

June 24, 2007

The Incomparable Majesty and Glory of God (#1)
 Psalm 29:1-11 / Isaiah 46:8-14 / Job 36:27 - 37:18

As we scanned the content of chapter 36 last week, and in turn, look with scrutiny at chapter 37 this week, we discover something about Elihu — he's a lot like most people I know. He pulls in ideas from here and there and blends them all together so that you can't really pin down exactly what he believes about God. He seems to be somewhat of a syncretist.

In some ways he appears to think he's somehow one with God, or possesses the knowledge God possesses, as we noted last week when he claimed to be "one perfect in knowledge."

Oswald Chambers picked up on that point in his book "Baffled to Fight Better," and says:

"Elihu is stating with enormous airs that "Humanity" is another name for God; whereas one of the big Bible doctrines is that Humanity is not God, and was created to be distinctly not God."

He even implies that Elihu is a pantheist who sees *"the immediate presence of God pervading everything."*

I tend to agree with him. There are points at which it does seem that Elihu is voicing "pantheistic" ideas — a "pantheist," of course, being a person who sees little or no distinction at all between God and the material universe.

To the pantheist the universe and everything in it (as a whole) is itself God — or a manifestation of God — the earth, and its trees, rocks, flowers, animals, air, water and people. "God," to the pantheist, is in everything, and is everything — which may help us to understand how Elihu could claim to possess "perfect knowledge."

In 37:16 he says God is "perfect in knowledge," whereas in 36:4 he claimed he was "perfect in knowledge" — a statement which led me to suggest last week that he was "enormously conceited."

But maybe he wasn't. Maybe Oswald Chambers is right and it is merely the logical outflow of his somewhat-pantheistic view of God. For if everything is God and God is in everything, that would explain how he could think he possessed God's knowledge, since he himself would be just another one of the innumerable manifestations of God.

That's what people fail to see about the New Age Movement. They hear Shirley Maclaine and many others claiming they are "divine." But you have to realize that their view of God is pantheistic. They have adopted eastern or Hindu thought, which enable them to see themselves as one of the innumerable manifestations of God.

If the divine is everything, and is in everything, then that would include them, and us, and anyone or anything, be it living and animate or lifeless and inanimate.

And it doesn't stop with Elihu's view of humanity. For he does seem to continue in a similar mode of thought in verses 36:30 -37:5 where he describes the advance of a threatening thunderstorm which makes the grazing cattle uneasy, and makes his own heart "pound and leap from its place."

That is, in contemporary terms, "the storm scares the living wits out of him!"

Why? Because he doesn't see the thunderstorm as separate from God but as a manifestation of God's presence (and not a manifestation of His happy presence)! "Listen!" he says in verse 2. "Listen to the roar of His voice, to the rumbling that comes from His mouth. He unleashes His lightning beneath the whole heaven and sends it to the ends of the earth. After that comes the sound of His roar, He thunders with His majestic voice. When His voice resounds, He holds nothing back. God's voice thunders in marvelous ways; He does great things beyond our understanding."

Thus it's nearly impossible to miss the fact that Elihu sees the storm as God coming in wrath — for in verse 31 of chapter 36, speaking of the thunder and lightning and driving rain, it literally says in the Hebrew: "For by them He judges the peoples" (as the NASB correctly renders it as opposed to the NIV "governs.").

It's an idea he repeats again in 37:13 where he says: "He brings the clouds to punish men, or to water the earth and show His love."

Therefore we see that to Elihu, a storm (and he means a severe storm) is either God punishing people, or showing them His love depending on whether it happens to simply water your crops or wash them all away! If it waters them its God showing you love; if it washes them away its God punishing you for some sin.

But then Elihu seems to change his tune. Because starting in verse 6, and going down through verse 22, instead of equating God with the storm he seems to imply that God is now separate from the storm and commands it apart from it — from above it, beyond it or outside it — which is, of course, contrary to Pantheism and right in line with the rest of Scripture!

So it's hard to know. Was Elihu influenced by the pantheism that was indeed known in his area, since the land of Ur was on the trade routes where Hindu merchants would have shared their ideas — pantheistic ideas that would have predated the writing of the book of Job — since we know that Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world.

Was he enormously conceited, or did he simply see himself (like all pantheists) as being one of the innumerable manifestations of God?

Or maybe Chambers is wrong. Maybe Elihu is doing what David does in Psalm 29, who also sees God's presence in a violent thunderstorm coming across the Judean hillside, and metaphorically speaks of the deafening thunder and flashes of lightning as "God's voice," which "breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon; shakes the Desert of Kadesh, twists the oaks, and causes all in His temple to cry "Glory!"

Maybe Elihu is simply using metaphorical language as well — which is why I told Randy (when I was working through this whole text on Thursday) — interpreting and then preaching the Bible is not always so easy—especially when you come to the wisdom literature of the Bible!

But all this stuff does bring up a very important issue (assuming Elihu's view of God is biblical and not semi-pantheistic): Do you, or are you, like Elihu, able to see or discern God's presence sovereignly working in and though all He's created (even something as common as a thunderstorm)?

Because what Elihu does in verses 6-22 is ask us to see the phenomena that occurs in this world as manifestations of His work or His presence — like snow (v. 6) / the mighty downpour that stops every man from his labor and sends the animals scurrying for cover (vv. 6b-8) / the cold driving winds that produce ice and freeze broad waters or large lakes (vv. 9b-10) / the dark overcast skies that hang hard as a mirror of cast bronze (v. 16 and 18) / or the south wind that's so hot it makes a man sweat and swelter in his clothes (vv. 17).

Those are things which God "controls," says Elihu in verse 15. They are things God commands, ordains, speaks through, or uses to accomplish set purposes — to which we might add from other books of the Bible: earthquakes, fires, drought, blight, famines, floods, plagues and pestilences. Scripture says we should see the hand of God in it all — both blessing and disaster — because God sovereignly rules over it all (Isaiah 45:1-7 / Amos 3:3-7 / Amos 4:4-13 / Revelation / etc. / etc.)

So my **FIRST** question or my **FIRST** point is this: Do we do that? We should never see God AS the phenomena that occurs in nature (which Elihu comes dangerously close to doing), but we should see such phenomena as the work of his hands and somehow as speaking a message to us.

Elihu may have gone a bit too far by seeing God so closely intertwined with the storm that the storm actually becomes the presence of God, and the thunder and lightning His voice, but in our scientific western culture, we have gone so far in the other direction — we have so disassociated God from creation, and from such phenomena, that we often fail to perceive God to be speaking through such things as earthquakes, floods, plagues and pestilences at all—quite contrary to the Bible.

If Elihu can be accused of being dangerously close to Pantheism, surely most North American Christians can be accused of being dangerously close to Deism — the opposite of Pantheism, and a view held by many of the founders of our nation. Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson essentially believed that God created / established the laws of nature and the moral law / set things in motion / and then vacated the premises! That is, He exists, but He governs merely by the natural laws He established.

From the time of the U.S. Revolution on, the tendency has been (even in the church) that natural disasters are just that—natural disasters and nothing more. Earth-quakes, Tidal Waves, Famines, Pestilences, Hurricanes and Tsunamis have nothing to do with God. He neither causes them, guides them, alters them, interferes with them or speaks through them. They just happen.

Earthquakes, Tidal waves and Tsunamis for instance, are not God speaking in any way, shape or form, they are simply the result of shifting of fault lines and the movement of continental plates. And the same can be said of hurricanes, droughts, blights, famine and floods. In the mind of most North Americans they have absolutely nothing to do with God (even if insurance agencies do call them “acts of God.” To most they are simply the result of shifting weather patterns, the greenhouse effect, or that infamous “El Niño.”

That’s what one missionary from the States was quick to tell the Hondurans in the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Mitch — the hurricane had nothing to do with God, it was merely the result of El Niño.

But is that true? Can God be the Sovereign Lord over the entire universe and over all the events of history, and be said to have had nothing to do with it? / Can it likewise be said that there was absolutely no message from God in it? / Is it mere superstition to believe God is sovereign even over such things as El Nino or the shifting of fault lines, or is it biblical?

I mean no Christian should ever deny the reality of shifting fault lines, and natural causes behind natural phenomena. They are undeniable, measurable realities which only the fool would deny. So the question is not whether those things play a part, the question is whether or not God sovereignly rules even over those things?

Are Elihu, David, Amos and Isaiah right, when they say God is most certainly involved in all that happens in nature and creation, or is the Deist right? Did God merely create the world (and all that is in it), establish the laws of nature, set things in motion, and then vacate the premises to let those laws govern the world in an impersonal way or does He still sovereignly orchestrate all that happens using such things as secondary causes in the process?

In other words are we to somehow see God in such things as the prophets did, or are we not? Does God speak through such things or does He not? Are we to see Him as Lord over such things or are we not? And if He is involved, and does speak through such phenomena, how do we know what He's saying in and through them?

You see, Elihu says that through such things God either shows His love, or He executes His judgment — "He brings His clouds to punish men, or to water his earth and show His love," as he says in verse 13.

And here again I must **AGREE** and **DISAGREE** with Elihu at the same time!

I **agree** that God CAN and often DOES speak in and through storms or natural phenomena. And sometimes, through His prophets, he tells us exactly what He was saying through it (as in Amos 4:4-13). As sovereign Lord over all creation He can be said to "speak" through everything and anything that happens!

And I also have to **agree** that this particular storm in Job DID signify the coming of the presence of God to answer Job! In that sense Elihu did perceive something different about this storm as compared to other storms. He sensed that it wasn't just an ordinary storm but a theophany whereby God was coming to answer Job.

The storm was NOT the presence of God, but it did signify His coming, and as we'll see when God does speak next week in chapter 38, after His long "silence" the lightning and thunder and dark clouds did signify His divine displeasure with Job and all his friends. Elihu was right to be scared out of His wits—the storm did signify the coming of God's presence—not to judge, but definitely to rebuke and correct.

Yet I must also disagree that when a storm does damage it is God saying "I punish you," and when it merely waters their crops He is saying, "I love you." That may be the case but it may not, and thus apart from God specifically telling us so, it would be best not to make such blanket pronouncements.

In the drought and famine that drove Joseph's brothers to Egypt looking for food, and ultimately led them to be reunited with Joseph and reconciled to him, God was carrying out His good and loving purposes for them all. They were God's providential way of keeping His promise to Jacob and his sons — hard as that was to see except in hindsight!

Or maybe we could put it this way: The famine was NOT God saying "I punish you." It was actually God saying "I love you" to Joseph and his family even though it was through a "flood of troubles." It was as much an expression of His love for them as when "the gentle rains of good times fell upon their fields" and prospered them.

Henri Nouwen was right: *"The cup of sorrow, inconceivable as it seems, is also the cup of joy."*
(God's love is shown in many ways.)

But that brings me to my SECOND and LAST point for today: The need to resist the temptation to always spiritualize away the natural phenomena in the Bible so as to apply it personally to people. Most every preacher I've ever known (and I've been guilty of it as well) has inadvertently taught people not to see the hand of God in natural phenomena by always spiritualizing them.

Earthquakes are upheavals in our lives, storms are difficult times / Hurricanes are really bad hardships / Droughts and famines are times of spiritual dryness / Tornados are times of flurried activity when we get dizzy from all the activity / Tidal Waves are when we feel swamped by the responsibilities of life and so on!

Some people wouldn't know how to apply this text except to spiritualize the storm, and the snow, and the mighty downpour, and the cold driving wind that freezes the lakes, and the hot south wind that makes men swelter and sweat and suggest they are "trials" or "hardships."

But the context forces me to avoid doing that. Because Elihu (and the other OT prophets) did not want people to spiritualize these “natural phenomena” into trials, but actually try to consider that God may be speaking through things like the weather — real storms like Hurricane Mitch or Katrina / and real earthquakes like the ones that hit California and Japan / and real tornados like the one’s that ripped through that town in the Midwest not long ago / and real Tsunamis or tidal waves like the one that hit Southeast Asia a few years ago.

Yet we’re so used to being taught to “spiritualize everything” that when a real disaster happens we don’t see it as having anything to do with God at all, and rarely see it as saying anything to anyone!

How different that is from Amos chapter 4, where he sees, and declares that God is speaking through such natural phenomena. Speaking of a famine which they all experienced God says:

“I gave you empty stomachs in every city, and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me,” declares the Lord. ‘I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me,’ declares the Lord. ‘Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you did not return to me,’ declares the Lord.”

It’s hard not to see that Amos is saying that what the weather did God did. Yet you know what we’d probably say today? *“Had nothing to do with God. It was simply a stroke of bad luck. Blight hit the crops in Bucks County but not over there in Lancaster. It was a toss of the dice. Yep, just those darn weather patterns — the effects of El Nino.”*

“Not so!” God would say, who is sovereign even over things like El Niño! *“I was speaking to my people Israel and calling them, through such natural phenomena, to repent and return to me — I was speaking to them through such things but they did not listen to me and would not repent or return to me,”* says the Lord.

Why? Maybe it was because, like us, they were trained *NOT* to see God in such things. Maybe their priests also taught them to do the same thing we do — spiritualize such things away so that when a real storm happens, or a real famine strikes, or a real plague hits, we don’t know what to make of it, other than giving a scientific explanation devoid of any reference to God.

You see, it is dangerous to “speak for God” and tell others what He is saying through such phenomena. Some have attributed their own meaning to such events and caused great hurt to people in the process — as Elihu’s overly simplistic interpretation and explanations of the rain would do to the righteous farmer who lost his crops in a flood, or the man like Job who lost his children and grandchildren to a desert sand storm.

But this much we can be sure of: If God has permitted it, He is saying something through it! Maybe it’s simply this: “Don’t build massive cities with megatons of concrete and skyscrapers right on top of unstable fault lines!” Or maybe it’s “Don’t build houses on shorelines that get hit with hurricanes every single year!” Or “Don’t deplete the ozone layer, or fill the atmosphere with tons of pollutants that cause a greenhouse effect and alter weather patterns!” It may be something as ridiculously simple and common sense as that!

Or it may indeed be God saying: “I’m displeased with what you’re doing. I’m displeased with the rampant materialism and hedonism. The rejection of godly values offends me, and the drive to remove any mention or recognition of me from public life is a frontal assault on my glory.” Such natural phenomena may indeed be a wake up call, or a call to repentance, or a call to change one’s direction in life. As with Amos, it may well be God calling His people “to return to me.” It may indeed be God speaking very loudly!

It was in the Old Testament, and continued to be in the New Testament, and if you take the Book of Revelation seriously, it will also be that way in the end times. God has always spoken through such phenomena / is speaking through such things today / and will continue to until the Lord returns — even if people today, as in Amos’s day, don’t believe it.

It’s probably *better* to be like Elihu and equate those things with God and His divine activity, and risk people interpreting them a little bit wrong on occasion, than to be like many modern day Christians and fail to see God as being involved with them at all!

That’s it my friends. I leave it to you. Elihu may have been slightly mistaken on some points, but he was right on in others. The storm was not God, and the thunder and lightning was not God’s voice, but God was in the storm, and He was not pleased, and out of it He shall speak a word of correction and rebuke to Job and his friends as we shall see next week! A word that will call us, like Job, to be humbled, and stand in awe (maybe like Job with our hand over our mouth) as we consider The Incomparable Majesty and Glory of God displayed to us in creation.