

August 26, 2007
 What On Earth Is God Talking About?!
 Isaiah 26:20-27:1 / Revelation 20:1-6 / Job 40:14-41:34

I must begin by saying that I probably put in as much research preparing this message as I have on any message I've ever preached, and I usually do 6- 8 hours research for every sermon!

I did that, because as you probably noted, it's hard to know exactly what God is talking about in these verses!

He appears (in chapter 40:15-24) to be speaking about a Hippopotamus. That's what most scholars believe God is describing in these verses — and I agree. Others have suggested a Rhinoceros, except for the fact that the "behemoth" here (which in the Hebrew simply means "beast"), is said to "lie hidden among the reeds of the marsh." "The poplars by the stream surround him," and "when the river rages he is not alarmed. He is secure, though the Jordan should surge against his mouth." (vv. 21, 22 and 23).

Thus we are dealing with a massively strong animal whose "bones are like tubes of bronze" and lives in and around rivers or marshes — a hippopotamus being the best guess! And that's all we can do – take the evidence we have in the text and make an educated guess.

And what's God's purpose in bringing this hippo to Job's attention? It is to assure Job (who would have been well aware of the massive strength of a hippo) that he was too weak and feeble, as a human being, to capture or control such a massive beast (though for God, the task would have been as simple as snapping His fingers—so to speak).

God's point is simply this: He can control and master things that we, in our wildest dreams, never could. Match the strength of a man against the strongest of God's creatures (a hippo, rhinoceros, or elephant) and man's strength is woefully inferior by comparison. A truth that should further humble Job.

Then we move on to chapter 41, and come to the next "creature" (leviathan). And when we do, we find we have a much harder time trying to identify just what leviathan is — though it does appear to be a creature as well.

At first (in light of verses 1-11 of chapter 41) it seems it might be a whale. But then in light of verses 12-17 others have suggested it is an Enormous Nile Crocodile — its mouth like a door ringed with fearsome teeth and scales on his back so close together that no air can pass between (vv. 14-15).

His form is strong yet graceful. He's made to slither gracefully through the water, leaving a glistening wake as he goes, and then churning up the water when it attacks its prey (vv. 31-32). An animal no one would dare approach with a bridle (v. 13) – at least not if they want to live!

But when we get to verses 18-33 we realize we are wrong on both accounts! For neither a whale nor a crocodile “throw out flashes of light with their snorting” (v. 18). They don't have “eyes like rays of the dawn,” and “firebrands don't stream from their mouths, or smoke from their nostrils” (v. 20). Their breath does not “set coals ablaze,” nor do “flames dart from their mouths” (v. 21).

Some have suggested it's a dinosaur, but it's obvious that just like the whale or the crocodile, fire-breathing qualities do not, and never have, belonged to ANY animal including dinosaurs (though some have fancifully tried to suggest it)! That would be reading into the text something it doesn't support it.

No, anyone reading the text in a literal sense would have to conclude that what God is describing is some sort of huge, sea dwelling, and fire-breathing dragon!

And that's the **KEY** to correctly understanding what we are dealing with in this passage. It's a creature, but it's not an animal! It's something God did create, but not something any human being has ever seen walking the face of the earth! It's a monster of mythical proportions who “breathes fire out of its mouth” and “makes the depths churn like a boiling caldron” (v. 31) — a huge dragon-like creature who lives in the murky depths and of whom God can say: “Nothing on earth is his equal” (v. 33).

And as if that were not enough to clue us in to what is being spoken of here in this text, God gives us the ultimate clue in verse 34 where He tells us that leviathan: “Is king of all who are proud.”

Who or what, then, then is God speaking about? Satan! With no prior warning, God has switched from literal to a metaphorical description. With no prior warning He has turned from describing a creature that inhabits the visible world to a creature that inhabits the invisible world.

And He does so by using the same exact form of “symbolic picture-language” that He also uses in the Book of Revelation, where we read: *“And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for 1000 years.”*

Isaiah makes the same connection between Satan and Leviathan in chapter 27 verse 1, where he promises that on the Day of Judgment God “will punish with His sword...Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent, He will slay the monster of the sea.”

“Nowhere,” says Norman Habel in his Commentary on Job, “does Leviathan ever appear as an ordinary animal.” “He churns up the ocean’s deeps and makes them seethe in turmoil; he thereby reveals his character as a symbol of chaos and subterranean fury.... Chaos is stirred when he is aroused.... Leviathan is the king of chaos and invincible. No one from “on the dust” (that is, “no one on the face of the earth”) can dominate this monster...”

No one, of course, except God! That’s God’s answer to Job here in these verses. It’s His answer to “the problem of evil.” There is (God tells us) a created being — a personal, powerful, insidious, planning, scheming, creature which the Bible calls Lucifer, the devil, Satan, the Dragon, or Leviathan and he wreaks havoc and chaos on the earth. Evil is NOT and NEVER HAS BEEN the mere absence of good! I get so TIRED of hearing that irrational suggestion!

And LISTEN: The thought that evil is so powerful and personal and scheming and insidious would be unbearably frightening, were it not for the fact that God also tells us in this passage that He is sovereign over evil and in total control of it (which is exactly what Job goes on to affirm in chapter 42 verse 2).

“Nothing on EARTH is leviathan’s equal,” says God. Satan has no rivals on the face of the earth! He is more powerful than any other created being! Even Michael the Archangel, we are told in Jude 9, “Did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said “The Lord rebuke you.” And the thought of that can be quite unnerving!!

But don’t be fooled, because this passage also tells us Lord of Heaven and earth “owns him!” “Everything under heaven belongs to Me,” says God (v. 11b), after which He immediately goes on to describe, or include, leviathan or Satan! That’s God’s whole point in this final response to all Job’s questions. In chapter 9 verse 23, Job had said, *“When a scourge brings sudden death, (God) mocks the despair of the innocent. When the land falls into the hands of the wicked, he blindfolds its judges. If not He then who is it ?”*

And today, after waiting so long, Job finally gets his answer! Who has been torturing and afflicting him? Who is the one that wreaks havoc and chaos on the earth?

Leviathan. The Evil one. The King of Chaos and havoc who stirs up the dark depths like a caldron, and glides under the surface of the depths like a serpent — hidden from our view and visible only when he stirs up evil, or stirs up the sea like a pot of ointment.

You see, here in this chapter God settles once and for all the lingering and persistent misconception (or superstition) held by so many people:

That somehow Satan and God are two powers of equal magnitude “duking it out in the heavens,” with God winning on some occasions, and Satan winning other occasions!

God’s response to such an assertion (or such silliness) is this:

Leviathan (or Satan) is a created being and therefore limited in knowledge, power, and essence. God, on the other hand, is the uncreated Creator, and therefore unlimited in knowledge, power, and essence.

God is omniscient — He knows all things — including your thoughts before you think them, your feelings before you feel them, and your actions before you perform them! He knows EVERYTHING — including the end from the beginning, and every-thing in between! Satan does not! In fact, Satan does not know the future, and therefore can’t know how we will respond to trials and suffering or temptation. In the beginning of Job he had said, “Stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.” But Job didn’t — not only revealing Satan’s inability to know the future, but also heaping shame and humiliation upon him again!

Satan is mighty — “on earth is not his equal,” as Luther wrote quoting verse 33 from today’s text. But God is MORE mighty! God is Almighty! He is omnipotent, where Satan, by comparison to Him, is impotent!

The same is true for Satan’s essence. Satan must “roam about,” limited as he is in space and time, while God is everywhere at all times, limited by nothing and even inhabiting eternity! God is infinite, Satan is finite.

Which means this — and this is Job’s comfort: That between God and Satan there is a bridgeless chasm of difference! There is not even the slightest comparison! God rules, Satan obeys! God decrees, Satan submits! God commands and lays down the limits Satan must abide by, and

Satan must in abject humiliation, come before God and coweringly ask permission before he can wreak havoc or cause any chaos. And even then He must abide by every limitation God places upon him in that regard (as we saw in chapter's 1-2, and Job will soon affirm in chapter 42:2).

"In Chapter 41," says Mike Mason, "God finally reveals to Job who it is that has been torturing him. Moreover, the Lord here makes the distinction once and for all between His own power, which is uncreated and therefore unlimited, and the power of Leviathan which, as sweeping and unparalleled as it may be, is nevertheless a created power and therefore one with strict limits. By painting metaphorically so sublime and impressive a portrait of the Devil, God is only doing what He has done all along with Job, and all along throughout the history of the world: giving the Devil his due. God allows evil, for now, to have its day, and even gain the upper hand and grow greater and greater, to the point that it may seem to have completely obscured the very memory of everything that is good. Why does God do this? He does it so that in the end, when He finally steps in and crushes Satan's head, His victory over evil will be all the more astounding and glorious, and so that all those who have put their faith in Him will be filled with an exceedingly greater joy than would have been possible in any other way."

"God could have exterminated Lucifer," says Erwin Lutzer, pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, "crushing him with raw power. Or he could have banished him to another planet...in a dark corner of a far-off galaxy... Then again, God could have thrown him into the lake of fire immediately. That too would have been fair and just. But God decided to use Lucifer (whom we now call Satan) to demonstrate truths that would have been permanently hidden if evil had not entered the universe."

The purpose in God creating was the display of His glory, and His glory is displayed in the revelation of all God's multi-faceted perfections and attributes, like His holiness, hatred of sin, wrath, righteousness, judgment, justice, mercy, forgiveness, healing, kindness and uncanny grace!

Had there not been a "Fall" — had the "evil one" not been set loose to tempt and distort and incite chaos, we would know nothing of those perfections! That is, the "glory" of God revealed in those attributes would have been forever hidden, thus thwarting one of the main purposes of creation and redemption—the revelation and display of ALL God's perfections.

In that sense, though disarmed and mortally wounded, and with his eventual defeat unavoidable, *"the ruler of this world,"* says Lutzer, *"stands as a final witness to the fact that no creature who fights against the Creator will win. No will pitted against the will of God will ever find*

permanent fulfillment and freedom. God has proved that He alone rules, and beside Him there is no other. The devil rules today, but only by divine decree. He tempts us, but only to the extent that God chooses to grant him his wish. He destroys, but only as God approves of such destruction. He stalks proudly about, but only as far as God will let him.... (He) exists as God's instrument for justice for the disobedient, and God's means of purification for the obedient. Our war with him teaches us about the nature of sin, the holiness of God, and our helplessness apart from Grace."

What has Job learned from his extended trial? What has God taught him by telling him that the frightfully powerful "leviathan" or "Satan" belongs to Him?

Job tells us in verse two of the very next chapter: *"I know you can do all things, no plan of yours can be thwarted."* Or maybe we could add one word: "I NOW know you can do all things, no plan of yours can be thwarted."

No created being, no human army, no weapon formed against Him, no principality or power in the heavenly realms can prevail to thwart any plan God has devised! Our plans always seem to get thwarted, and so we fear that God's plans do too! (Probably because we have all too often made the mistake of assuming our plans are God's plans, and when they don't work out we assume God's plans were thwarted!)

Likewise, if we think of God and Satan as two powers of equal might, knowledge, wisdom and power it's easy to understand how we could think God's plans could be thwarted by him!

But that's precisely the MISCONCEPTION this book seeks to eradicate! God (says Job after hearing of His sovereign power and rule over Satan) can do ANYTHING! NOTHING He purposes to do can ever, in any way, be thwarted because even the Evil One—powerful as he is—is merely a created being who belongs to God, must ultimately obey Him and submit to all His decrees!!

Even when it LOOKS like God's purposes are being thwarted, it is only because the veil is drawn, and we cannot peer into the heavenly councils of God! Because if we could we would see how God is actually using the chaos and catastrophe's we face, and see in this world, to actually bring about the completion His perfect plan!

Just as the disciples THOUGHT Satan had won when they saw their Messiah hanging there on the cross — just as everything looked so bleak and hopeless and darker than the blackest night when Jesus breathed His last breath on the cross, and anyone observing the situation thought

that Satan had won — so also we will discover what they did — that apparent defeat was the way God had planned to achieve victory all along!

Like Job, when we are in the midst of trials and pain and suffering, we can fall prey to the misconception that God's plans for us, or this world, are being thwarted! Only to find out in hindsight (and sometimes not till eternity) that God was actually bringing about His plans for us by MEANS OF THE VERY THINGS WE THOUGHT WERE THWARTING THEM!

That's God's message to us today: HE doesn't lose! HE never loses!! That's what these chapters tell us! That's what the Bible habitually tells us! GOD is Almighty! GOD is Omnipotent! GOD is the Victor! There is NOTHING GOD cannot do! All things are possible for HIM! No plan of HIS can EVER be thwarted! "HE does as He pleases," says the Psalmist, "with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth!"

And that's good news! Our God reigns! He rules over Satan! And as we know from the Book of Revelation He will one day do what He could have done all along: Crush Satan and evil once and for all with an unimaginable display of raw divine power!

The issue we all wrestle with is: Why doesn't He do it NOW!? Why didn't he do it earlier for Job? Why does He wait so long?

And the answer? Because He was using Satan, and will continue to use him until Christ returns — for a purpose!

Erwin Lutzer was right: *"Satan does stalk proudly about, but only as far as God will let him.... (He) exists as God's instrument for justice for the disobedient, and God's means of purification for the obedient. Our war with him teaches us about the nature of sin, the holiness of God, and our helplessness apart from Grace."*

If "leviathan" metaphorically represents Satan (and it must, since on the one hand there is not and never has been any such thing as a fire-breathing, sea-dwelling, dragon, and on the other hand there is ample evidence in Scripture that a dragon, serpent or leviathan signifies the Devil) then God's answer to Job here is very clear:

Satan, like all other created beings listed so far, somehow serves God's purposes in this age. Yet as He also makes clear, He controls Satan's every move and restricts the extent to which he can stir up chaos. Satan may be the "god of this world," but he can only rule to the extent God permits. He's like a dog on God's leash! He can go only so far and no further!

Which is why Martin Luther could say, *“The Devil is God’s Devil.”* God owns him! God rules over him! God dictates what he can and cannot do! God permits him to do some things and forbids him from doing other things.

In fact, what Jesus said to Pilate at His trial, we could also say to Satan: “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”

“How much power does the devil have?” asks Lutzer. “The devil has exactly as much power as God lets him have, and not one mite more... he cannot act without God’s express permission; he can neither tempt, coerce, demonize, nor make so much as a single plan without the consent and approval of God...”

“We must bear in mind that he does have frightful powers, but knowing that those powers can only be exercised under God’s direction and pleasure give us hope. Satan is not free to wreak havoc on people at will... Satan can only touch God’s children with God’s approval... He has to receive God’s permission before he can carry it out.”

“We must...be reminded of Satan’s limitations if we are to fight against him in faith. The more secure we are in the knowledge that the devil is not capable of acting independently, the more faith will arise in our hearts that we can defeat him.”

Job received great comfort from the knowledge that God was in control even over the havoc Satan wreaked on him. But not before he was driven to despise himself, and repent in sackcloth and ashes, for allowing that doubt to persuade him it was otherwise!

And how else can knowing this help us? To believe God is in control, frees us from feeling that we have to be! It makes us more relaxed, trusting, confident people — even when our world, or the world at large, seems to be falling apart at the seams!

It eradicates the superstitious fear that Satan has gotten the upper hand in this world, and thus enables God’s people to be bold and fearless even in the face of immense trials, persecutions and even death.

Knowing that Satan cannot lay a finger on us, and no trial can befall us lest it first pass through the filter of God’s holy love for us, helps us face trials in a whole new way! It gives us an uncanny patience and will to persevere when we know that any trial God permits will only be as severe as God permits, and last as long as God permits!

As Matthew Henry once noted, trails will last only as long as it takes to achieve the purpose for which God sent them. Though I would add: He may occasionally give us brief times of rest and relief from them.

It reminds me of a scene I used to see with my grandfather. He had this big round soap-stone grinding wheel, powered by a wooden foot peddle. A crude machine, but one that worked well! And he'd take a knife or an axe blade, and start to sharpen it, and I'd watch as the wheel would go round and round and he'd slide the blade back and forth across that moving surface, sparks shooting off all over the place (I'd even stick my hand in the sparks!)

But he'd never keep the blade in one spot too long, without pulling it away, because it would get to hot, and turn a reddish orange color. "Don't want that to happen," he'd say. "It'll make it hard and brittle and more likely to break."

The same is true with us. Our purpose is to be a royal priesthood. Servants of the Most High God. It is to be sharp and ready for service. Thus, God may allow Satan to try, or sift or afflict us (as he clearly did with Job)—as a means of sharpening us.

But when he senses (like Job) that we are about to break / when he knows we've been in that spot too long, and are getting brittle or about to break — when He senses the grinding might damage us permanently — He will intervene, pull back Satan's leash, and give us time to cool down and regain our strength!

That encourages me! It gives me hope in the midst of the darkest trials! That assures me God is in control! I may wish He would intervene more quickly. I may wish He'd give a yank on Satan's leash much sooner. I may feel that He needs to stop my trial sooner than He does — that His estimation of my ability to endure pain is far, far too high!

But He knows! He knows how much I can take, and how much I can't (and that I can usually take far more than I thought)! That's why He often says in the midst of my plea's for a break or release from my trial:

"Not Yet. I will never give you more than you can take, but you can take more than you think. The grinding wheel hurts, but the blade is dull, and I will not pull Satan back entirely until your cutting edge is sharpened once again."