

July 15, 2007

Being Confronted By God – Pride, Self-esteem and Reality!

I Kings 19:9b-18 / Acts 9:1-6 / Job 38:1-30

I've often wondered: *What would God say to me if He were to manifest His presence to me, and speak to me, like He did to Elijah, and Job and Paul.* In each case He was speaking to committed men, zealous in their faith, and doing what they thought was right—yet in each case they received a rebuke.

ELIJAH had just defeated the 450 prophets of Baal in a “supernatural power encounter” on Mount Carmel. Then one woman, Queen Jezebel, threatens to have him killed within 24 hours, and he runs into the dessert and hides out in a cave.

There an angel tells him to come out to the mouth of the cave so God could speak to him. “What are you doing here,” asked God? “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty,” Elijah responded. “All the other Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your alters, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

And what is God’s response? Does he pull Elijah aside and say, “It’s ok now Elijah, I understand. You’re tired. Post traumatic stress syndrome and all that. Go back in and lay down. You have a right to feel sorry for yourself, be scared and depressed.”

No, God sends a hurricane-like-mega-wind which tears the mountains apart and shatters the rocks; then He causes an earthquake and a huge fire to roar past the mouth of the cave and then in a still small whisper asks again: “What are you doing here Elijah?” And Elijah gives the same exact response again.

Then God gives him 4 tasks to do, strips him of his role as prophet and tells him to pass it on to Elisha, and then reminds him, “Oh yes and by the way, I have reserved seven thousand in Israel who have neither bowed down to Baal or kissed him.”

In other words, God’s words to Elijah are a rebuke. He tells him: “Get back to work, anoint Elisha to take your place,” and concludes by essentially saying, “Stop having a pity party; stop being so self-righteous and stop feeling so sorry for yourself.”

PAUL doesn't fare much better. He's a Jewish Pharisee zealous for the faith — in terms of legalistic righteousness — he's faultless! He was religious to the extreme, a Hebrew of Hebrews, outshining most of his contemporaries in his desire to prove his devotion to God. He even persecuted Christians because he thought it was a cult and threat to Orthodox Judaism.

Then one day on the Road to Damascus, Jesus appears to him in a heavenly burst of radiant light so bright Paul falls to the ground. Then Jesus spoke to him and said: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting," He replied. "Now, get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do." So off Paul goes into Damascus—blinded and unable to see anything, and so stunned he did not eat or drink for three days!

And no sooner has Paul been able to process a little of what has happened, than Ananias comes along with another message from God telling him how much he will have to suffer for Jesus — a Jesus he doesn't know yet!"

Makes you wonder, doesn't it? What would God say to YOU? If He was ever to manifest His presence in your presence and speak to you, what do you think He might say to you?

To some He has said, "Turn from that sin...or else." To others He has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." / To Elijah He essentially said, "Stop hiding away in this cave having your little pity party. I'm replacing you (you're fired!), but first I have a list of things you need to do!" / To the prostitute he said, "Your sins are forgiven." To the lame man, "Take up your mat and walk." / To the rich young ruler: "One thing you lack — go and sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasures in heaven." / To the weary, "Come unto me all you who are weak and heavy laden and I will give you rest." And to the unrepentant cities, "Woe to you... it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

But I guess that's the key: *God speaks a different word to each person. Yet in each case it's exactly what they needed to hear. And it would be the same for you. It might not be what you wanted to hear, or maybe even what you'd expect to hear. But I can say this without qualification: It would be exactly what you needed to hear!*

As one person once insightfully put it: ***"God comforts the afflicted, and afflicts the comfortable. He exalts and gives grace to the humble, but opposes and humbles the proud."*** In other words, He speaks words people need to hear — even if it's not what they want to hear.

That's part of being a good parent. A good parent tells their children what they need to hear, not necessarily what they want to hear.

That's why Job, when God begins to speak to him today, gets an earful rather than a warm embrace! That's the **FIRST** thing we need to see today: God is upset with Job. Initially Job voiced the pain and lament he felt stemming from the all the traumas he suffered (and that was valid as I pointed out). Later it went a bit further and turned into anger and feelings of being unfairly targeted or picked on by God (beginning to border on irreverence—though nothing the Psalmists didn't also do). But by the end Job was accusing God of wrongdoing — and that's where he crossed the line!

That's why God, when he begins to speak to Job today in chapter 38, after such a long time of silence, does not speak to him in soft, gentle comforting words, but in a stern and lengthy rebuke.

This is enhanced by the fact that He speaks to Job, "out of the storm." NOT out of clear blue skies as warm breezes blow on a sunny summer's day. / NOT out the hush that comes at days end when those breezes die down and the last traces of the sun's rays begin to give way to the oncoming darkness. And no, NOT even on from the hush of early morning, when (as the idyllic song puts it): "I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses... and He walks with me, and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own."

The scenario here is NOT quiet, comforting, words of consolation, but words of stern reprimand. Job is going to receive a tongue lashing from God for having the audacity to accuse God of having done wrong, and thus of being unjust, and thereby unrighteous.

Despite all that Job has suffered (and he has suffered in ways and endured pain none of us will ever have to endure) his response to that suffering has provoked the divine displeasure of God. And the gist of what God says for the next 4 chapters is this:

Who do you think you are, Job, to question the wisdom and rightness of my decrees, or what I ordain? Who are you, Job, to accuse me of wrongdoing? Who are you, as a finite piece of clay, to tell me what I as the infinite, sovereign, all-wise, all-knowing, all-powerful potentate of the universe CAN, SHOULD or MUST DO with those whom I have created?

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point: God's answer to Job is not an answer! Rather it is a barrage of one question, after another question, after another question that Job cannot answer!

Questions God knows the answers to, but neither Job, nor his friends, nor anyone else has the answers to.

Which leads us to the point I've stressed all along — God simply asks us to **TRUST HIM**. Like it or not (and we usually don't) God doesn't give us answers to all our questions. He simply calls us to TRUST that He, the God who knows all, and sees all, and is able to do all, will always and only do what is right.

Whatever a Righteous God does is always righteous — even if it appears to be otherwise by our understanding. / Whatever a Good God does is Good — even if the goodness of what He does is hidden from our eyes. / Whatever an All-Wise, Holy, Just, and Loving God does is always for the best — even if He alone knows how that can be.

And that's the point of God's response: I was there when the earth's foundations were laid. You Job were not. I determined the exact dimensions of the earth. You Job did not. I set it in its place, Job! You did not! Who then are YOU, Job, to tell ME what I must and must not do; what I should and should not do; what I can and cannot do!

Now, surely Job did not know this, but we do, and it helps us understand God's reasoning in this passage. He says, "*Were you there when I marked off [the earth's] dimensions?*" And in reference to that, consider the following facts:

If the earth's diameter was much smaller than its mass, which determines the gravitational force, would not be sufficient to hold an atmosphere necessary to sustain life. And if it were slightly larger, then the gravitational force would give the "average person" a weight of anywhere from 700 to 900 pounds (meaning you'd have a difficult time even doing something as simple as walking! Jumping would be nearly impossible, and sports would be out of the question)!

If the tilt of the earth on its axis were not exactly what it is, the differential in surface temperature would become too extreme to sustain life. / The same would be true if the speed of the earth's rotation were faster or slower — temperature changes and wind velocities would be so great that life would cease to exist.

If the earth's orbit around the sun were not fixed exactly as it is, in the path that it now follows, in its precise distance from the sun — if it were to drift only a few miles out of what it is, it would again produce such extreme heat or freezing temperatures that life would be impossible.

If the ratio of light falling on the earth's surface, compared to the light reflected from it's surface were to change, so that too much were reflected, it would cause the earth's surface to be overwhelmed by glaciers. And if too little were reflected it would become intolerably hot and most of the earth's surface would become like a desert.

It's "dimensions" as God says in (v. 5) — it's diameter and circumference / the angle it tilt on its axis / the speed of its rotation on that axis / and the ratio of light falling on it or reflecting off it are exactly what they need to be in order to sustain life. What are the odds of that just "happening"?

AND THAT'S NOT ALL! Life would also be severely threatened if the ratio of oxygen to nitrogen in the earth's atmosphere were even slightly altered.

If the ratio of protons to electrons were greater or smaller than it is, electromagnet-ism would dominate gravity and prevent the formation of stars and planets (including our own)!

If the strong nuclear force were just .3 % stronger or .2% weaker / Or if the expansion rate of the universe was different than it is by only one part out of 10^{55} th power (an immeasurably small amount!) the universe would have collapsed prior to star formation.

No star formation, no light, no light, no life! And I could go on and on and on!

But it's not necessary. Because you know what all that means? Do you know what the odds are that a planet be able to sustain advanced life forms, or that another planet somewhere out there in space has all 41 necessary factors to support life?

Dr. Hugh Ross puts it this way:

"With considerable security, we can draw the conclusion that much fewer than a trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a percent of all stars could possibly possess...a planet capable of sustaining advanced life."

You see, I was wrong last week (or I should say the facts I quoted to you were old) — there are not just one 100 billion there are an estimated 1 trillion galaxies! (Though I was right about each galaxy containing 100 billion stars)! And if each star has at least one planet orbiting around it that would equal 100 billion trillion planets!

And given the fact that only a trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth have the 41 factors necessary to sustain life, that would mean that only ONE out of a 100 billion trillion planets fits the criteria necessary to sustain advanced life forms. And guess what — you're living on it folks!

It's amazing, when you think about it — isn't it: If things were even slightly different than they are, if certain things were not fixed (like the planets in their orbits), or if any of the 41 necessary criteria for life were missing, life couldn't exist!

It's either the most mind-boggling, unlikely, impossible scenario, or something so perfectly planned that the whole universe screams to any objective onlooker — "Intelligent Design!" There has to be a Creator! The Psalmist was right: "The heavens declare the Glory of God."

And you know what? That's at least in part God's answer to Job. The God who made everything just as He did, and established everything just as it is (just as it had to be!) essentially says to Job:

"You think you know so much, Job, but you really know next to nothing." (An obvious wound to Job's self-esteem — but a necessary one. Part of any truly good "self-esteem" is the acknowledgement of reality! I am better suited for life when I correctly perceive reality than when I incorrectly tell myself things that aren't true just to make me feel better about myself!)"

Job wasn't there when God marked off the dimensions of the earth, measuring its diameter to the exact size it had to be to sustain life. Yet it got done, and it got done with inconceivable preciseness, without Job's approval or input!"

Which brings us to our **THIRD** and **FINAL** point. What do you think was going through Job's mind as God was "putting him in his place" so to speak? What would have been going through your mind at that point, or what would you have said at that point?

I know what I would have said: **NOTHING!** (Hard to believe but its true!) I would have sat in humbled silence (just like Job did) and do what he does in chapter 40 where he simply places his hand over his mouth and apologizes for having spoken of things he knew nothing about.

The perfection of creation and how it all fits together so flawlessly (in ways I couldn't comprehend even if I studied nothing else for my whole lifetime!) humbles me before God. Maybe even moreso than Job because science has now enabled us to know so much more about its wonders than Job could ever have known!

Even the most intelligent scientists can only explain life as it is, or as he thinks it is, and how he thinks it came to be, but he can never know for sure! All he can do is offer guesses and probabilities and theories and suggestions — but he can't know for sure.

Just like the theologian can't know for sure when it comes to the mystery of why a loving God allows suffering — selective suffering. The suffering of righteous people. The kind of suffering that inexplicably comes upon people like Job who have tried all their lives to fear God, shun evil, and do everything right).

THAT (I believe) is the point of God's response to Job. Just as God alone knows how and why things came to be exactly as they are in terms of the flawlessly perfect design of creation, so also God alone knows why He has permitted Job and countless other God-fearing people like him to suffer as they do. God alone knows why He permits the suffering of those He loves so dearly.

That's why we must leave such things to faith and trust — trust that just as the creation had to be exactly as it is in order to sustain life, so also the things that happening that creation must be exactly as they are in order for God's perfect plan of redemption to be fulfilled.

Life isn't random folks. It may seem that way to those looking at it from below, from this side of eternity, but that's only because we can not see into the eternal counsels of God, or fathom how things must fit together to bring about the fulfillment of God's perfect plan.

That (I believe) is the point God is making today — If we knew as much as God does — if we saw all that He sees, and knew all that God knows, or understood all that He understands (knowing even the things that must happen today in order for other things to fall in place tomorrow and even 100 years from now we would all agree): ***EVERYTHING that God does is Right and Good and Just and Fair. He does all things well.***

In fact, I believe that's where verses 17-21 come in, where God switches from the natural realms of the visible creation to the invisible realms of the spiritual world and says: *"Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death?"*

Or speaking of light and darkness (which could also serve as metaphors for good and evil as they do numerous times in the Bible) God says:

"What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years!" 😊

You see, we can't even fully comprehend what we *CAN* see, never mind that which is *BEYOND OUR ABILITY* to see. And thus, although we can express our griefs and sorrows over suffering / and even our frustrations and bitterness (as the Psalmists also do) / we must be careful to stop before we cross the line of accusing God of doing wrong, or being unjust, or having made a mistake.

God doesn't make mistakes! Mistakes are what humans make. Misunderstandings are what humans make! Wrong perceptions or false assumptions are what people have! God is perfect in all He does, righteous in all He ordains, and just in all His ways — including all that He sovereignly ordains or permits.

If we knew what He knows we would all say: ***"Yes and Amen." "All Your ways are just and right."*** (Rev. 15)