wild ox willing to serve you?
Will it spend the night at your crib?
10 Can you tie it in the furrow with ropes,
or will it harrow the valleys after you?
11 Will you depend on it because its strength is great,
and will you hand over your labour to it?
12 Do you have faith in it that it will return,
and bring your grain to your threshing floor?

We have tamed a number of species of ox. They were the main work power in the ancient world, and in many places still are, by which agriculture is conducted. In those days there was a wild ox (now thought to have been extinct since 1627): a great big creature. No way could it have ever been tamed—it would have been great if that had been possible. He had never been tamed, and would never have been willing to lie down with your cows in the barn. If you let him go loose, he would not come trotting back to you. He would be off!

Again, God is talking to Job about things over which he has no control, but which God has well in hand.

A SILLY BIRD

Have you ever made a close study of the emu? They are part of Australia's national emblem, but they do appear to be a bit stupid. Once we were driving along the Dog Fence out of Coober Pedy, in the far north-west of South Australia. The Dog Fence runs for thousands of kilometres, and is intended to keep the wild dingoes from straying out of the cattle-station country into the sheep-station country where they can do quite a bit of damage to the sheep. In front of us on the track were a couple of emus—huge birds, with long legs and a long neck, long flowing feathers, and tiny wings that cannot fly. As we approached in the four-wheel-drive vehicle, they started to run to get away from us—and emus can run very fast. The Dog Fence was on our right, and to the left were thousands of square kilometres of flat unfenced country. The emus could have run out there and evaded us easily. But what did they do? They kept running along the track, faster and faster, every now and then crashing against the Dog Fence to try and break through it! Not very clever.

The ostrich, like the emu, appears to be a bird of very little brain:

- 39:13 The ostrich's wings flap wildly,
 though its pinions lack plumage.
14 For it leaves its eggs to the earth,
 and lets them be warmed on the ground,
15 forgetting that a foot may crush them,
 and that a wild animal may trample them.
16 It deals cruelly with its young, as if they were not its own;
 though its labour should be in vain, yet it has no fear;
17 because God has made it forget wisdom,
 and given it no share in understanding.
18 When it spreads its plumes aloft,
 it laughs at the horse and its rider.

Why would God be pointing out the ostrich, in particular, to Job? Especially when God admits that He Himself has made the ostrich as silly as it is! Maybe it is just that God loves the ostrich, and delights in her, and it does not matter to Him if she is a bit stupid and unthinking—she is one of His creatures! And even if it flaps its puny wings in a vain attempt to fly and never takes off, and does not appear to know how to care properly for its young (all parents could take some comfort from that!), and sometimes in its fabled stupidity 'hides its head in the sand', God still thinks it is wonderful. And, God says to Job, you should see it run! There is nothing like the speed and movement of an ostrich or an emu on the run. God exhilarates in that!

THE WAR-HORSE

- 39:19 Do you give the horse its might?
 Do you clothe its neck with mane?
20 Do you make it leap like the locust?
 Its majestic snorting is terrible.
21 It paws violently, exults mightily;
 it goes out to meet the weapons.
22 It laughs at fear, and is not dismayed;
 it does not turn back from the sword.
23 Upon it rattle the quiver,
 the flashing spear, and the javelin.
24 With fierceness and rage it swallows the ground;
 it cannot stand still at the sound of the trumpet.
25 When the trumpet sounds, it says 'Aha!'
 From a distance it smells the battle,
 the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.

I have a friend who is a keen horse-rider, and has done some rodeo riding on the bucking broncos. He has always wanted someone to paint him an action picture of the scene. He is not an artist himself, but he knows exactly what he wants, and has the picture sharply in his mind's eye: the red dust, the stamping hooves, the arched back, the clinging rider, the flying mane and tail, the flaring nostrils, and most of all, the look in the horse's eye!

The horse must be one of God's most magnificent creations. Jonathan Swift certainly thought so when, in his extended novel *Gulliver's Travels*, he ended up preferring the proud and noble race of horse animals to the company of human beings. Horses have been some of our closest and most useful animal companions. God does not seem to be making any point here in describing the horse, except to delight in its sheer strength, terror, majesty, eager fearlessness, unstoppable courage, and speed. God made the horse! He shows it to Job and says: 'There! What do you think of that!?'

THE SOARING BIRDS OF PREY

- 39:26 Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars,
and spreads its wings toward the south?
27 Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up
and makes its nest on high?
28 It lives on the rock and makes its home
in the fastness of the rocky crag.
29 From there it spies the prey;
its eyes see it from far away.
30 Its young ones suck up blood;
and where the slain are, there it is.

Many years ago I saw a Disney wildlife film version of the *Grand Canyon Suite*: the glories of the USA's Grand Canyon and its wild inhabitants set to magnificent music. After seeing that, I thought that if I ever had an opportunity for another life on earth, I would like to be a golden eagle over the Grand Canyon. That is, until we moved to Meningie, on the shores of Lake Albert in South Australia, near the mouth of the River Murray and that long stretch of water called the Coorong, and I saw the pelicans. Sometimes they would be circling to thousands of feet on thermals over the town, wings extended motionlessly, exalting in the sheer joy and wonder of it all. Other times they would come swooping down across the surface of the lake, so close that the water almost ruffled their tummy feathers, every now and then rising a few centimetres, enough to give their wings a flip to keep up the momentum, before dropping back down again. Or they would sit pensively, floating on the water, or moving noiselessly through it, sometimes in groups herding the fish before them, then all going beaks down into the water together for a good feed. That was when I forgot about the eagles and the Grand Canyon, and decided that, given the chance, I would much prefer to be a pelican over the Coorong!

God's 'wildlife documentary' for Job's benefit culminates in these magnificent birds of prey, soaring to the heights, and making their nests way beyond human reach. There is reference here also to the blood of their victims—a theme that commonly occurs in the Bible in apocalyptic writing (e.g. Ezekiel 39:17, Revelation 19:17–18), where the birds are called upon to devour the remains of God's enemies in the aftermath of the final battle when His great victory has been won. Jesus himself referred to this in Matthew 24:28: 'Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures [some translations: 'eagles'] will gather.' In all these things, God's sovereignty is secure, and His good purposes are sure. This is what Job is being shown.

Twenty

THE PROUD AND LOFTY

After showing Job all this, God looks to Job for a response:

- 40: 1 And the LORD said to Job:
2 'Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?
Anyone who argues with God must respond.'

Just look back to 38:1, when God first addressed Job:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:
'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?'

We have seen now how God has shown Job that there is so much that Job does not know, that Job can never know, and that Job does not need to know, because God knows it, and He has it all in His hand. That is not to put Job down. God is simply saying: 'Job, this is the way it is. This is how I am, with my whole creation.' In actually opening all this out to Job, God is admitting Job into some of those great mysteries that are God's. There is a great ennobling and a wonderful privilege in that. As God says to Job, 'Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you, and you declare to me.' This is standing Job upon his feet, not putting him down. God is simply stating what the situation actually is.

THE FAULTFINDER

But now God says: 'Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?' In what sense is Job 'a faultfinder'? We have looked before a number of times at 42:7, where God says to the friends: 'You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has'. We have been saying all through that Job has been speaking right of God in the things that he has been saying. And yet God here calls Job 'a faultfinder'. There have been times when Job, under the pressure of his suffering has made some ill-advised statements: things which, in his more lucid moments, he might have thought the better of. That is not to excuse Job. We are all responsible for what passes our lips. Whatever pressures we are under, we are responsible for what we say. God certainly holds Job to what he has said.

What comes out under pressure is often what is really there underneath, which needs to be rebuked and dealt with. That is what God is doing here. What might some of these things have been where Job perhaps overstepped the mark? Look back at 7:19, where Job was saying to God: 'Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle?' Job was saying to God: 'Just leave me alone! Why are You going to all this trouble, and bringing all this against me?' There is an unanswered question there, which we gave the answer to at the time: that God takes all this trouble over us, even in the matters of suffering, because we are so important and special to Him. But Job there was just wanting to be released from it all. Another place is 9:14-24:

How then can I answer him,
choosing my words with him?
Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.
If I summoned him and he answered me,
I do not believe that he would listen to my voice.
For he crushes me with a tempest,

and multiplies my wounds without cause;
he will not let me get my breath,
but fills me with bitterness.
If it is a contest of strength, he is the strong one!
If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?
Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me;
though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.
I am blameless; I do not know myself;
I loathe my life.
It is all one; therefore I say,
he destroys both the blameless and the wicked.
When disaster brings sudden death,
he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.
The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;
he covers the eyes of its judges—
if it is not he, who then is it?

We saw there that Job was right in that he was attributing all of this to God. The sense that comes through that of Job's underlying feeling, however, is: 'God is bigger than me' (which is true), 'so what hope have I got? It's not fair!' (which is false). It may be that God here is picking him up on that.

In 19:5–7:

If indeed you magnify yourselves against me,
and make my humiliation an argument against me,
know then that God has put me in the wrong,
and closed his net around me.
Even when I cry out, 'Violence!' I am not answered;
I call aloud, but there is no justice.

Again, we made the point that what is happening to him is the action of God. But is it really God putting Job '*in the wrong*'? Is it that there is no justice? Or has Job gone too far in saying that? We know that God was not putting Job in the wrong, but was in fact upholding his righteousness and integrity.

STUBBORN SELF-WILLED SELF-DETERMINATION

In these ways, Job was tending to find fault with God, but perhaps this was indicative of something deeper in Job, which was not just Job's problem, but is ours as well. How does Job respond to the Lord?

40:3 Then Job answered the LORD:
4 'See, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?
I lay my hand on my mouth.
5 I have spoken once, and I will not answer;
twice, but will proceed no further.'

In a sense, Job was right: 'Having seen all that, I have nothing I can say'. But I am not sure he is saying that particularly willingly. Maybe he is saying it in the sense: 'OK, You win! You are right! I won't say anything more.' When we say, 'OK, you win!', we are really wanting to win ourselves. Job is also saying perhaps: 'Well, I have said all I want to say—I don't need to say any more. I have stated my case.' He still has his mind fixed back on that, even though he has had these wonders opened out to him.

Ever heard the story of the little boy whose teacher told him to stand up, and he refused? The teacher said: 'I said, Stand up!'. The boy still would not, and remained sitting there. The

teacher said, 'Now listen: you stand up, *now!*' The boy stood up, and he said, 'I'm standing up on the outside, but I'm sitting down on the inside!' We do a lot of that, because, at the core of every human being, there is an inner, self-willed self-determination, which is at the heart of our problem. Job is no exception to that. He is a sinner, like the rest of us. This self-willed self-determination is challenged and exposed whenever God comes near to us by His word.

There are times when I have thought I am sailing along happily, at peace with God, at peace with the world, at peace with everything, and then someone comes and preaches or speaks God's word in some way, and something happens in me that exposes again that stubborn 'standing up on the outside but sitting down on the inside'. Job is not free of that, when God has spoken to him in this very direct way.

THE ULTIMATE ISSUE

This is what God now addresses—the thing that He must really get to in Job:

40:6 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:
7 'Gird up your loins like a man;
I will question you, and you declare to me.'

Still God is not putting Job down. He is getting him to stand on his feet. God is still ennobling Job. He is suggesting that in being self-willed in this way we are demeaning ourselves, we are being something *less* than human. God is saying: 'Come on—I want to speak to you Man-to-Man'—if God can do that! As He spoke to Moses 'face to face, as one speaks to a friend' (Exodus 33:11). God says to Job: 'No. That kind of attitude still is not good enough. Come on! Be a true human person, with your God! Stand up! With no reservations, or distancing of yourself towards me. Let us have it out together.'

What is really at issue here comes out in the next two verses:

40:8 Will you even put me in the wrong?
Will you condemn me that you may be justified?

What is really at stake when we fix on that self-determination—which was never meant to be a part of the human heart: we were always meant to be open to God, with no reservations at all—when we fix on that self-determination inside, we are 'Godding it'. We are putting ourselves in the place of God. It has got to be God, or us. Ultimately, that is the great issue.

That is the great issue that came to a head on the Cross: God, or us. We ourselves will kill the Son of God, if we want to carry this confrontation right through. But who will win, in the outcome of that?

That is what God is coming to here, with Job. But He does it with such great tenderness and strength:

40:9 Have you an arm like God,
and can you thunder with a voice like his?

He goes on to say: 'If you want to be God, then let me show you what that involves, and then tell me if that is still the way you want to go':

40:10 Deck yourself with majesty and dignity;
clothe yourself with glory and splendour.
11 Pour out the overflowings of your anger,
and look on all who are proud, and abase them.
12 Look on all who are proud, and bring them low;

- tread down the wicked where they stand.
13 Hide them all in the dust together;
bind their faces in the world below.
14 Then I will also acknowledge to you
that your own right hand can give you victory.”

It is ironic, in a way. He is saying to Job: ‘If you were God, this is the way you would go about it’. We may wonder if that is really the way God goes about it. God says: ‘If you can do that’—which Job of course does not have a hope of ever doing anyway. God is saying: ‘Here is a proud one, that I must deal with, but perhaps I will not deal with him in quite the way you would’.

GOD IS LORD OVER POWERS OF EARTH AND SEA

Then God goes on, for the rest of chapters 40 and 41, to speak about two more creatures. Both of them, particularly the second one, take up a great amount of God’s attention. One is a land-creature, ‘Behemoth’, to the end of chapter 40; and the whole of chapter 41 is about ‘Leviathan’, who is a sea-creature. In some translations, ‘Behemoth’ is interpreted as being the hippopotamus, and there are certain features of the description here that fit a hippopotamus, although there are certain features that do not quite fit. ‘Leviathan’ is interpreted as being a crocodile. Again, there are some things about the description that fit the crocodile, but there are lots of things that do not. Leviathan has also been identified as the great whale. If you have ever read the famous American novel *Moby Dick* in its full unabridged version, you will see what Herman Melville makes of the whale, and of these passages concerning Leviathan—the wonderful descriptions of Leviathan and the whale and the whole massiveness and untamedness of these great creatures.

In each of these descriptions of Behemoth and Leviathan, they seem to go beyond the ordinary hippopotamus or crocodile or whale, or whatever. They may be simply poetic embellishments, or they may be talking about something more. In every culture there is the sense of a great land-monsters, and great sea-monsters, or dragons! On the ancient maps, in the unexplored areas, they put: ‘Here be Dragons!’ The description of Leviathan, particularly, fits better a sea-dragon than either a whale or a crocodile. And perhaps Behemoth is really what the Australian aboriginal people called a ‘Bunyip’! You can take your pick.

The thing about this is that there is the land-monster and there is the sea-monster, and they both have a wonderful freedom and vitality, and God is in control of both of them. It is a bit like when, in Revelation 10:1–3, a great angel comes down:

I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He held a little scroll open in his hand. Setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, he gave a great shout, like a lion roaring. And when he shouted, the seven thunders sounded.

This mighty angel puts his right foot on the land, and his left foot on the sea. So he has control of both the land and the sea. That is something like what God is saying here: whether it be the land, with all its threatening elements, or the sea, with all its uncontrollable forces—whether it be the land-monster or the sea-monster—they are under my purvey, and own my sway.

Indeed, in some of the residual elements of creation mythology found in the Bible, ‘Rahab’ and ‘Leviathan’ are nominated as the chaos-monsters, signifying the dark, unruly powers that seek to disrupt and destroy, over which we have no control. God’s subduing of these horrific forces in creation is also associated with His power over the Red Sea in the exodus and His conquest of the enemies of His people, in saving them:

Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,
who pierced the dragon?
Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep;
who made the depths of the sea a way
for the redeemed to cross over? (Isaiah 51:9–10)

On that day the LORD with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea (Isaiah 27:1).

In Job 3:8, Job spoke of ‘those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan’—suggesting some kind of supernatural forces. Psalm 74:12–14 indicates that God is well and truly in command of these:

Yet God my King is from of old,
working salvation in the earth.
You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.
You crushed the heads of Leviathan;
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.

THE GREAT LAND-MONSTER

40:15 Look at Behemoth,
which I made just as I made you;
it eats grass like an ox.
16 Its strength is in its loins,
and its power in the muscles of its belly.
17 It makes its tail stiff like a cedar;
the sinews of its thighs are knit together.
18 Its bones are tubes of bronze,
its limbs like bars of iron.

This makes me think of a charging rhinoceros, as much as the hippopotamus, who is rather more cumbersome. Whatever it is, God regards it as one of His prime creatures:

40:19 It is the first of the great acts of God—
only its Maker can approach it with the sword.
20 For the mountains yield food for it
where all the wild animals play.
21 Under the lotus plants it lies,
in the covert of the reeds and in the marsh.

That is also what makes me think it is like a monster of some kind—the Australian Bunyip is said to reside in the swamps:

40:22 The lotus trees cover it for shade;
the willows of the creek surround it.
23 Even if the river is turbulent, it is not frightened;
it is confident though Jordan rushes against its mouth.
24 Can one take it with hooks
or pierce its nose with a snare?”

Job could not bring a sword to Behemoth, to capture or tame it. Yet this is 'the first' of God's great creatures. Look at the great strength and freedom and vitality in which it lives! God rules over this one.

THE GREAT SEA-MONSTER

- 41: 1 Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook,
or press down its tongue with a cord?
2 Can you put a rope in its nose,
or pierce its jaw with a hook?
3 Will it make many supplications to you?
Will it speak soft words to you?
4 Will it make a covenant with you
to be taken as your servant forever?
5 Will you play with it as with a bird,
or will you put it on leash for your girls?
6 Will traders bargain over it?
Will they divide it up among the merchants?

So: are you going to tame the sea-monster—are you going to make it your pet, or your servant? Yet there is a sense in which it is God's pet. God does all those things with it, but lets it range free.

- 41:7 Can you fill its skin with harpoons,
or its head with fishing spears?
8 Lay hands on it; think of the battle;
you will not do it again!
9 Any hope of capturing it will be disappointed;
were not even the gods overwhelmed at the sight of it?
10 No one is so fierce as to dare to stir it up.
Who can stand before it?
11 Who can confront it and be safe?
—under the whole heaven, who?
[Or RSV (Hebrew): 10 No one is so fierce that he dares to stir him up.
Who then is he that can stand before me?
11 Who has given to me, that I should repay him?
Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine.]

We might think that God has dealt with Leviathan now, and made His point that no one could take on Leviathan, so why would you ever think you could take on God? But there is something about Leviathan—God says: 'No, I've still got more to say. I just can't keep silent!':

- 41:12 I will not keep silence concerning its limbs,
or its mighty strength, or its splendid frame.
13 Who can strip off its outer garment?
Who can penetrate its double coat of mail?
14 Who can open the doors of its face?
There is terror all around its teeth.
15 Its back is made of shields in rows,
shut up closely as with a seal.
16 One is so near to another
that no air can come between them.
17 They are joined one to another;
they clasp each other and cannot be separated.
18 Its sneezes flash forth light,

- and its eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn.
19 From its mouth go flaming torches;
sparks of fire leap out.
20 Out of its nostrils comes smoke,
as from a boiling pot and burning rushes.
21 Its breath kindles coals,
and a flame comes out of its mouth.

He may be talking about a crocodile, but this is why I think He is talking about the Dragon!

- 41:22 In its neck abides strength,
and terror dances before it.
23 The folds of its flesh cling together;
it is firmly cast and immovable.
24 Its heart is as hard as stone,
as hard as the lower millstone.
25 When it raises itself up the gods are afraid;
at the crashing they are beside themselves.
26 Though the sword reaches it, it does not avail,
nor does the spear, the dart, or the javelin.
27 It counts iron as straw,
and bronze as rotten wood.
28 The arrow cannot make it flee;
slingstones, for it, are turned to chaff.
29 Clubs are counted as chaff;
it laughs at the rattle of javelins.
30 Its underparts are like sharp potsherds;
it spreads itself like a threshing sledge on the mire.
31 It makes the deep boil like a pot;
it makes the sea like a pot of ointment.
32 It leaves a shining wake behind it;
one would think the deep to be white-haired.
33 On earth it has no equal,
a creature without fear.
34 It surveys everything that is lofty;
it is king over all that are proud.”

‘King over all that is proud’—Job included, and you, and me. And it is a creature *of God*. In Psalm 104, there is another of the magnificent descriptions in the Bible of the great works of creation. That culminates also with Leviathan:

- O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.

I was on holidays at Aldinga beach, where the sea was great and wide and calm, and I went splashing into it. I looked around, at the cliffs and the hills and the sea stretching out to the horizon, and I thought: ‘Here is the great and wide sea also, in which teem living things innumerable, both small and great beasts. And I am one of them!’—one of the smaller variety. The psalmist goes on to say:

- There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

Why did God form this great monster for the seas—the largest of all the creatures? To ‘sport’ in the deep. One of God’s great playfellows, in whom He delights.

Twentyone

‘NOW MY EYE SEES YOU’

God has now shown Job His great delight in and sovereignty over the whole creation and all creatures, small and great, and says, in effect: ‘Well, Job, what do you say to that!?’

JOB’S RESPONSE

42:1 Then Job answered the LORD:

2 ‘I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.’

He is not saying this with a bowed head any more. He is not saying, in a resigned tone: ‘Yeah: I know that You can do all things, I suppose; and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted—OK, You win’. He is saying the one thing that he really needed to know all through this terrible suffering: ‘I KNOW that YOU can do ALL THINGS, and that NO PURPOSE OF YOURS CAN BE THWARTED!’ Is not that the answer to Job’s prayer, and the very thing that we all need to know in these desperate situations? God, You are God! And You can do all things. And there is nothing that You set out to do that will not come to fruition.

So Job then reflects on himself and some of the things that he has been saying, and quotes God (from 38:2):

42:3 ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’

He says: ‘You are absolutely right’.

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

Job is now quite happy to be able to say this. He knows that, if he himself did not know about it, at least God did. He quotes God again (from 38:3 and 40:7)

42:4 ‘Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you declare to me.’

In these words, God had ennobled him by addressing him directly, and seeking a direct response. Standing humbly in this high dignity, Job goes on:

42:5 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,

We know how faithful Job had been to the word of God that he had heard, over many years of his life. And now he says what he has longed to be able to say all along:

but now my eye sees you;

‘Now my eye sees You.’ Job had been trusting that he would see God after he died:

after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another (Job 19:26–27)

Now, even before death, Job has been granted this vision of God. God has been saying to Job: 'Come on, I will question you, you answer me, let's have it out, let's talk it over'. But Job realises that he does not need to do that. Because the vision of God that he has now received is totally vindicating and satisfying to him.

I am reminded of when Thomas was wanting to press through to the risen Jesus. He was saying: 'Unless I see the holes in his hands, and where the spear went into his side, I will not believe'. So Jesus comes to him and he says: 'OK, Thomas, here are the holes in my hands, here is where the spear went into my side: touch me, and believe'. I do not think Thomas really took Jesus up on that, because what he saw there fully was more than enough for him. He said: 'My Lord, and my God!' (See John 20:24–29.) God is not averse to us taking Him on, but when He comes to take us on, that is enough, and more than enough, for us. 'Now my eye sees You!'

Some translations have the word 'myself' in the next verse:

42:6 therefore I despise [myself],
and repent in dust and ashes.

That sounds like the kind of abject self-loathing of repentance, which is necessary for us when we come to repentance. We see 'In me lives no good thing', and 'You are all-in-all', even 'I despise myself'. But Job has no need for that at this point, because that is something he has done years ago. Remember how that is what Job's friends were trying to get him to say: 'I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes'? This he has done already, and he does not need to do that again.

This is different. In fact, that word 'myself' does not appear in the Hebrew. It is often put in by the translators, but the Hebrew simply says: 'I despise'. There is no 'I despise myself'. What is he referring to? I guess he is referring to what he has talked about already in verse 3: the times when I was shooting my mouth off, when I had no right to, and when I was out of order. That is nothing, now. I despise that. 'Therefore I despise'. He is acknowledging that he had spoken out of turn, out of misguided short-sightedness. Now that he has seen God and what God has shown him, he has been put right, and counts all that he said as nothing. Even everything he has said, earlier in the book, he counts as nothing. Because now he has God.

This is a bit like when Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) wrote his massive works, the *Summa Theologica* and others, which set the agenda for theological study especially in the Roman Catholic church for almost a thousand years, and it was by no means light stuff. As we have seen, what Job said in this book is by no means light stuff. But towards the end of his life Thomas Aquinas said, 'All I have written is straw', because he had a vision of God which was far more than anything he had been able to put into words.

Maybe that is Job's experience here, too. 'Therefore I despise.' 'Whatever I might have said, that doesn't matter any more. I have no need of that. I count it as less than nothing. For now my eye sees You.' We would say the same, of all that we have held dear, if we were face to face with God, as Job is here.

What about 'and repent in dust and ashes'? Job is not putting himself down there either. He is just making an acknowledgment of the way things really are. Rather like the great Abraham, when he sought to approach God in prayer, over the matter of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, in Genesis 18:27:

Abraham answered, 'Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.'

Abraham was not crawling to God here. He was just acknowledging what he was made out of anyway, and Who has made us out of that. Remember Genesis 2:7: 'the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.' That is what we are. To be 'dust' before the Creator who has made us as human beings is no mean thing, especially considering the glory He is taking us to. That whole pressing though to God that Abraham did, in Genesis 18, seeking out God's justice, seeking out who He really is, and how He really operates, is very like the same sort of thing that Job was trying to do, right through this book. Finally he is rewarded, as Abraham was, by being shown all that God Himself is doing.

GOD, JOB, AND HIS FRIENDS

42:7 After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. 8 Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has done.' 9 So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

We have looked at this before, several times. We have seen that Job was a great man of prayer. In fact, his reputation as a man of prayer is referred to in Ezekiel 14, where God says: 'I am bringing my judgments upon Israel, and even if these three people, Noah, and Daniel, and Job—three great pray-ers—were there, they would not be able to save even their own children by their prayer; they would only save themselves by their righteousness'. Job is such a great man of prayer, when bidden by God to offer sacrifice on behalf of his children, and to pray for his friends. Yet there comes a time when not even Job could save us from God's judgment. There must be a greater than Job who comes to do that. It is by virtue of that one, Jesus, that Job, and the rest of us, are able to pray in sacrifice to God and be heard.

JOB'S RESTORATION

42:10 And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.

There is a bit in Exodus 22:4, in the laws of God, that if a thief steals something, and is found out, he has to pay it back double: 'When the animal, whether ox or donkey or sheep, is found alive in the thief's possession, the thief shall pay double'. God is virtually saying: 'I have taken all this off Job, and I had no good reason to do that, so now I will pay him back double! You have caught me!' God keeps His own laws. Jesus called himself 'a thief in the night' also (see Matthew 24:43, 1 Thessalonians 5:2)!

42:11 Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring.

A lovely coming-together of the family.

42:12 The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys.

This is indeed double: in 1:3 he started out with ‘seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys’.

42:13 He also had seven sons and three daughters.

These replace the same number of children that he had before. It is the daughters who get particular attention here:

42:14 He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. 15 In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers.

This was very enlightened for those days. They were special girls—real gifts from God. Remember also that Job had seen God, and that always makes a difference to how we treat others.

42:16 After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. 17 And Job died, old and full of days.

What a wonderful blessing that was. But the most wonderful blessing was the revelation that Job had received.

Something of what we can learn from this is told in James 5:7–11:

Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors. As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

In these studies on Job, ‘You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful’.