

“A GREAT BIG GOD!”

Job 26:1-14

The book of *Job* isn't the easiest book to read. It's probably one of those parts of the Bible you rarely, if ever, dip into. And if you do, it's a while before you return. It doesn't appear to be terribly uplifting and it's all a bit complicated – full of allusions to all kinds of things that we can't fully understand. On the whole, it seems to be a bit unusual compared to most of the rest of the Bible. It's a bit like basing your understanding of the world of popular music on one hearing of the songs of Leonard Cohen, or thinking that Francis Bacon's paintings are what contemporary art is all about, or that *The Daily Mail* is a good place to start an exploration of all that's good in journalism – all a bit gloomy and overdone.

Job was a very rich and influential man in the Ancient Middle East but he ended up in the middle of a contest between good and evil in which, effectively, the Devil bet God that Job would give up his faith in God if God allowed him to lose his possessions, family and health. However, Job, with his family all dead and his wealth all gone, sitting on the rubbish tip and scratching his sores, still clings to his faith in God, his belief that somehow God knows what he is doing and will vindicate him in the end. Three of Job's friends visit him and try to help him come to terms with what is going on, but their advice and sympathy are inadequate and ill-informed, and Job finds their words really don't make much difference to him. Most of the book is an account of their conversations as the arguments go back and forth.

But you really need to read the whole of the book to get a feel of what is going on. Apart from the fact that this is the most magnificent poetry and grapples with the issues that are at the very heart of the human condition, it contains some of the most wonderful writing about God in the whole of the Bible, in the whole of literature. If you really want to glimpse something of that, read the last few chapters, from Chapter 38 onwards. But here in Chapter 26 we have a kind of mini-preview of what is to come, together with some amazing insights into the God whom we try to worship in our own limited and stuttering way.

The first four verses are Job's sarcastic reply to Bildad, one of his friends who has tried to point out to Job the error of his ways. And then he embarks upon this short exclamation of wonder at the being and activity of God. Job looks at what he sees around him, the evidence, as he regards it, of God's presence and power in the universe, and dissolves into wonder. It's expressed poetically because, as we shall see, there is no other way to try and describe God. These are the words of a man standing wide-eyed in amazement, a man who is full of awe at the majesty of God, a man who is aware that he cannot even begin to talk about God and make any sense. In short, this passage – and the longer passage at the end of the book – demonstrates the kind of awe and wonder that we seem to have lost in much of our worship and in our relationships with God.

He speaks here of a God who can **see into every situation**. Much as the Psalmist describes it in *Psalms 139*, there is nothing, nowhere, no-one that is beyond the scrutiny of God's searching gaze. Even Death and Destruction, whom Job personifies here, are subject to the penetrating eyes of God. He can see everything. He knows all that is going on. He is supreme in the universe because he is omniscient – all-knowing, all-seeing. Of course he is: he made it all. He governs it all. He is the one who grants permission for it all. And if that is the case, we should be aware that he knows all about us, too. Look at what the writer of *Proverbs* says in *Proverbs 15:11*: “*Death and Destruction lie open before the LORD – how much more the hearts of men and women.*”

This is the God who **sustains the universe** that he has made. In *vv7-10*, Job wonders at all he sees of the world. God has spread out the heavens over empty space, he has hung the earth on nothing and filled the clouds to their limit with water without bursting them. For Job, these are marvels. He cannot comprehend how it happens. And then God has drawn the horizon across the world, separating the sky from the sea, giving each their limits and ensuring that the universe operates as it should from day to day. Such a God must indeed be magnificent and worthy of wonder.

Within that ordered universe, God is able to **stir up and still the storms**. He churns up the seas as if the great sea-monster Rahab is thrashing about in them. And then he calms them down again, blowing away the mischief making serpent Leviathan (the “*gliding serpent*” of v13. It’s a bit like that section in Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* which accompanies Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony, where the gods blow away the clouds and bring back the sunshine.

Here is a God, Job is saying, who is above and beyond all that we can experience and know. Here is a great God who does amazing things with death and storms and the raging seas. Here is a God who is magnificent and powerful and majestic and awesome. This is a great big God! And we respond that Job is a primitive man who cannot really understand what is going on. His account here is clearly influenced by the tales of the pagan gods, such as Mot, the god of death, Ba’al, the cosmic storm god, and Yam the god of the seas. He is basically ignorant of all these phenomena and has to try and find some explanation for what he sees in the world – and God is that explanation.

We, of course, consider our knowledge more advanced. We have no need to immerse ourselves in such mythological talk. We know what is going on here. Now we know what death is all about – we can explain why it is that we stop living. We can manage disease and illness. We can describe the processes of aging and dying. We even think we might be getting close to a way of preventing it happening at all.

Now we know what holds the universe in place. We can measure and plot the forces which sustain the earth’s orbit. We can calculate the distances and directions of the planets. We can quantify it all and extrapolate from that all kinds of other things. There is no wonder in it. We even know what the horizon is and why it’s there.

We can predict and even tame the storms. We forecast the weather and working out when the volcano will erupt and even, just this week, find ways of predicting the tsunami. We know that storms are caused by winds and pressures and not by pagan gods or mythological seas creatures. We know it all. We’ve worked it all out. We’ve written it down and tabulated it all and some would say we’re not actually all that far from finding an equation which will explain everything, a unified theory of the universe. Of course, we’re not influenced by the gods as Job was. But we are actually influenced by the gods of our own time, the gods of science and reason, the gods which many would say remove our need to wonder, deny our ability to marvel.

And yet ... and yet. The last verse of this chapter is one of those wonderful bits of poetry that you always wish you could have written yourself. Here in a nutshell, in a few well-chosen words, is what it’s all about – for Job and for us, and for everyone in between. “*These are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him!*” All our knowledge – Job’s limited scientific knowledge, our libraries and universities full of knowledge – is just a drop in the ocean as far as understanding God is concerned. God may roar in the hurricane and thunder in the earthquake, he may grab our attention through the Northern Lights or the colours of autumn, he may dazzle us with the Milky Way or the desert sun. But even those things are actually just a whisper compared with what he can do, compared with what he is and what he does that we cannot see or count or calculate.

God is infinitely greater, infinitely more awesome than anything we encounter here. He knows infinitely more than we can ever begin to understand. He is a great big God. And beyond the equations and the explanations there is such mystery, such wonder. This is the God who has overcome death in Jesus his Son, who has shown us through that resurrection that there is new life waiting for us to grab hold of. This is the God who has promised us a renewed creation and the opportunity of sharing it with him. This is the God who has offered us the possibility of eternal peace. This is God who, in allowing Jesus to come into this earth and die on the cross, has demonstrated a love that is incalculable, indescribable, incomprehensible.

And if this is just the whisper of God, the very edge of his being and activity, well – as Eugene Peterson translates the last line of this chapter, “*Whatever would we do if he **really** raised his voice?*” How could

we cope with the “*thunder of his power*”? Sometimes we think that we have tamed God. We have begun to understand the way his universe works, so we think we have begun to understand him. We have started to be able to count and calculate and quantify his works, so we think we have got him where we want him. We have tied up his acts in theological statements and constructed our neat little boxes within which we think we can allow him to perform as we want him to.

But this is an awesome God, an immense God, an infinite God. He is beyond our ability to describe with our words – even in poetry. We cannot depict him in drawings or drama. We cannot capture him in equations and formulae. We cannot even contain him in our doctrines and dogma. His Holy Spirit blows where he wants. He touches our lives as he pleases and not as we dictate. We cannot tame him to meet our hollow expectations nor harness him to fight our petty battles. This is a great big God. “*Who then can understand the thunder of his power?*” But do you know what? As we are about to celebrate in this bread and this wine – he loves you. Yes, you. And that is even more awesome.

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"A GREAT BIG GOD!"
Job 26:5-14

This is Job's short exclamation of wonder at the being and activity of God. Job looks at what he sees around him, the evidence, as he regards it, of God's presence and power in the universe, and dissolves into wonder. This passage – and the longer passage at the end of the book (from chapter 38) – demonstrates the kind of awe and wonder that we seem to have lost in much of our worship and in our relationships with God.

- Job speaks of a God who can **see into every situation** (vv5,6). (Look at *Psalm 139* & *Proverbs 15:11*)
- This is the God who **sustains the universe** that he has made (vv7-10).
- Within that ordered universe, God is able to **stir up and still the storms**.

Here is a God, Job is saying, who is magnificent and powerful and majestic and awesome. But we respond that Job is a primitive man who cannot really understand what is going on. His account here is clearly influenced by the tales of the pagan gods, such as Mot, the god of death, Ba'al, the cosmic storm god, and Yam the god of the seas. He is basically ignorant of all these phenomena and has to try and find some explanation for what he sees in the world – and God is that explanation.

We consider our knowledge more advanced. We know what death is all about. We know what holds the universe in place. We can predict and even tame the storms. We're not influenced by the gods as Job was, but we are influenced by the gods of our own time, the gods of science and reason, the gods which many would say remove our need to wonder, deny our ability to marvel.

But the last verse of this chapter is what it's all about: "*These are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him!*" All our knowledge is just a drop in the ocean as far as understanding God is concerned. God is infinitely greater, infinitely more awesome than anything we encounter here. This is the God who has overcome death in Jesus his Son, who has shown us through that resurrection that there is new life waiting for us to grab hold of. This is the God who has promised us a renewed creation and the opportunity of sharing it with him. This is the God who has offered us the possibility of eternal peace. This is God who, in allowing Jesus to come into this earth and die on the cross, has demonstrated a love that is incalculable, indescribable, incomprehensible. His Holy Spirit blows where he wants. He touches our lives as he pleases and not as we dictate. And he loves us, which is even more awesome.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you think it is true that we have lost a sense of wonder about God and the universe? What makes you think that?
2. Why do we feel we have to understand everything? Does it make us feel more comfortable – or less?
3. Is there a danger that we could be worshipping a "God of the gaps" – a God who is there only to explain the things we can't?
4. Is what we believe about God (our doctrine) complete and fixed for ever? Or are there still areas about which we need to keep an open mind?
5. What do you find awesome about God? Is that something that makes you fearful or secure?
6. How could we express more wonder and awe in our worship together?
7. This passage contains some wonderful poetry. Are there any passages in the Bible that you are particularly drawn to because they seem very well expressed?