

The magnificence of God

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[0 : 00] . Tonight, friends, we have the second to last in our series of seven studies or sermons on the book of Job.

And our title tonight is The Magnificence of God. The Magnificence of God. And the next Sunday evening, God willing, we'll be finishing in chapter 42, where the story has a remarkable and happy ending.

In the end, it's happiness by the pound. Tonight, we have just an ounce or two of happiness, but we've got to do a bit more wrestling and struggling before we even get to that.

Now, this evening, we're heading for chapter 41, which was read a few minutes ago. And I hope to spend the last part of the sermon in that chapter. But we need to survey the scene, first of all, from the end of chapter 28, which is the point that we reached last Sunday evening.

So you might like to turn back with me to chapter 28 and verse 28, page 435. Now, if you were here with us last week, you'll remember that we saw that chapter 28 makes the point that wisdom, wisdom with a capital W, the wisdom that structured the universe, the wisdom that sees and directs the beginning and end of all things, that kind of wisdom is not available to man.

[1 : 36] Chapter 28, verse 13 says that it is not to be found in the land of the living. It cannot be found. There's no access to it. And in the framework of the book of Job, there is no access either to the answer to Job's big question of why he, an innocent believer, should be suffering so terribly.

However, there is a wisdom, wisdom with a small W, which is available to men and women. And that is the subject of the final verse of chapter 28.

So let me read that final verse, which is where we ended last week. And God said to man, really to the whole of mankind, God said to man, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.

That is the lifestyle and mindset, mindset of wisdom, which Job has been practicing for many years. Because we learn back from chapter 1 that he is a man who fears the Lord and turns his back upon evil.

And the point of reiterating that command at this stage in the book of Job is to help Job to see that despite his terrible sufferings, he needs simply to continue to live like that.

[2 : 52] Suffering comes to Job. In Job's case, it's one hail of brutal bullets after the other. And yet the Lord says to him, and says to all of us, Go on fearing me, and go on turning your back upon evil.

And ultimately, in Job's case, that's exactly what he does go on doing. However, like any human sufferer in the real world, Job continues to go through turmoil and mental anguish.

Yes, he's heard chapter 28, verse 28. He knows that it comes to him as a divine command. But he's in so much pain of mind that he has to go on pouring out his soul before God and before anybody else who's listening, which, as far as we're concerned tonight, is us.

And thus we have his last major speech, which occupies chapters 29, 30, and 31. Now this is a tremendous speech. It is mighty poetry, and it's well worth reading through at a single sitting.

To summarize it, it's Job's final defense. It's as though we're in the divine law court. And Job is his own counsel for the defense.

[4 : 06] He hasn't hired a lawyer to speak for him. He speaks for himself. And he is seeking painstakingly and finally to establish his innocence before God.

Now in chapter 29, you might like just to run your eye over the chapter, he reminisces there about the good old days before his sufferings hit him.

So verse 2. Oh, that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me. This is the good old days. When his lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness.

As I was in my prime. When the friendship of God was upon my tent. When the Almighty was yet with me. You see his implication that God has now deserted me.

But he's thinking back to those days when, to his mind, God was still with him. When my children were all around me. Of course, now he's childless. They've all been killed. When my steps were washed with butter, and the rock poured out for me streams of oil.

[5 : 06] It's almost like the land of milk and honey, isn't it? When I went out to the gate of the city, when I prepared my seat in the square, and so on. So everything was lovely in the garden, in the good old days.

And he goes on to say that in these good old days, he was held in great honour in the community. He was regarded as, and he was indeed, a generous benefactor to the poor.

He defended the needy and the aliens. His words and his views were hugely valued. Now on to chapter 30. You see it begins with the word, but.

But now. So we suddenly turn a corner here. By contrast. Chapter 30. But those who used to look up to me, now mock me. Ne'er do wells.

Detest me. And spit in my face, he's saying. Verse 15. I'm overwhelmed by terrors. And verse 16. My soul is being poured out.

[6 : 05] It's as though my life is ebbing away. And worst of all, verse 20. I cry out to you, to God, for help. But you don't answer me. In fact, you've become my enemy.

Or so it seems. Verse 21. You've turned cruel to me. With the might of your hand, you persecute me. Now let me ask.

Who is it actually who is tormenting Job? It is, of course, Satan. We know that because we're told it clearly back in chapters 1 and 2. But Job doesn't realize who his real tormentor is.

And here he thinks, he still thinks, that it must be God. Now severe suffering can make us think that it is God who is against us. When in truth, it is Satan who is against us.

Yes, God allows Satan. God gives permission to Satan to hurt believing people. But the comforting thing is, as we'll see again later this evening, that God is utterly in control and will not permit Satan to gratify his ultimate wishes towards us.

[7 : 11] Now, of course, the ultimate wish of Satan towards any of us is to take us to the pit with him, where he is destined. Anyway, back to the text. In chapter 29, Job is saying, I'm longing for the good old days.

Chapter 30, look at the dreadful position I'm now in. And in chapter 31, he presents God with a quite remarkable challenge.

This is, you might say, the high point of his speech. And it is unbelievably daring. Now, the structure of chapter 31, starting at verse 5, there are several short sections.

And each short section is structured like this. If I have transgressed in such and such a way, then let me be punished in a way that fits my transgression.

Let me give just a few examples. Look with me at verses 5 to 8. If I have walked with falsehood and my foot has hastened to deceit. In other words, if I've treated other people badly and falsely, then, verse 8, let me sow and another eat, and let what grows for me be rooted out.

[8 : 21] So let me be done badly by in the end. Or verses 9 to 12. If my heart has been enticed towards another woman, another man's wife, if I've lain in wait for her at my neighbor's door, then, let my wife grind for another.

In other words, let the same thing be done to me. Let adultery be committed by some other man with my wife. Or verses 16 to 23. If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail.

In other words, if I have not been compassionate and merciful and kind towards needy people, then, and look at the punishment here, verse 22. Then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket.

Or verses 38 to 40 at the end of the chapter. If my land cries out against me, and its furrows have wept together, if I've eaten its yield without payment, and made its owners breathe their last.

In other words, if I have been a harsh, cruel agricultural landlord, he was a rich man, he had many tenant farmers working on his farms. Then he says, verse 40, let thorns grow instead of wheat, and foul weeds instead of barley.

[9 : 39] So Job is saying, my defense is that I've done none of these things at all. I've not dealt falsely with other people. I've not cheated on my wife. I've not treated my servants badly.

I've not turned away needy people. I've not put my trust in money, or gloated over my enemy's misfortune, or concealed my sin, or oppressed my tenant farmers. I am innocent. Now we turn to the critical verses, 35, 6, and 7, in that chapter. I am innocent, he's saying, but you are not listening to me.

Verse 35, oh that I had one, someone, to hear me. And then there comes this unbelievably daring moment, when halfway through verse 35, Job gets out his pen, so to speak, and puts his signature to his defense.

Here is my signature. Let the Almighty answer me. That's where he throws down the gauntlet. Let God answer me. Now friends, would you dare to speak to the Almighty like that?

[10:46] Job is not saying, please answer my prayer. These are not the pleading words of a humble supplicant. These are the challenging words of a man who is saying to God, there is my defense, in its full and final form.

Answer my defense, if you can, and prove me wrong, if indeed I am wrong. But if you can't answer my defense, then it's you who are in the wrong, and you should never have treated me like this. That's what he's saying. Do you remember, I think it was about eight years ago, when President Bill Clinton of America was impeached, when he was put on trial, when he was put on trial, and forced to face the questions of his interrogators, and the world looked on at this spectacle with a curious sense of the unreality and strangeness of the whole business.

That here was the most powerful man, politically, in the whole world, and yet he was being put in the dock and forced to defend himself. Now, of course, he was not innocent of the crimes that he was accused of, but here, it's no mortal who is put in the dock.

It's as though Job is bringing the Lord himself to trial, and forcing the Lord to defend himself.

Answer me, if you can, Job is saying, but if you can't, then it's I who am vindicated, and you who have acted wrongly.

[12:14] And then we read, at the very end of chapter 31, the words of Job are ended, and there is a pregnant pause. Will God answer him?

What happens next is rather odd. In the first verse of chapter 32, we learn that the three comforters who have had a great deal to say now have nothing more that they can say to Job.

Why? Because, verse 1, he was righteous in his own eyes. Just imagine their conversations together. Well, friends, we've tried, haven't we? But what can you do with a man like this?

You can't say right for saying wrong, can you? Nothing will convince Job that he's in the wrong, so we're best saying nothing. So, they shut up. And we hear no more about them until chapter 42.

Where God finally tells them that he's angry with them because they have not spoken rightly about him, as Job has. So, that's going to be the final verdict on all their speeches and on Job's speeches.

[13:22] But now, at this point, somebody else appears quite out of the blue. So, let me read from chapter 32, verse 2. Then Elihu, we haven't heard of him before, then Elihu, the son of Barakal, the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned with anger.

He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God. He burned with anger also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong.

Now, Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they, that's the three comforters, were older than he. And when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, he burned with anger.

So, we have this angry young man, Elihu, the son of Barakal, the Buzite. Now, I'm not going to linger over Elihu, although he deserves lingering over. And I say that because he has given no less than six full chapters in which to speak.

And that is more than any of the three comforters have been given. It's a little difficult to know just what to make of Elihu's contribution because God passes no assessment on it.

[14:35] As I said a moment ago, we know from chapter 42 what God's assessment is of the comforter's speeches, that is thumbs decidedly down, and we know what his view of Job's speeches is, and that is thumbs up.

But we have no divine comment on Elihu's speeches. So, next time you have a wet Wednesday afternoon, sitting at home with nothing to do, why not sit down with Elihu for half an hour and see if you can make out what contribution his words are making to the development of the book of Job.

I'll say no more about him than that, except to point out that as his speeches draw to a close, he begins to use the imagery of a thunderstorm approaching.

Maybe as the five men, Job and the three comforters and Elihu, maybe as these five are sitting together on the ash heap, storm clouds are gathering. In fact, chapter 38, verse 1, suggests that that may have been exactly what was happening at this point.

But let me read from Elihu, chapter 36, verse 32. Elihu 36, 32. He's speaking here about God.

[15:45] He covers his hands with the lightning. Maybe the lightning and the thunder is brewing up on the horizon. He commands it to strike the mark. Its crashing declares his presence.

The cattle also declare that he rises. Excuse me, I've got a frog. You know what cattle are like when there's a storm approaching? They can get restless and uneasy and perhaps start lowing.

I think that's what he's talking about. Now chapter 37. At this also my heart trembles and leaps out of its place. Keep listening to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth. Under the whole heaven he lets it go and his lightning to the corners of the earth. After it, after the lightning, count to five, count to ten, and his voice roars.

He thunders with his majestic voice and he does not restrain the lightnings when his voice is heard. God thunders wondrously with his voice. He does great things that we cannot comprehend.

[16:46] No wonder we get slightly nervous when we hear the thunder. Now time forbids me to read the whole chapter but if you glance down through the verses you'll see how Elihu builds up the imagery of storm and sky and wind until the moment in chapter 38 verse 1 when the one whom Job has challenged to answer him finally does answer him.

Then, verse 1, the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

Dress for action like a man. I will question you and you will answer me. You will make it known to me. Now we've had this electrifying moment, this almost unbelievable moment back in chapter 31 when Job has virtually impeached God and thrown down the gauntlet in the courtroom demanding that God answer him.

But when the Lord finally speaks we know immediately who is going to be questioning whom and it is not as Job had supposed. The tables you see are instantly turned.

Job has demanded an answer from God but all he gets is two chapters of questions and magnificent panoramic breathtaking questions they are too.

[18:08] Let me read the first few. Verse 4 in chapter 38. There's irony in some of these questions. 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? On what were its bases sunk?

Or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Now what human being can answer questions like that?

These initial questions take us back to the creation to the founding of the earth in verse 4 to the making of the oceans in verse 8 Then verse 22 takes us up into the Himalayas and the rocky mountains.

Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail? The places where they're kept high up presumably. Verses 29 and 30 take us to the frozen poles from whose womb did the ice come forth.

[19:12] Verse 31 takes us right up into space amongst the constellations the Pleiades and Orion the Maseroth and the bear with its children its cubs. Then verse 39 takes us to the plains of Africa.

Can you hunt the prey for the lion or satisfy the appetite of the young lions? And then chapter 39 is a zoological survey. We consider the wild goats and the deer the wild donkey and ox the ostrich the war horse the cliff dwelling hawk and the whole of these two chapters are a barrage of questions launched at Job one exorset after another.

And what happens? Chapter 40 And the Lord said to Job Shall a fault finder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God let him answer it.

Then Job answered the Lord and said Behold I'm of small account what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth I've spoken once and I will not answer twice but I will proceed no further.

You see how the tables have been turned and how deeply Job is being humbled. Well let's stand back from the text for a moment and try to see what is going on.

[20 : 39] The big question in Job's mind right the way through has been the question to the Lord Are you running this universe properly? Or even are you a fit person to be running this universe? Here you are supposedly in control but look at what you've allowed to happen to my life and I'm a believer I'm one of your people my once happy life is in shreds do you really know what you're doing?

However in a very real sense God's barrage of questions to Job does constitute an answer to Job's question to God in chapters 38 and 39 God is saying to Job look around you Job at the wonderful planet and at the universe and look at all its varied life forms and creatures are you God? Did you make all these things? Because if you are God then I will happily step down and hand over the running of the universe to you wasn't there a film called Bruce Almighty a year or two ago where somebody called I didn't see it but I think somebody called Bruce was given the powers of the almighty for a short time and discovered it was pretty hard to run the universe much harder than he'd expected you see the Lord is saying but Job you are not almighty are you?

So what makes you think that you could run things better than I can? Well the two chapters go straight home like a shaft into Job's heart and that's why he says in chapter 40 verses 4 and 5 you're right I'm unworthy I have nothing to say in reply apparently in 1945 just before Clement Attlee won a landslide general election victory which surprisingly ousted Winston Churchill from power Mr. Attlee had a lot of difficulty with a man called Professor Harold Lasky who was the chairman of the Labour Party at that time and Professor Lasky kept on writing to Mr. Attlee telling him how to do his job and more or less saying do it as I suggest or resign well in his reply to one of these irksome letters Attlee ended by writing a period of silence from you would now be most welcome well perhaps chapters 38 and 39 are the Lord's way of saying thank you Job for the many chapters of your speeches in which you've been telling me how to run the universe a period of silence from you would now be most welcome and that's exactly what happens chapter 40 verse 5

[23 : 19] I've spoken once and I will not answer twice but I will proceed no further so the point of chapters 38 and 9 is not merely to humble Job but to teach him a strengthening lesson and the lesson is that if God and God alone knows how to create the universe and all its teeming life forms and if God and God alone has the power to run this amazing planet and universe then he can be trusted to know what he is doing in Job's life and in your life and in my life Job was suffering terribly he had lost all ten of his children almost all his property all his standing in society all his friends had deserted him even his wife found him offensive his health was in ruins and yet God was telling him that the creator of the universe could be trusted not to make any mistakes he hasn't made a single mistake in my life or in your life now there's the first lesson

I'd like us to draw from tonight's study the creator can be trusted in everything that he does and everything that he allows now one more lesson more briefly from chapter 41 you'll see that chapter 40 when God begins to speak and to challenge Job deals with the behemoth you see behemoth mentioned there in chapter 15 if you look at your footnote there it says a large animal exact identity unknown I think some Bibles are a little bit more bold at this point and say probably the hippopotamus so if behemoth is the hippopotamus we'll leave him to laze in the Limpopo river for tonight and we'll leave him undisturbed but chapter 41 is about another creature who is called Leviathan now the \$64,000 question is who or what is Leviathan again there's a footnote a large sea animal exact identity unknown if you have a new international version I think the footnote says possibly the crocodile doesn't want to be too committed but says possibly with a crocodile now when you read in verse 15 that his back is made of rows of shields shut up closely as with a seal and when you read in verse 30 that his underparts are like sharp potsherds and in verse 31 he makes the deep boil like a pot he does sound very crocodilish but when you look at verse 19 and 20 and 21 out of his mouth go flaming torches sparks of fire leap forth out of his nostrils comes forth smoke as from a boiling pot and burning rushes his breath kindles coals and a flame comes forth from his mouth when you read that he seems to be more like a mythological fire breathing dragon and in the first few verses of chapter 41 it seems that the

Lord is asking Job if he is able to tame this beast but what beast is it that Job is being asked if he can tame or tie down or make a pet out of I think the chapter strongly hints that we may be dealing with something more than a crocodile here and other Bible passages make things rather clearer so Psalm 74 says to God you broke the heads of the sea monsters you crushed the heads of Leviathan the sea you'll probably know this but the sea in Bible imagery represents chaotic anti-God forces and the serpent like Leviathan is somehow involved in these forces of disintegration

which oppose God within the book of Job itself at chapter 3 verse 8 remember Job was cursing the day of his birth in that chapter and he says may those who curse days curse that day those who are ready to rouse Leviathan now to rouse

Leviathan surely is to call upon God's arch enemy the prince of darkness to come and undo part of God's creation the same imagery reappears in Isaiah chapter 27 in that day the Lord will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent Leviathan the twisting serpent and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea now surely we are dealing here with the old serpent in another guise the old serpent whose malevolent activity runs right the way through the book of Job and is the cause of Job's sufferings runs right the way through the Bible of course and look at the ironic questions that God puts to Job in the first seven verses of the chapter can you catch him can you tie him up can you tame him can you put him on a leash for your little girls verse five my little girls at home have been longing for a pet puppy a dog for about two years they've been lobbying us and finally we've given in what would they have thought if I brought them a ten foot crocodile on a leash now the point is that Job hasn't a hope of subduing Leviathan what man is a match for God's arch enemy look at the way that Leviathan is described in the very last verse of the chapter he sees everything that is high he is king over all the sons of pride which is just like the New Testament description of the devil do you remember how Jesus speaks of him as the ruler of this world and Paul calls him the prince of the power of the air so the purpose of chapter 41 is to make Job realize how awesomely powerful his enemy the devil is can you take him on Job can you tame him can you put him in his place of course you can't but I can and in a sense the chapter reaches its climax in verse 10 no one is so fierce that he he a man dares to stir

Leviathan up who then is he who can stand before me and you see the logic there it moves from the lesser to the greater if no man is able to take on Leviathan how much less can anyone take on God what is Leviathan verse 33 he is but a creature but God is the creator so these chapters are a magnificent self-revelation of the power and glory of God and Job begins to see and in chapter 42 he acknowledges his ignorance and his rashness in challenging and doubting God and we can only imagine that he begins to feel great comfort and great gratitude that the fierce enemy who has brutally attacked him is utterly under the control of the universe's creator and from our perspective this side of the cross our New Testament perspective we can see it even more clearly than Job was able to so for example in Hebrews chapter 2 we read that the son of God became a man so that [31 : 04] I quote through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death that is the devil through his death he has destroyed the devil the one who has the power of death so friends let's take these two great truths home this evening first that the creator can be trusted to make no mistakes in our lives and secondly that Leviathan God's arch enemy is no match for the creator our lives like Job's may go through times of great pain when it seems as though all the joys and the blessings and the ease and the delights have vanished and there's no prospect of recovery it's as though winter has come and spring seems an impossibly far away dream but the book of Job is in the Bible to teach us that in our darkest times not only can we hold on to God we must hold on to him

Job was filled with joy again later joy in this life and we'll see that next week now that may happen to some believers to others restoration has to wait until the world to come but whether it's now in this life or then in the great future the lesson is that God can be trusted and that ultimately the evil one has no power over those who belong to the Lord let's bow our heads and praise him for the first time we just talked about we've used our of our of and we a our and c and as we have been Bye Bye and we Low wellness as pockets Greg Pra P we cameraman