

Job 38.1 – 42.6

Who alone can rescue?

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 20 August 2023

Job: Out of the Storm [10]

Out of the storm

For those of you who are visiting, or who have been asleep for three months, we've been studying the book of Job together since June. When I put the series together there were two sermons I was particularly looking forward to preparing: the one on chapter 19 – 'I know that my Redeemer lives' – and today's passage. You may have spotted from the first verse of the reading, it's why the series is called 'Out of the Storm'.

Finally, after all the back and forth between Job and his friends, after a poem about wisdom, after the young man Elihu warned Job about the danger he was in – finally after all that God himself speaks. There are two speeches and both begin the same way **J**:

J Then the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm.

Job 38.1 & 40.6 (NIV)

When God spoke to Elijah he didn't speak in the earthquake, wind or fire, but with a still small voice of calm. Sometimes that is how he speaks – but sometimes he speaks **out of the storm**. Sometimes God speaks in the thunder, as he did on Mount Sinai when he gave the Ten Commandments. Then as here God spoke directly, not via a prophet.

This is a 'sit up and listen' passage. This is the climax of the whole book, the bit we've been waiting for, the bit when God answers all Job's questions and explains everything and tells us how the world fits together and why there is suffering and evil and how he executes his perfect justice.

Pause

Except, that's not what happens. The Lord doesn't answer Job's agonised question, 'Why?' Instead he gives a much deeper and more profound response to Job's suffering.

God is God (38.1 – 40.5)

J This is King Alphonso X of Spain. He ruled in the thirteenth century and was nicknamed 'Alphonso the Learned'. Like so many of us, he thought he could do a better job of running the universe than God.

‘Had I been present at the creation,’ Alphonso the Learned said once, ‘I would have given some useful hints for the better order of the universe.’¹

Now, we might not say that out loud but many of us *think* or *act* like we know better than God, or could do a better job than him, or can ignore what he has to say, or don’t really need him at all, actually, until we have a problem of some sort.

God’s first speech is a reminder of a simple but profound truth: **God is God**. He isn’t an older or more powerful version of me, he isn’t just another person with a louder voice: he is **God**. Job needed to be reminded of that.

All along he had been protesting his innocence, and he was right to do so. But as Elihu warned him, some of what he said stepped over the line into pride and arrogance. God agrees **⌋**:

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

Job 38.2-3 (NIV)

Job has wished he could summon the Lord into the courtroom. But the Lord summons Job.² Out of the storm God says to Job, ‘You have been asking all these questions – but actually *I’m* going to question *you*.’ I counted 53 questions in God’s first speech...

‘Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?’ (38.4).

‘Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb... when I fixed limits for it... when I said, “This far you may come and no farther; this is where your proud waves halt?”’ (38.8-11).

‘Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water?’ (38.34).

God doesn’t say all this to belittle Job. By lifting Job’s eyes to see the beauty, the wonder, the order of creation, God shows Job has been wrong to say that the world is fundamentally evil. ‘No,’ God says, ‘When I made it **the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy**’ (38.7). It’s a beautiful picture.

But there’s another point that’s easy to miss. Job and his friends call God *El Shaddai*: ‘Almighty God’. And he is. But when God speaks to Job **out of the storm** he is given his covenant name for the first time since chapter 2: Yahweh (38.1, 40.6).

(When you're reading the Old Testament and see LORD written in small capitals it means the Hebrew word is 'Yahweh'.)

God is Almighty, Powerful, High and Exalted – he is all those things, but he is also Yahweh the God of the covenant, who calls his people by name, who acts out of love to save and to rescue.

'Remember who I am,' the LORD says: 'I am the Creator of the stars, and I made you. I **laid the earth's foundation** and I **fixed** the **limits** of **the sea**, and I know you by name. I am the One who is mighty, and I am the One who loves you.' **God is God.**

Evil is evil (40.6 – 41.34)

And yet there is still a problem. Christopher Ash puts it like this:

It is all very well for the Lord to be the good Creator of a good world. But what about the world we actually have to live in, a good world touched by darkness and death?

Christopher Ash, Out of the Storm, 92

The problem goes something like this: if God is all **good** he must *want* to remove suffering; if God is all **knowing** he must *know* about suffering; if God is all **powerful** he must be *able* to remove it – so given there *is* suffering, God can't be all three.³

Or, there is more to it than that, and the truth about the world can't be reduced to a simple philosophical argument.

On Friday the nurse Lucy Letby was convicted of murdering seven babies and attempting to murder six more. Yesterday the Daily Mail's front page included a police photo of her with the caption 'the eyes of evil'.⁴

I'm not sure I see evil in her eyes. I'm not sure what I see in her eyes to be honest – she looks so *ordinary*. But that's the point actually. She committed these evil crimes while living an ordinary life. Evil doesn't always look like Hitler or Stalin. Evil doesn't always look like a creepy loner. In fact it rarely does – far more often evil is hard to spot, hidden from sight.

In his second speech God unmasks the hidden evil that has been stalking Job's life: Behemoth and Leviathan.

Over the years much ink has been spilled over these two creatures in God's second speech. At first Behemoth sounds like a hippo, strong and powerful (40.16), lurking in the water (40.21-22). Leviathan sounds like a crocodile, with fearsome teeth (41.14) and scales (41.15).

But is that really the best God can do? ‘Hey Job, sorry about all that’s happened – but look, a hippo!’

Is the climax of the book of Job *really* a description of a crocodile?

Did Job end up repenting **in dust and ashes** (42.6) because God said he had made a couple of fearsome creatures?

Of *course* there is more to it than that.⁵

This is not the first time Leviathan appears in the book of Job. Back in chapter 3, which is the bleakest chapter of the book, Job wishes he’d never been born – never even conceived. He wishes the day of his birth could be erased from history. He wants the darkness to win, his life to be undone – and he calls on Leviathan to do all that (3.3-8). ‘Come on,’ Job says, ‘and finish the job.’ That doesn’t sound to me like something a crocodile can do. And anyway, whose hand had struck Job in the first place?

If we look more closely at these terrible creatures we get more clues. The name ‘Behemoth’ means something like ‘Superbeast’. And in 41.19-21 Leviathan breathes fire – it sounds like a dragon – who terrifies even angels (41.25). A Beast and a Dragon... now what does that remind you of? ¶ In Revelation they are pictures used to describe Satan and his servants, evil and destruction.

Now we begin to understand. These creatures are more than a hippo and a crocodile: they are pictures of the untameable and violent and destructive evil of Satan.

It's tempting to think that Satan's work was finished in chapter 2 when Job was afflicted **with painful sores** (2.7). After that verse he is never mentioned again by name. But his influence is all over the speeches that follow, whispering lies and half-truths into the ears of Job and his friends. In his craftiness Satan gives them images of his own evil *but makes them think it's God*. Sometimes Satan makes himself look like God – sometimes he makes us think God looks like Satan. But Evil is not God, **Evil is Evil**.

So now God exposes the evil at the heart of creation. At one point Job described a monster who **churned up the sea** (26.12) – he was talking about God but now he realises it's Leviathan who **makes the depths churn like a boiling cauldron** (41.31).

Job sees (42.1-6)

And so Job admits there is more to the world than he can possibly know (42.3). His view of God hasn't changed, but it has grown richer and deeper: **J 'My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you,'** he says (42.5).

But what has he seen?

God has exposed the great mystery of evil at the heart of creation.⁶ Behemoth the Beast and Leviathan the Dragon are not God's equal – they are creatures (40.15, 41.33): fearsome, terrible, far too much for us humans to handle, but creatures nonetheless.

Job's greatest fear is that the evil he has suffered is unrestrained, limitless – that either God is himself evil, or he can't do anything about it. But it is not.⁷ Even the frightening Leviathan is to God what pets are to us (41.5). The sea – another symbol for evil and chaos – has limits set by God (38.8-11).

Job has spent this whole time trying to justify himself – now he realises only God can do that; only God has the power not only to limit the power of evil, but also to bring good and life from even the worst suffering.⁸

This is not neat and tidy. It is not an explanation of why there is evil and death in the world. But it is hope – true hope – for evil is limited and God is greater. That is what Job sees, finally. He doesn't get the answer he wanted, but he gets what he needed: a vision of who God *really* is. So he says, **'My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you'** (42.5).

Who alone can rescue?

Today's title is 'Who alone can rescue?' The letter to the Hebrews puts it like this **§**:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil.

Hebrews 2.14 (NIV)

Evil and death **are too strong for me**⁹ – but they are not too strong for *him*. Behemoth the Beast and Leviathan the Dragon are terrifying – '**Nothing on earth is its equal**' (41.33) – but they cannot stand before our Father in heaven.

Don't try to save yourself: Leviathan is too strong for you; but God is greater. Only *he* can save. **§ Pause** Only *he* can rescue.

¹ See Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, 373.

² Christopher Ash, *Out of the Storm*, 91.

³ David Atkinson, *The Message of Job*, 153.

⁴ <https://www.thepaperboy.com/uk/daily-mail/front-pages-today?frontpage=71804>.

Retrieved 20/08/2023.

⁵ For the next section see Robert Fyall, *Now my eyes have seen you*, 119-174.

⁶ Fyall, 167.

⁷ Ash, *Storm*, 97.

⁸ Atkinson, 155.

⁹ Ash, *Wisdom*, 423.