

July 22, 2007

Humbled by the Awesome Power of God
Isaiah 44:6-11 / Isaiah 64:1-4 / Job 38:34-39:30

Last week we saw that God's initial response to Job in chapter 38 was to point him to the absolute perfection and uncanny precision with which He established "the place, the foundation, and the dimensions of the earth." And the point of God doing that (I believe) was His way of saying this to Job:

"If I so perfectly planned the dimensions of the earth — its diameter, circumference, and precise place in the universe so that all things necessary to sustain life were so flawlessly laid out and set in place, how could you, Job, possibly think that I would be so mistaken in terms of the things I ordain, allow or permit to take place on it?"

THAT seems to be the gist of God's response to Job last week. Just as God alone knows how and why things had to be exactly as they are in terms of the flawless design of creation, so also God alone knows why He permitted Job (and countless other God-fearing people like him) to suffer as they have.

Such a precise God wouldn't create the universe with such flawless precision and perfection, and then leave what happens in that universe to mere chance or arbitrary forces.

There's a reason for everything that happens. / Things are the way they are for a reason. / There is a purpose behind everything God does, allows or permits, even if He alone is able to comprehend and understand those purposes and reasons.

In other words, God's "answer" to Job, which comes by way of questions and not answers, is that God alone knows why He permits the suffering of the righteous — or the suffering of those He loves so dearly....such as Job and countless others like him.

And as we move on into chapter 39 today, God continues to respond in a similar fashion (though coming at it from a slightly different angle). His purpose is twofold: *To once again magnify the glories of His own limitless power, wisdom and creative genius evidenced in and through creation, but also, in doing so, vicariously humble Job by pointing out Job's obvious lack of such power, wisdom and creative genius.*

It reminds me of what used to be the stated purpose of all preaching in Lutheran churches: "To humble the sinner, and exalt the Savior."

That appears to be the purpose of God here — to exalt the infinite wonders and glories of His own being, and by so doing simultaneously humble Job (and of course, us along with him).

And why do we need to be humbled? Because sometimes (as was the case with Job) we can come to the point where we actually begin to think we are wiser, know more, or could run this world better than God! That God has messed up, or made mistakes, or done things wrong, or permitted and ordained things he should never have permitted or ordained, and that we would be much better designers and much better rulers of this universe than He has been.

From what I hear as I listen to people talk, had it been up to us — if we were the ones in charge — the righteous would never suffer / children would never die / sickness, illness and hardships would be done away with / crime, wars, and violence would completely cease / natural disasters would never occur / and even the effects of aging would be done away with.

In other words, if WE designed everything, everything would be perfect! — Even though we'd have no idea how to make that happen apart from totally altering the nature of nature, and the nature of people!

Making everything into a world of controlled objects that adhere to no laws, suffer no consequences, possess no liberty, have no autonomy, and exercise no free agency! That is, apart from making a plastic world inhabited by non-thinking robots!

Gwinne Dyer, an English newspaper journalist, once wrote an article entitled: "A Cruel Universe, but the Only One Where Humans Could Exist." And from a Christian perspective I don't agree with everything she says. But she does make some points worth considering.

Thus I'd like to ask you to listen as I read what she wrote. It's lengthy, and I know "preachers aren't supposed to read lengthy quotes!" Sorry, but it fits well with today's message (even though its not, as you'll see, written from a Christian perspective)! But it has enough good points to warrant your hearing it! She says this:

"Why do babies die? Why do people starve to death in famines? Why is the universe so cruel, taking some away before they even had a chance to enjoy life, while others have long, happy lives and die peacefully in bed? Religious people call it "the problem of evil." If God is all powerful, why does he allow such horror and pain in His universe? A god who deliberately allowed Auschwitz and the killing fields of Cambodia to happen

would not deserve our love, or even our respect—and if he couldn't prevent them, then he isn't all powerful.

Cardinal Basil Hume, an English clergyman, was recently asked why God permitted such things by a journalist as they stood in the middle of an Ethiopian refugee camp. Hume had the honesty to answer that he had "no idea," more sophisticated men of religion, whether Christian, Muslim or Jewish, might give longer answers that sounded plausible—but they are all answers that go around in circles. If you don't believe in God, of course, then there is no philosophical problem. The universe is impersonal, human beings are on their own, and terrible things happen to them for the same reason they happen to fruit flies: no reason at all except blind chance. But even non-believers often wish the universe were a kinder, more forgiving environment. Yet the answer is: It can't be. It is an answer that applies equally to a universe created by a loving God and to a Godless universe which doesn't care about people at all. Any universe which could conceivably be a habitat for human beings must be one in which events have predictable consequences—even if those consequences include terrible tragedies for human beings.

Imagine, for a moment, a universe in which tragedies didn't happen. When the engines of a jet fail on takeoff, it does not crash at the end of the runway and (kill all 150 people aboard). Instead, it just wafts gently to the ground, because God loved the passengers and chose to save them. But if that were all that happened when aircraft engines failed, there would be no need for aircraft maintenance. Indeed, there would be no need for engines, or even wings—and people could safely step off the edge of cliffs and walk on air. The law of gravity would be suspended whenever it endangered human lives. So would all the other laws of nature. Whenever children's lives were at risk from disease, biochemistry would change its rules to save them. If an earthquake were going to kill thousands of people, continental drift would simply have to stop: so much for geology. And if someone tried to kill somebody else, the gun wouldn't work, or the bullet wouldn't fly straight, or it would turn into a marshmallow before it struck the victim.

In such a universe, there could be no science or technology, because there would be no fixed natural laws on which we could base them. The strength of steel and the temperature of boiling water would vary depending on whether human lives were threatened by any given value. There could be no logic, since the same causes would not invariably have the same effects. It would be an entirely magical universe. It's all a package and quite indivisible. Either you have a magical Garden of Eden where non-human creatures closely resembling angels, with no hard choices to make and no penalties to pay, browse idly on lotus leaves, or else you get the remorselessly logical

universe we live in, where actions have consequences and you pay dearly for your own mistakes (and those of others). I know there is little consolation in all this for those who have had to watch helplessly while their child died, or for the millions whose loves and hopes lie 40 years buried (now 62 years buried) with the last world war. It can be a cruel universe, and knowing why doesn't make it less cruel. But even God could not have made it any different if he wanted it to be an appropriate home for human beings."

Now, from a Christian perspective it would be better to say that the universe isn't cruel, though cruel things do happen in it, and that an all powerful God is worthy of our love, respect and praise, even if He has or does allow such things as Auschwitz, 9/11 or the killing fields of Cambodia.

That's the **FIRST** thing we can learn from these verses. It's not that God is unloving if He allows such things, nor is it that He can't possibly be Almighty if He permits such things. It's that we must trust that being a God as infinite and wise as He is, there is a reason behind all He does or allows — even if we, for the life of us, cannot understand what that reason might be. That English clergyman was right. In the face of certain things we must simply reply: "I have no idea. God alone knows."

That's not a cop out. It's godly humility admitting our human inability to fathom a mystery that only the infinite mind of an eternal God can grasp.

Though we as human beings always seem to at least want the chance to understand it, don't we? Even though these chapters in Job are basically telling us:

That to do so would require such an infinite grasp of all the inter-connected issues having to do with things visible and invisible / natural and supernatural / past, present and future (encompassing laws, and principles, and principalities, and powers, and actions, and reactions; the dividing and blending, fission and fusion of elements and non-elements; matter and anti-matter — both in the material and spiritual realms) that we as finite human beings couldn't comprehend it even if God plainly laid it all out for us — *because the finite human mind can never fully grasp an understanding of the infinite ways of God.*

And thus God asks us to consider: If He used such mind-boggling, personal care and oversight to make sure the earth, and the universe in which He placed it, were established with such uncanny perfection and precision, do you think He would then leave what happens in it to mere chance or arbitrary, impersonal, forces—to a mere role of the dice?

Would He do everything so right when it came to creating the world, and then do things wrong when it came to overseeing what happened in that creation?

Would it not be wiser to suggest (even if you went by logic alone) that things are still the way they must be, even if we can't comprehend why they must be the way they are — in this season, or for this time in redemptive history.

Things will not always remain this way — there will come a time for the people of God when there will be no more tears or pain or sickness or suffering! But during this present age, and for this period of redemptive history, God has ordained (for reasons known only to Him) that suffering, sickness, pain, death and tears be part of the human experience — even if we would prefer they were not. Even if we think it's a mistake to allow it!

Then **SECOND**, in verses 34-38 God is telling Job He is sovereign over all the things that happen in creation — including the weather. It is He who sends the lightning bolts on their way (v. 35). It is to Him that they report (v. 35b). He endowed the human heart with wisdom and the mind with understanding (v. 36). He knows the number of the clouds and causes the rains (the water jars of heaven) to fall when the earth is dry and in need of watering. God oversees all those things, to the point that we can say like Amos in chapters 3-4, that what the weather does, God does.

Likewise in verses 39-41, God tells us it is He who provides for the lioness and her lion cubs in the den. He even provides food for the raven to feed her young when they instinctively “cry out to God and wander about for lack of food.” (v. 41).

It sounds amazingly similar to what Jesus said when he spoke of the sparrows and said: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father... So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”

You see, it's essentially the same exact message: ***If not even an insignificant little bird (like a sparrow) can fall to the ground apart from God willing it to happen (apart from the will of your Father as Matthew puts it) then do you really think anything can happen to you (who are worth much more than many sparrows) apart from Him willing or permitting it?***

If He provides food for even irritating birds like ravens, or crows, when their young call out to Him for food, don't you think He hears you when you call out to Him? If He listens even to the cries of young birds when they suffer the pangs of hunger, don't you think He hears you when you cry out to him in your sufferings?

Like the sparrow He may “will” that it falls to the ground, for reasons known only to Him. But don't be deceived: He's there and He's well aware of everything that's happening — even to a little bird off in the forest that no one sees!

So don't be afraid — Nothing can happen to you apart from the will of Your Father in heaven. Nothing! And just knowing that should enable us to face our sufferings with an entirely different outlook or perspective!

WHY? Because we KNOW from His Word that if He permits it, and chooses not to intervene to change it, we who have “greater worth (to Him) than many sparrows” can be assured He does so for a reason, even if that reason is known only to Him.

Just as a COMMANDER who sees the whole picture, does not always tell the soldier every reason why the mission he is being sent on is of such grave importance that he must RISK or even LOSE his life to accomplish it, so also GOD who sees the even greater picture does not always tell us why we must suffer — though we know that a God who is so intimately involved in the affairs of this world that not even a sparrow can fall to the earth apart from His permitting it to happen, would not permit our suffering if it were not for a purpose. *God is too precise to let anything happen for nothing!*

Scripture makes it clear: “Nothing can happen to any of God's children unless it first passes through the filter of God's sovereign, personal, loving, holy and just oversight of our lives — lives we were given that we might honor Him and somehow fulfill a purpose in His eternal plan of redemption.

The **LAST**, we find that even the “apparent mistakes” in creation, or it's “flaws” have a reason, place and purpose as well. After pointing out the uncanny agility and strength of the mountain goat / and the uncanny durability of the wild donkey who can survive on almost nothing in the wastelands / and the wild ox who is so strong he's like a machine plowing furrows and bringing in cart loads of grain to the threshing floors / He then turns Job's attention to the **ostrich** — a bird whose wings flap joyfully but have absolutely no ability to lift her 300 pound body off the ground! A bird with tremendously undersized wings and can't fly!!

A bird so dumb she lays her eggs on the ground “unmindful that she may step on them and crush them.”(v. 14-15) A bird that “treats her young harshly as if they were not her own” — (that is, a mother who has no mothering skills)! (v. 16) “God,” we are told, “did not endow her with wisdom, or give her a share of good sense.” She's simply a downright dumb animal! (v. 17)

Interesting, isn't it? Why would God point to an animal that seems to contradict everything He's been saying up to this point? — That He makes no mistakes, and does everything with exacting precision?! I mean if I were trying to convince the skeptic of God's creative wisdom and genius, I would not have pointed out the ostrich—but God does!

WHY? Because He wants us to know that even the ostrich (silly looking as it is, with wings too small to carry its weight, and dumber than a hoe) — still has unique gifts, serves a particular function, and fulfills a specific purpose in the created order.

Consider this:

The ostrich is the second fastest animal in the entire world (and the fastest 2 legged animal)! It can run 45 miles an hour, and sustain that speed for up to 30 minutes—leaving horse and rider in the dust! As v.18 states: "When she spreads her feathers to run, she laughs at horse and rider!" (Can't you just picture all those majestic, muscular, proud, sleek, horses with multi-million blood lines racing at the Kentucky Derby, and then picture a spiny legged, funny looking, dumb ostrich leaving them all in the dust!!)

But that's not all. Ostriches produce the strongest commercially available leather in the world and some of the most beautiful feathers. Their meat is very low in cholesterol and calories, being almost fat free. Ostrich farming is one of the most open, free range farming alternatives available anywhere in the world today!

They have the best feed to weight gain ratio of any land animal in the world; are one of the only environmentally friendly animals in the world (doing almost no damage and requiring only about two thirds of an acre to feed and breed three adult birds). They can be successfully farmed from the coldest climates of Alaska to the hottest climates of equatorial Africa, and have one of the most advanced immune systems known to mankind.

20,000 products are made from ostriches, which is why current prices for eggs or hatched chicks are \$1,000 to \$1,500! A pair of yearlings are \$17,000 to \$25,000 proven breeders are \$45,000 to \$90,000 per pair — for ostriches! (Anyone looking to start a new career?!)

They may **LOOK** like a "mistake," but wise people are now finding that their meat is some of the most healthy, and provides good protein at little cost. They are highly resistant to disease, flourish in nearly any climate, require little care or land to graze, do little damage to their environment, are faster than all their predators (except the cheetah), produce the strongest leather and some of the prettiest feathers!

So, why would God throw the dumb and somewhat odd looking OSTRICH into the mix of such magnificent animals as the powerful OX, the majestic HORSE, the stately EAGLE, and the flawlessly designed HAWK... (which, by the way, is so aerodynamically perfect in its design that it can do aerial dives at 120 mph, and has the best vision of nearly any animal alive — having one million photo-receptors per square mm in the retina as opposed to humans who have only 200,000 / a second set of eye muscles not found in other animals / and an indented fovea which magnifies the central part of the visual field and acts like mini- binoculars)?

Why throw the ostrich into the mix?

Because God wants us to KNOW that even things that appear to be “mistakes” (like the ostrich and the suffering of His saints) serve a purpose in the overall plan of God — even if (during this present age) He alone knows what that reason is!

In other words: *Even what “appear” to be “mistakes” are not mistakes!*

That (I believe) is the point of verses 13-18, along with this — If God being all-wise, all-knowing, and all-powerful, chooses to allow His beloved children to suffer, we must simply learn to trust (or struggle to trust) that it is no mistake either — and train our hearts to rest in the assurance of that truth.