

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.*¹

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:

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,

¹ Kay Carney (nee Robinson), *New Creation Hymn Book*, 155.

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?'

Psalm 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.