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# Things too Wonderful for Me

Job 42: 1-6, 10

**A Sermon preached at the Festival of Preaching on zoom, February 9, 2021 by Revd Dr Sam Wells**

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*Then Job answered the Lord: 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. "Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me." I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.*

I wonder, when you lie on your bed, how long it takes you to get to sleep. There's something extraordinarily vulnerable about lying down with your eyes closed not knowing what will happen next. It puts us in touch with our isolation. For those who sleep alone, or for those who feel alone even if they have another person asleep beside them, this can be the most terrifying moment of the day. All the busyness, demands, activity or entertainment of the last 16 hours is now ruthlessly exposed as an organised construction to avoid this merciless feeling: of powerlessness, defencelessness, helplessness. All the deepest anxieties of our lives are crystallised in this instant: however dynamic, accomplished or abundant our life has been, it's as if at this moment, poised between waking and sleeping, we have to renounce it all and feel naked, weak and empty. It's an experience of standing on the brink of death.

Which makes it ironic that the very thing we long for with every fibre of our body is to go to sleep, to dive deep into the darkness of oblivion, and be replenished to face the next day. It's ironic because, for most of us, what we fear most about death is that very same thing that each night when we lie down on our bed we long for, namely, oblivion. It's one of the great ironies of our lives. Our deepest fears are to be utterly alone and to cease to have meaning, and yet every day we urge each of these conditions on ourselves and become extremely anxious if we can't achieve them. It's as if sleep is teaching us one of the most important lessons of life.

When we step back a little, and place things on a larger canvas, we confront a larger paradox. Let me set it out in three dimensions and a contradiction. We exist, first, in a world of myriad complexity, subtlety, intricacy and wonder. If we simply consider our own bodies, the daily processes of breathing and digesting, moving and thinking, feeling and expressing – all of these require astonishing degrees of detailed intention and meticulous execution; and those just name the things we take completely for granted, that happen without us even making a decision to set them in motion. If we look beyond us we find the world is at least as fearfully and wonderfully made. Just take water for example, which comes to us in oceans and raindrops, ice cubes and fountains, crashing waves and hailstorms, boiling steam and paddling pools. There are unfathomable numbers of animals and insects, forms of terrain and vegetation, rocks and landscapes. And if we raise our eyes to the skies we behold, with greater or lesser understanding, planets, stars and galaxies – an incomprehensible extent and unfathomable depth of glory and astonishment. That's the first dimension.

The second dimension is our either acute or dim recognition that behind, beyond and within all this life and existence, there is some logic, purpose or intention. At this point I should make it clear that I don't believe in atheism. The reason I don't believe in atheism is that it's almost impossible to argue that there's no logic whatsoever in the universe. That, after all, is what all the great ventures of physics are trying to establish, from gravity to relativity. Whatever you arrive at as your most significant organising principle, whether by scientific deduction or by contemplative reflection or by interpreting the signs of revelation, that is your God. It's fair to say the so-called New Atheists have a somewhat thin notion of God, but I don't think it's accurate to say they are actually atheists, who believe in no God, even if they say they are. Even if you have very little notion of a discernible purpose or intention, you're inevitably searching for some kind of logic: all of us are, all the time, every time we check the weather forecast or try to work out whether that tumour we're worried about is malignant or benign. That's the second dimension: the logic behind all things.

The third dimension is the realisation, sudden or gradual, common or unique, that this logic is more than just a cold or mechanical chain reaction, but has purpose, intention and (and this is the crucial step) personality. This personality is by its nature shaped for relationship. For Christians, being shaped for relationship means God is not just always looking to enter into and sustain relationship with us, but is also inherently made up of relationship – what we call the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus relationship isn't an afterthought for God – relationship is the very essence of what God is, and thus what eternity is. Jesus is the ultimate and utter proof of these two things – proof that God is shaped to be in relationship with us, and proof that God's inner life consists of relationship.

So these are the three dimensions – the world and universe are immeasurably intricate and beautiful, there's at least some level of logic behind it all, and that logic turns out to be a personal being whose deepest nature is relationship and whose deepest purpose is to be in relationship with us. So far so good. But here's the contradiction. We die. Apparently our breathing stops, our organs shut down, our consciousness ceases, our body begins to decay, and we are finished: no feeling, no awareness, no life, no future, no anything.

See how death is a contradiction of all three dimensions of life I described earlier. No one can explain how a world and a universe that has such complexity and intricacy can collapse into the still, silent, inert form of a dead body. No one can identify the logic behind why all the processes that create the miracle of life are finally thwarted by the absurdity of death. No one can understand why the God who looks in every moment to establish or sustain relationship is content to see that relationship come to such a sudden, overwhelming and permanent end. It seems totally illogical, uncharacteristic, unjust and incomprehensible.

When we lie on our deathbed, or perhaps more truthfully when we lie on our bed at night and, for a change, don't seek the oblivion of sleep but search the darkness for meaning and hope, this is the conundrum we wrestle with. How can life end? How can that which brought life into being countenance its obliteration? How can the one who does everything to be in relationship with us tolerate the permanent elimination of that relationship?

These are the questions that dominate the book of Job. Job is usually thought of as a book about suffering, but suffering is really a subset of problem of death, and most people could endure almost any amount of suffering if they were sure that restored relationship and abundant life would duly follow. So the real issue for Job and for us is not so much suffering, as annihilation. The story of Job doesn't claim to be historical, but is more like a parable, beginning, 'There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job.' The book is like a long version of the struggle in Genesis 32 between Jacob and the angel, where Jacob strives all night until finally the angel blesses him. The blessing Job seeks throughout the book is to know that God will not finally abandon him.

In the parable of Job, Satan wagers that Job's loyalty to God only stretches as far as his prosperity, and, if Job faces adversity, he will turn against God. Consequently, in four disasters, Job loses his oxen, sheep, camels and children; and then his body, his wife and his friends turn against him. But Satan loses his wager: Job refuses to turn against God. He does, however, curse the day of his birth. His friends queue up to offer plausible reasons for his plight, largely that Job is being punished for his sins, and that he is being stubborn and proud for not recognising this. But Job dismisses these shallow rationalisations. His complaint is not the suffering itself, it's the way that suffering encapsulates the three dimensions of the paradox we explored a moment ago. He says, in a roundabout way, 'This just doesn't add up. Here is a magnificent and complex universe; there is surely a logic behind beneath and beyond it; and that logic is the purpose of a God who longs to be in relationship with us. How then can there be death, if that death entails annihilation? Annihilation goes against everything else I know about existence.' The point is not, as Job's comforters maintain, that humans are punished for their sins: the point is, as Job irrefutably points out, that everyone is headed for annihilation, faithful and fickle alike. Job isn't doubting God's power; he's questioning God's goodness. Job's suffering is unendurable because he has nothing to look forward to. He discerns that God's power is useless if it's not grounded in love.

We and Job have to wait 38 chapters before we get any kind of an answer to Job's question. When God does speak, we and Job don't quite get the answer we long to hear. God's answer is to affirm the mystery of our and the universe's origin and destiny, and to assert that those mysteries lie with God alone. In other words, we're left still clinging on to the three dimensions of our quandary, but now knowing that God endorses that paradox and recognises our struggle. While not offering a clear-cut answer, God's words restore the relationship with Job, and thus affirm that our communion with God transcends death. We aren't given a concrete picture of what our lives will be like in eternity, but we *are* given the one thing we need to know: that our communion with God will abide. It's as if we're given a choice: choose the material comforts of life and lose everything forever; choose communion with God and all other things will be added unto you. More starkly, we're shown that the material comforts of life are a false insurance policy in case communion with God isn't available. In Job 38, communion with God feels like shouting at each other through a whirlwind: but both parties are hanging on each other's every word; and that's what intimate communion is.

The story of Job is in the Bible. That means two things. It means Job is a parable about Israel, which in exile in Babylon found itself, like Job, having lost all its material comforts, and wondering if it was going to be annihilated and if all the good things in its history amounted to no more than a teasing form of torture. But this story being in the Bible also means that the answer to Job's question is, in the end, Jesus. In Jesus we see the story of Job played out in intense form, most of all upon the cross. The words 'Why have you forsaken me?' are a concise summary of the book of Job. They don't get an answer. For those three hours, for two nights that follow, it seems that God's love and God's power have parted company and the whole of creation

is a pitiless mockery ending in annihilation. But Jesus' resurrection once again unites power and love, and shows us that we will not ultimately be forsaken.

The reason why the book of Job is harrowing is not just because it's about suffering. Job is deeply troubling because it exposes something uncomfortable about most manifestations of the Christian faith. In most cases our faith is based on an assumption that if there is a God, the job of that God is to fix human problems, ameliorate existence and arrange benefits. In other words, that God is a piece of technology whose role is to improve our life. It's an utterly human-centred arrangement. A narcissistic faith. Not really faith at all: more the demand to honour a contract we never actually made – a contract by which we agreed to be born and God agreed to do the rest. We treat God like a government we voted for but that then reneged on its election promises. When was that election again? Who among us chose to be born? At what point did we enter into a deal with God? On what grounds do we expect better of life than we find it gives us? What gives us the presumption to treat God like this?

The book of Job, by contrast, maintains that the heart of all things is relationship. If there's hardship, and yet there's still relationship, it is well with our soul. By contrast, if there is prosperity, but no relationship, there's no reason to rejoice. Thus God is fundamentally, not a means to secure comforts, but the one in whom we find everlasting and inexpressible relationship. An ancient prayer puts it succinctly. 'God of time and eternity, if I love thee for hope of heaven, then deny me heaven; if I love thee for fear of hell, then give me hell; but if I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone.'

The so-called 'problem of suffering' assumes that God's role is to bring health and flourishing – and if God fails to do that, God is malign or weak. But what if God's role is to be with us always, in person in Jesus, in myriad ways through the Holy Spirit, and forever in heaven? God is not an instrument we discard if it malfunctions. God is the essence of all things who astonishingly chooses to be with us, even in desperate hardship – and even, in the crucified Christ, in indescribable agony. That doesn't make suffering go away. But it turns God's engagement with suffering from a pretext for rejection into a reason for worship.

When we lie on our beds at night, or on our deathbed facing eternity, we do indeed face the loss of everything. But the witness of Job is that we lose everything – but God. The one thing we don't lose is communion with God. The one and only thing that in the end really matters. The source from which all blessings flow. So, and only so, may we rest in peace.