

Eight

BILDAD—I

Bildad the Shuhite was the second of Job's three friends to speak. Remember chapter 2, verse 11:

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite.

We also need to remind ourselves, as we consider each of these three, what God says about them in chapter 42, verse 7:

After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.'

That tells us that, in all of what is happening here, what Job says is right, and what his friends are saying is wrong. That does not mean that everything they say is false. They are godly men, and good theologians, so they are not to be judged and condemned, but they are to be attended to with discernment.

BILDAD'S POSITION

Eliphaz, remember, began from the presupposition that human beings cannot be righteous or pure before God. So he magnified God, and made humanity to be of little account. He became quite deterministic and fatalistic about it. 'Human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward' (5:7). Eliphaz was a little bit stoical and pessimistic: he said, 'You have to put up with that situation, you have to knuckle under to it'. And he said, 'If you play the rules right, you will get looked after'. This was a kind of prosperity teaching which we saw came from an over-anxious application of the truth, which does not accord with reality—it does not accord with Job's experience, or with the experience of Jesus, or Paul, or others—the righteous who suffer. Eliphaz's God ended up being removed and indifferent, so Eliphaz had to say finally: Job must be a terrible sinner, if this God is so provoked against him.

Bildad the second speaker is not quite so old or wise as Eliphaz. He starts from a slightly different position, and he does not carry things through as far as poor old Eliphaz did. The hallmark of Bildad's contributions is that he has a cast-iron system, a doctrinal straitjacket, that he starts in, and that he finishes in, and that he never sees his way clear to break out of. He starts, admirably, with an unshakeable belief in the justice of Almighty God. Job has that belief in God's justice, too. It is to this that Job appeals. But for Bildad it is not so much a personal relationship, as Job is seeking, so much as a rigid, logical, doctrinal system. When that system is challenged, by Job, and by the situation that he faces, then all Bildad can do is to close up, and become obdurately insistent on the rightness of his doctrinal stance.

Bildad first speaks in chapter 8:

8:1 Then Bildad the Shuhite answered:
2 'How long will you say these things,
and the words of your mouth be a great wind?'

Bildad gets stuck into Job right away! Eliphaz says something similar to Job in his second speech (15:2), not his first, but Bildad from the start says, 'You are just mouthing empty words—it is like a big puff of wind'.

Then Bildad lays his foundation:

8:3 Does God pervert justice?
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?

There is the right way; there is the wrong way. God is fixed in the right way. He will not change from that. So it is cast-iron, like that.

Of course, it is true: God will not pervert justice, and the Judge of all the earth will not do wrong. But how large is Bildad's conception of this God?

THE SINS OF THE CHILDREN

In verse 4 he says that it is not just Job who is in the wrong. Remember one of the sufferings of Job was that all his children perished. Bildad, rather unfeelingly, gets stuck into Job's children. He must do that, you see, if he is to apply this system. He says, 'They have all perished, so they must have been terrible sinners, so they must have got their just deserts'. And that's that.

8:4 If your children sinned against him,
he delivered them into the power of their transgression.

That is just what Job doesn't need to hear. And that is really not the way Job approached God on behalf of his children. Think back to chapter 1, verses 4–5:

His sons used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the feast days had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' This is what Job always did.

Job knew the justice of Almighty God. He knew the seriousness of sin. Job also knew the provision that God had made for His mercy. So he made full use of that, in his prayer for his children, and his offering of sacrifice for them. Bildad appears to know nothing of that. The children have perished, and so they must have been terrible transgressors, and that's it. They have been delivered into the power of their transgression.

VENDING-MACHINE GOD

Bildad does urge Job to seek God and be accepted, but there is a condition attached: 'if you are pure and righteous':

8:5 If you will seek God
and make supplication to the Almighty,
6 if you are pure and upright,
surely then he will rouse himself for you
and restore to you your rightful place.
7 Though your beginning was small,
your latter days will be very great.

It is almost like a vending machine: put in the right coins, you get out the right package. If you are pure and right, then God will be bound to do this back to you; but

if you are not, he will be bound to do the opposite. That is the kind of system in which Bildad is working. You will get great reward, if you are pure and upright. Quite straightforward. Why can't you just accept that?

THE SYSTEMATISERS

Bildad goes, for his authority, to the olden days:

- 8:8 For inquire now of bygone generations,
and consider what their ancestors have found;
9 for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing,
for our days on earth are but a shadow.
10 Will they not teach you and tell you
and utter words out of their understanding?

He appeals to respect for the forebears and the tradition of the great teachers of the faith. That is something that we often do. We need to be careful how we do it, and that we are actually representing them rightly.

I was reading a book once about a fellow called Grimshaw, of Haworth. He was one of those involved in the evangelical revival in eighteenth century England. He was an Anglican minister, and Haworth was a little parish up in the north of England, and he just got on with preaching the gospel, under God. This book that I was reading was claiming, Ah, Grimshaw—he was one of the founders of *our great evangelical tradition!* That could not have been further from the mind of Grimshaw. He was just getting on with preaching the gospel. What he and others did had been taken, and set up into a system, 'the great evangelical tradition', and he had been put at the head of that. That is what happens, unfortunately, with all the great teachers, like Luther, and Calvin: they are men who were getting on with the job under God, and in the course of that they made certain statements, in their wrestling with God and with the situation they were in, and people then lock onto those statements *outside* the cut-and-thrust of the wrestling with God and with people that those great souls were engaged in. So, after Luther had gone, after Calvin had gone, the systematisers came in, and they took things that they had said, and they put them into categories. They then end up, sometimes, making those great teachers say things that they never really said, or not in quite that way. Because it is now at one remove from the cut-and thrust of that wrestling. The same thing will happen with teachers that are abroad today.

So Bildad is your armchair theologian, or your library-research theologian, who takes what some have said—like what the Bible says about the justice of God, or what the Bible says about rewarding the righteous, or what the Bible says about punishing the wicked—but then abstracts that and makes it into a system, which then he cannot see out of to the reality of God as God really is.

When Bildad puts his theology into words, he phrases it beautifully. This little piece from Bildad is some of the finest poetry in the Book of Job:

- 8:11 Can papyrus grow where there is no marsh?
Can reeds flourish where there is no water?
12 While yet in flower and not cut down,
they wither before any other plant.
13 Such are the paths of all who forget God;
the hope of the godless shall perish.

That is beautiful stuff. But as we read through this, we see there is no hope for the wicked. The godless person will just be destroyed. He says, That is the way it *must be*, with the wicked:

8:14 Their confidence is gossamer,
 a spider's house their trust.
15 If one leans against its house, it will not stand;
 if one lays hold of it, it will not endure.
16 The wicked thrive before the sun,
 and their shoots spread over the garden.
17 Their roots twine around the stoneheap;
 they live among the rocks.
18 If they are destroyed from their place,
 then it will deny them, saying, 'I have never seen you.'
19 See, these are their happy ways,
 and out of the earth still others will spring.

20 See, God will not reject a blameless person,
 nor take the hand of evildoers.
21 He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,
 and your lips with shouts of joy.
22 Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,
 and the tent of the wicked will be no more."

The problem with this, when we take the truth and set it up into a system, is that it then becomes automatic and self-perpetuating. It allows no room for the free sovereign action of the personal God. Even God must obey these logical rules that are imposed by the theologian on His truth.

It may be as Bildad sets out here, that the hope of the godless will perish. But God may decide to keep the wicked going. This is what Job later points out to Bildad, that Bildad cannot quite cope with. What about when God *does* keep the wicked going, for purposes of His own: perhaps to bless them, because He wants to send His rain on the just and the unjust (see Matthew 5:45); perhaps to judge them: to bring the pressure of His love to bear on their lives (see Luke 5:1–11); or perhaps for some other purpose of His own, that is not for us to say. Perhaps in His forbearance, to bring them to repentance (see Romans 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9). Or for whatever reason.

INCOMPARABLE GOD

Job sees through what Bildad is saying here. He is not satisfied with that tidy system, whether it is going to reward him or not. Reward is not what Job is wanting. He is not saying, I want to get my act right so I can get all my wealth back again, and get my family back, if that is possible. Job is not interested in that. He has come to the edge of his life, and he is not really concerned with those issues any more. What Job wants is God—he wants God to deal personally with him. He will not be content with any thing else.

In chapter 9, Job replies:

9:1 Then Job answered:
2 'Indeed I know that this is so;
 but how can a mortal be just before God?
3 If one wished to contend with him,
 one could not answer him once in a thousand.

Maybe Job is beginning to say in this chapter, 'I would rather be condemned by a warm, true living God, than rewarded by some kind of cold impersonal vending-machine system, however much it may favour me.' In chapter 9, he is not just answering Bildad; he is also harking back to what Eliphaz was saying. This may sound a little bit like what Eliphaz was saying here: that God is so highly exalted that you could never be just before Him—Eliphaz was saying human beings can never be pure before their Maker. I don't think Job is saying that here. 'How can a mortal be just before God—how can I come before God?' That is what he is asking. Eliphaz was despairing of this ever being possible. Job is insistent that it is possible, and he wants it to happen. He feels that everything is against him, and the action of God is hard and heavy against him, and he wants to be able to break through that and come before God and speak with Him. But he knows that, in doing that, it is not going to be on the basis of an evenly-balanced system, like Bildad was saying. Bildad was saying, 'You put this in, you get that out'. Job is saying, 'No, God's not like that'. Eliphaz is right when he says that, if you want to balance God and humanity off against each other, where is humanity? For God is God, and He is not going to be locked into a system that balances us out, one against the other. That is why he says, 'If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times.'

9:4 He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength
—who has resisted him, and succeeded?—

Job is saying a word to his comforters there: 'You think I am trying to harden myself against God, to stand up against Him. That is not what I am on about at all. That would never succeed. For look at God: who He is, what He does! God can remove a mountain—what will He do with a human being?'

9:5 he who removes mountains, and they do not know it,
when he overturns them in his anger;
6 who shakes the earth out of its place,
and its pillars tremble;
7 who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
who seals up the stars;
8 who alone stretched out the heavens
and trampled the waves of the Sea;
9 who made the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the chambers of the south;
10 who does great things beyond understanding,
and marvellous things without number.

There is no deficiency in Job's appreciation of God's greatness and His majesty. In fact, it seems whenever Job speaks about God, there is so much more welling up in his heart, and welling up in our hearts, than there is when the comforters attempt to speak about God, in the way that they want to put Him into their boxes or into their categories. Job's heart is so full of God that when he just gives expression to some of the very things that the comforters were trying to say, it comes across with so much more grandeur and majesty.

CAN I LAY HOLD OF GOD?

But this is also Job's problem:

9:11 Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him;

he moves on, but I do not perceive him.
12 He snatches away; who can stop him?
 Who will say to him, 'What are you doing?'

He is saying, 'I am searching for God in these sufferings of mine, and no way can I lay hold of *Him!* No way can I question what He is doing in that way'.

He goes on to talk of the greatness of God:

9:13 God will not turn back his anger;
 the helpers of Rahab bowed beneath him.

That is a reference back to the beginning of the Book of Genesis, where we are told that the earth was void and without form, and there was chaos, and the swirling depths of the ocean, and God sent out His creative word over all of that. There are various stories that are hinted at in the Bible about the kind of process by which God subdued chaos and established His order of creation. One of them was that there was a great chaos monster called Rahab, with all its cohorts, and in a mighty battle God subdued that. There are various hints of that kind of story coming through in the Bible, and this is one of them. Job harks back to that. He is saying, 'If God has a purpose against a person, you are not going to put a stop to that until God has done what God is going to do'. See how he comes back to God's sovereignty and God's freedom of action, and the greatness and the majesty of that, which Bildad was trying to restrict.

9:14 How then can I answer him,
 choosing my words with him?

If I try and put a prayer into the right words, how is that going to stop God doing what He is going to do?

9:15 Though I am innocent, I cannot answer him;
 I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.
16 If I summoned him and he answered me,
 I do not believe that he would listen to my voice.

I cannot make any claims on my own behalf against God. I must be on the basis of God's mercy, freely and sovereignly administered by God. 'If I summoned him and he answered me'—I think he means in the kind of way that Bildad says, so that we are sort of on an even footing, and He *has to* respond to my request that is phrased in the right way—if it was that, he says, I could not respect a God that worked at that kind of level.

Job goes then into a further description of his sufferings:

9:17 For he crushes me with a tempest,
 and multiplies my wounds without cause;
18 he will not let me get my breath,
 but fills me with bitterness.
19 If it is a contest of strength, he is the strong one!
 If it is a matter of justice, who can summon him?

We have seen before, and we shall see right through the Book of Job, that Job will want to deal with no one other than God. Satan does not get a mention in the mouth of Job, though we know he was involved in chapters 1 and 2. Job sees everything that is

happening, rightly, as the action of God in his life, and it is before this God that he now wants to come. This is the thing that the comforters can't come at.

Job also knows that if he was to approach God according to the evenly balanced system that Bildad is propounding, he would get nowhere:

- 20 Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me;
 though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse.
21 I am blameless; I do not know myself;
 I loathe my life.
22 It is all one; therefore I say,
 he destroys both the blameless and the wicked.
23 When disaster brings sudden death,
 he mocks at the calamity of the innocent.
24 The earth is given into the hand of the wicked;
 he covers the eyes of its judges—if it is not he, who then is it?

He says, 'I am innocent . . . I am blameless'. Remember that Job has not ever called himself sinless. We shall see again that he does acknowledge himself as a sinner: that there were sins in his youth, and there are iniquities that are uncovered and brought to his mind by this great suffering—as we do become very sensitive to our sin when suffering comes. Job is fully aware of that. He has already said, 'I must appeal for mercy'. You can only appeal for mercy if you are a sinner, and Job does that. But he is saying, In this matter of the sufferings that have come on me now, my present disposition towards God is not sinful, it is not wrong, I haven't charged God with wrong, and I still will not do that. I have acknowledged that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, and I have blessed the name of the Lord—in this suffering. That is what he is referring to here. 'I am innocent, I am blameless. You are trying to accuse me of coming against God, or trying to set myself against God in all of this, and you are telling me to submit and knuckle under to that. But I am not in a wrongful position in this suffering, as I am now.' That is what he is saying. It is in this that he is calling upon God vindicate him.

GETTING IT RIGHT?

It may be that not everything Job says in his suffering is wholly well judged and well balanced. In our sufferings we don't always see clearly—that is part of the depth of suffering—and we don't always say things that are completely judicious. So when he starts to say, 'He destroys both the blameless and the wicked'—well, we know that this happens, that everyone good or bad must die—and 'When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent', he begins here perhaps to overstep the bounds. When God finally speaks to Job, there are certain things that He must rebuke about Job. Even though He commends Job and the position he has taken over against the comforters, God at the same time must rebuke some of what Job has said in his anguish. This may be an instance of where Job has lost sight of God and the truth of God in some way.

Job does say, 'The earth is given into the hand of the wicked; he covers the eyes of its judges.' God does give the earth over to the wicked: He gives the earth over to the control of Satan, who is 'the ruler of this world' (see Luke 4:5–8, John 12:31–33, 14:30–31, 1 John 5:19). That is all part of the working out of His great purpose. The thing that Job is saying is: 'If it is not he, who then is it?' Who can stand alongside God? Not Satan, not any of the human race, not me. It is God who is

sovereign. Here Job is not charging God with wrong, but he is saying, ‘This is the way I can see it now’, and it does not fit at all with what Bildad has said.

Then again, he goes into spelling out the experience of his suffering, which is very great:

9:25 My days are swifter than a runner;
 they flee away, they see no good.
26 They go by like skiffs of reed,
 like an eagle swooping on the prey.

So much for what Bildad says about the endurance and prosperity of the righteous! But then, he says, if I try to put a brave face on it, and say I won’t try and work this out with God, I can’t do that either!

9:27 If I say, ‘I will forget my complaint;
 I will put off my sad countenance and be of good cheer,’
28 I become afraid of all my suffering,
 for I know you will not hold me innocent.
29 I shall be condemned;
 why then do I labour in vain?
30 If I wash myself with soap
 and cleanse my hands with lye,
31 yet you will plunge me into filth,
 and my own clothes will abhor me.
32 For he is not a mortal, as I am, that I might answer him,
 that we should come to trial together.

Job knows that if the whole of his life is weighed up before God, then there is plenty there that God would have every right to condemn him for. If he goes that way, he would not stand a chance. What he desires is to come before God for justification. But how can this come about?

9:33 There is no umpire between us,
 who might lay his hand on us both.

There is no third party in this, and there is no system that can make it as if there is a third party between us, by which we can negotiate. It’s God, and it’s me, and that’s all we can say!

9:34 If he would take his rod away from me,
 and not let dread of him terrify me,
35 then I would speak without fear of him,
 for I know I am not what I am thought to be.

Job is acknowledging that God has every right to lay His rod upon Job, but he is saying, ‘Nevertheless, I desire to have that closeness of relationship with You, I do want to speak with You directly. Not to make any claims for myself, not to put myself on the same level as God—for that could never be—but I do want to be before Him’.

WARM AND REAL, AND BIG ENOUGH

That is why Job does not hold back in giving voice to his sufferings, as we have seen before:

10:1 I loathe my life;

I will give free utterance to my complaint;
I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
2 I will say to God, Do not condemn me;
let me know why you contend against me.

It is because Job has such a great and a warm and real understanding of God that he does not bottle up, he does not button down, as the comforters are trying to tell him to do, but he speaks his heart, and he knows, 'Well, God has just got to be big enough to handle that, and that is why I will come out with it'. He is not trying to put himself in the right before God, or phrase it in such a way that it might be acceptable to God—he figures, 'Whether it is right, or whether it's not, God has got to be big enough to handle this, so I will say it anyway'. That is what all the great pray-ers do, like Abraham, and the Psalmist. They don't hold anything back before God. Simply *because they* know the greatness and the mercy and the reality and the truth of God as He really is.

10:3 Does it seem good to you to oppress,
to despise the work of your hands
and favour the schemes of the wicked?
4 Do you have eyes of flesh?
Do you see as humans see?
5 Are your days like the days of mortals,
or your years like human years,
6 that you seek out my iniquity
and search for my sin,
7 although you know that I am not guilty,
and there is no one to deliver out of your hand?

One of the prophets says, 'God is not a human being, that He should condemn or that He should try and follow through our sin to its bitter end, as we might' (see Hosea 11:8–9). Once again, Job is saying, 'We are not on the same level: You are not a human being like we are. You are not like these comforters who are trying to push me through in the full extent of my being a sinner. You are bigger than that':

10:8 Your hands fashioned and made me;
and now you turn and destroy me.
9 Remember that you fashioned me like clay;
and will you turn me to dust again?
10 Did you not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese?

Completely at God's mercy, stirred around, helpless.

10:11 You clothed me with skin and flesh,
and knit me together with bones and sinews.
12 You have granted me life and steadfast love,
and your care has preserved my spirit.

We saw that right at the beginning, how favoured Job was with God. Particularly in chapter 29, how Job really knew closeness with God right through his life, and delighted in Him, and was wise and mature and strong in that. These are the things that Job is appealing to. He is saying, 'Surely, all of that could not have been for nothing! Because we had such fellowship there, and I knew such a wonderful relationship with You, that surely what is happening now cannot be the last word.'

10:13 Yet these things you hid in your heart;
I know that this was your purpose.

Job is still saying, 'Even these sufferings are something that has come from God, for His purpose'. The same purpose by which God was showing favour to Job earlier is now the purpose by which He is inflicting these deep sufferings.

10:14 If I sin, you watch me,
and do not acquit me of my iniquity.
15 If I am wicked, woe to me!
If I am righteous, I cannot lift up my head,
for I am filled with disgrace
and look upon my affliction.

Note here again how Job does not deny his sin, or claim that it should be overlooked. Yet even Job's righteousness, in the face of this suffering, cannot really make a difference to him: he cannot hold that up as something that he can use to lever God away from him, or to get His hand off him, if that is what God is going to do.

10:16 Bold as a lion you hunt me;
you repeat your exploits against me.
17 You renew your witnesses against me,
and increase your vexation toward me;
you bring fresh troops against me.

Perhaps Job is saying there that even the comforters have been gathered together by God, as part of the compounding of his sufferings.

10:18 Why did you bring me forth from the womb?
Would that I had died before any eye had seen me,
19 and were as though I had not been,
carried from the womb to the grave.

Once again Job is saying, as we have seen before: 'Surely, if this is the outcome of life, it would be better never to have lived'. He is asking to die, but it would have been better never to have been born, or to have died in the womb.

10:20 Are not the days of my life few?
Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort
21 before I go, never to return,
to the land of gloom and deep darkness,
22 the land of gloom and chaos,
where light is like darkness."

If Bildad had been able to receive all of that, as Job was spelling out the depths of his suffering before God, and speaking to God, and witnessing to God, as he knows God to be, then maybe it would have cracked open some of that cast-iron system, and Bildad would have come to a revelation of God. We know later, in the end, God does speak to Bildad, as he speaks to Eliphaz and Zophar, and gets them to ask Job to pray for them, and they accept that ministry, and so do repent, and so participate in the kind of revelation of God that Job has received, and in the benefits of that. Before that happens, Bildad is still locked into his cast-iron system, and none of that warm,

palpable reality that Job is bearing witness to cracks that open, and he just becomes very tight-lipped about the whole thing—he can't handle it.

Gracious Father, we thank You that whatever we try to erect against You, to shore ourselves up, or to take hold of life in our own way, You do not let that stand; but that by Your word, and by Your action in our lives, You bring Yourself to us, and us to Yourself. Help us to know that You are God, that we are Your creatures, and to be glad of that, and to be glad of the great dignity to which You call us, that we might know You: not just know You, but know You as our Father, and us as Your children, and be conformed in Your wonderful image. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.