

The Wild Kingdom

By David Feddes

“Can you make a pet of him? ... Any hope of subduing him is false... Who then is able to stand against me?” Job 41:5-10

Have you ever thought to yourself that if God is real, he ought to do a better job of running the world? Have you ever wondered why God would allow so much sadness and pain, rather than making sure nothing bad ever happened? Have you ever wished that God would at least speak up and offer an explanation?

When terrible things happen, even the most godly people can't help crying, “Why me? Why this?” When finances collapse or loved ones die or sickness strikes, your world seems to make no sense. God seems to make no sense. Things you've always believed may seem less certain. Even if you hold on to some basic beliefs, those beliefs might not seem to help much. You feel empty, alone, and miserable. You feel that God is ignoring you or, worse yet, that he is deliberately targeting you and tormenting you. If only God would make himself known and explain your situation to you!

What if God did come and speak to you? What if God actually gave you an opportunity to have it out with him? If you've suffered things you didn't bring upon yourself, what would God say in response to your questions? And after God said his piece, how would you respond to him?

The Bible book of Job tells about a man who wants God to come and explain himself. Job is a good man who suffers bad things. Job's property is destroyed, Job's children and many of his employees are killed, and Job's health is ruined. Even after all that, Job still does not curse God or stop believing in him. But Job does protest and question why he should suffer so horribly when many other people who are far worse seem to be prospering. Job has friends who offer various explanations, but their words only made Job more miserable. Job keeps crying out for God himself to respond—and at last God does!

But instead of giving Job answers, God asks Job question after question after question, and God's questions don't seem to have much connection to Job's particular problems. God does not say a word about why Job lost his health and wealth. God does not say a word about why Job's children died. Instead, God gives Job a whirlwind tour of nature and asks him about things he can't explain or control, focusing especially on wild animals.

Why would God do that? If a man asks for answers about his own problems, why change the subject and talk about the wild kingdom? Well, it may sound strange, but God knows what he's doing. After Job meets the Lord and hears God's questions, Job suddenly has no more questions or complaints. Job is humbly submissive and totally satisfied.

When we struggle with pain and hard questions, we want an explanation, but is an explanation really our greatest need? A wrong explanation can do a lot of damage, and even an accurate explanation may not help. God's reasons often go beyond anything our minds can grasp, and even if we could grasp some of his reasons, answering the mind doesn't always heal the heart. We need trust more than we need understanding. We need wonder and worship more than we need to figure God out. We need to sense that whatever our personal troubles, we live in a world that is wild and full of wonders, and that behind it all stands a marvelous and caring Creator. When that reality comes home to us, we are humbled and healed.

A Whirlwind Tour

The Lord spoke to Job from a whirlwind. What is more wild and unpredictable than a tornado or a thunderstorm? You never know where a tornado might touch down. You never know where the lightning might strike. It can be scary, yet it can also be awesome to watch a storm in action. It was from such a wild storm that God's voice came to Job: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (38:3). God questions Job, and he starts by comparing the first steps of creating the world to the early stages of constructing a building:

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? ... Who marked off its dimensions? ... Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footing set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? (38:4-6)

Even in our scientific age, we can't explain how the universe came into being from nothing, how time and space got started, how matter and energy began. It is a marvel great enough to stump humans and make angels sing.

As the Lord continues to ask questions, he asks who gives water its properties and controls seas and clouds. God asks Job, Have you ever ordered a sunrise to end the night and send the evils of the darkness running for cover? Have you ever been to the bottom of the ocean—let alone the deeps of death? If you want to be such a know-it-all and think you could do a better job of running the world, can you control light and darkness? Can you direct snow and hail? Do you know where a lightning bolt begins or where a wind starts to blow? Do you direct thunderstorms? Do you water the ground with dew and rain? Do you give birth to frost or make ice? Did you conceive making liquid into a solid so that water turns to rock-hard ice? Can you control stars and constellations? Did you set up the laws for the earth? Do clouds and lightning bolts report to you as their boss? (38:8-35) God's world is too wild for us to control, too full of wonders for us to figure out.

Some things we are able to think about and know somewhat, but who invented the human mind or its powers of reason? God asks, "Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind?" (38:36) Some people with high-powered brains have claimed that it is not rational to believe in God. But where do they think their brain power comes from? From random evolution? In that case, their brain is a randomly evolved chunk of meat. There's no reason to expect a randomly evolved chunk of meat to know anything accurately, and there's no reason to expect a random world to be at all understandable.

But the God who created the world also created our mind. That's why our mind has at least some intelligence and the world is at least somewhat intelligible. Before we question God, we should honor him as the one who created our minds with the ability to question. Before we use our wisdom to judge God's wisdom, we must let it sink in that what little wisdom we possess is God's gift to us and is just a tiny speck compared to his boundless wisdom. Unless we're willing to grant that our mind comes from a Mind far greater than ours, all thinking is worthless and all things are nonsense. We can't escape the question God asked Job: "Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind?"

Wild Wonders

God's whirlwind tour of nature is just getting started. After asking mostly about non-living things, God asks Job about living things. He asks about animals, especially wild ones that are not tamed or cared for by humanity, weird ones that make you laugh or shake your head, worthless

ones that serve no human purpose. But what seems wild to us remains under God's care and rule. What seems weird to us is devised by God's wisdom. What seems worthless to us is entertaining and delightful to God.

Some pets and livestock are fed by humans, but wild animals and birds get fed in ways that don't involve humans at all. God asks Job, "Do you ... satisfy the hunger of the lions? ... Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God?" (38:39-41) Creatures in the wild kingdom don't depend on us but on God. Humans can damage fragile ecosystems and destroy creatures, but we can't create animals and birds, and we can't create ecosystems where wildlife flourishes. Only God does that.

Wild animals don't get food from humans, and they don't need human help to have new babies. God asks Job, "Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawns?" (39:1) We humans don't supervise or assist births in the wild. We don't count down the days till baby goats and baby deer are born. But thanks to God, wild animals give birth without us. "They crouch down and bring forth their young... Their young thrive and grow strong in the wilds" (39:3-4).

If we're tempted to think that the world revolves around us or depends on us, God questions us about creatures of the wild that don't depend on our help or follow our timing or serve our purposes. In Job's time, goats supplied people with milk; donkeys carried things; oxen pulled plows and wagons. Animals can be so useful to us that we might think animals exist only for our sake. But the Lord says otherwise. Besides tame species of goats, donkeys, and oxen, there are wild species. Mountain goats have babies and raise their young without giving milk to humans. Wild donkeys run free far from human settlements, serving no man and finding their own food. Wild oxen do their own thing; they don't work for people. If we think all creatures and events revolve around humanity, we'd better think again.

God asks, "Who let the wild donkey go free? Who untied his ropes? I gave him the saltland as his home... He laughs at the commotion in town; he does not hear a driver's shout. He ranges the hills for his pasture" (39:5-8). Wild donkeys don't serve human interests, but God enjoys them.

Likewise, wild oxen don't help humans by pulling plows the way tame oxen do. God asks, "Will the wild ox consent to serve you? Will he stay by your manger at night? Can you hold him to the furrow with a harness? ... Will you leave your heavy work to him?" (39:9-12). The wild ox is very different from his tame cousin. The wild ox might gore or trample a man, but he won't work for him. The wild ox has enormous power, but it's not a power that can be harnessed for human purposes. So how dare we expect that the wild ox's Creator can be tamed for human use and harnessed to our agenda? God is good, but he is not tame. He is not controlled by any man's wishes, and he does not work for us or take orders from us.

As God continues his guided tour of the wild kingdom, he draws Job's attention to a weird bird: the ostrich. The ostrich has wings and flaps them but never flies. The ostrich doesn't take very good care of her eggs or her young. It seems that when God handed out brains to his creatures, the ostrich was last in line. But for some strange reason, God gave that bird the ability to run really fast. (39:13-18) A bird that can't fly but can run like a racehorse—why did God make something so weird? Only God knows, and he's not telling. How can we know or judge the deep things of God if we can't even figure out the ostrich?

We shouldn't expect all things to serve our personal desires or make sense to us. They are designed for God's glory and pleasure. That's the main reason he made them. And that's the main reason he made us: for his glory and pleasure.

Even a supposedly tame, trained animal has enough strength and spirit to make us wonder and fear. Consider the horse. God asks, “Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Do you make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud snorting? He paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength, and charges into the fray” (39:19-21). A mighty warhorse charging into battle is a fearsome wonder, and even lesser horses are still amazing animals, as I know from firsthand experience growing up on a ranch. Many kids are drawn to horses and love horse stories. A strong spirited stallion can fill us with fascination and wonder, because the deepest source of its strength and spirit is the horse’s Maker.

God then turns Job’s attention to the freedom and majesty of two great birds, the hawk and the eagle. The Lord asks, “Does the hawk take flight by your wisdom...? Does the eagle soar at your command and build his nest on high?” (39:26-28) If the eagle is an emblem of fierce freedom, can we expect the eagle’s Creator to be less free and fierce than what he has made?

Too Much to Handle

At this point God stops questioning for a moment and gives Job an opportunity to speak: “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!” How does Job answer? “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth” (Job 40:2-4). After God’s questions from the whirlwind, Job retreats into silence, so the whirlwind continues with even more questions.

For a moment God interrupts his tour of the wild kingdom to ask, “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself? Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his?” (40:8-9) Job has questioned God’s justice and wondered why bad people sometimes have an easier life than good people, but does Job set the standard for justice? Can he save himself? Can he crush the wicked and bury them? If you can do all this, says God, “then I will admit to you that your own right hand can save you” (40:14). Otherwise, Job would be wiser to trust God’s justice and power to save the faithful and punish the wicked in his own way and timing.

After saying this, God again directs attention to wild creatures—two in particular: behemoth and leviathan. Behemoth is a huge land animal. God says, “Look at the behemoth, which I made along with you and which feeds on grass like an ox. What strength he has in his loins, what power in the muscles of his belly! His tail sways like a cedar... His bones are tubes of bronze, his limbs like rods of iron. He ranks first among the works of God” (Job 40:15-19). Is this huge behemoth an elephant, a hippopotamus, or maybe something even bigger and stranger, such as a giant plant-eating dinosaur? Whatever behemoth is, humans can’t handle him. But God can.

God also speaks of a water monster called leviathan. “Who dares open the doors of his mouth, ringed about with his fearsome teeth? His back has rows of shields tightly sealed together... When he rises up, the mighty are terrified.” Is leviathan a giant crocodile, or is he some other huge reptile or sea creature? Whatever this beast is, he’s too much to handle. You can’t catch him or tie him down or make him work for you. You can’t buy or sell him. You can’t attack or overpower him or intimidate him in any way. “Nothing on earth is his equal, a creature without fear” (41:33) Speaking of this mighty monster, God asks Job, “Can you make a pet of him? ... Any hope of subduing him is false; the mere sight of him is overpowering. No one is fierce enough to rouse him. Who then is able to stand against me? ... Everything under heaven belongs to me” (Job 41:5-10).

The Lord who created leviathan is too much to handle. If you can’t handle leviathan, behemoth, a lion, a grizzly, or a killer whale, how can you ever handle the God who made them

all and is stronger and wilder than any of his creatures? Don't try to challenge or control or tame the Lord. Don't try to figure God out or turn him into your personal pet. Instead, submit to him, trust him, worship him, and marvel at his awesome ways. At the same time, trust that if the Creator prizes wild animals that have little connection to man, the Creator also prizes and cares for humans made in his image.

When God finishes speaking, Job is awestruck. He responds, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted... Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:2-5). The moment Job gives up on himself and humbly leaves his future to God, the Lord lifts Job up and declares that Job has been his friend all along. After stunning Job, God stands with Job and gives him a new lease on life, a new family, renewed health and wealth. But even before those blessings are added, Job finds contentment in a direct encounter with God and in the mysterious thrill that has filled him during his tour of the wild kingdom with God.

Too Good to Be Told

It is humbling and thrilling to discover that you are not the center of the universe, that your opinion is not the final word, that many things exist which don't need you or serve you, that the world is filled with wonders beyond imagination, that the world is ruled by a God wild beyond explanation, terrible beyond fear, tender beyond hope.

Our ultimate comfort and joy do not come from figuring out or controlling everything. If you demand a tame, safe world and a God who fits into canned formulas, you are out of touch with the real God and the real world. British author G.K. Chesterton writes of Job's encounter with God and says, "Whatever this [world] may be, a good animal or a bad animal, [it] is at least a wild animal and not a tame animal; it is a wild world and not a tame world." Many people think "that the fine thing about the world is that it can all be explained. God says, in effect, that if there is one fine thing about the world, as far as men are concerned, it is that it cannot be explained."

God offers riddles we can't solve, wildness we can't tame—and somehow the wild riddles of God bring more comfort than the safe answers of pious religious friends. When Job's friends offer clear religious answers, Job's "question still remains an open wound," says Chesterton. But "God simply refuses to answer, and somehow the question is answered. Job flings at God one riddle, God flings back at Job a hundred riddles, and Job is at peace. He is comforted with conundrums."

When God comes in a wild wind and asks wild questions about his wild kingdom, he keeps his deepest purposes secret. But God drops hints, "sudden and splendid suggestions that the secret of God is a bright and not a sad one... like light seen for an instant through the crack of a closed door." When God finishes speaking, Job is left with mystery, but it's a good mystery. Having met God, Job rejoices that God is who he is and runs the world the way he does. "He has been told nothing, but he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told. The refusal of God to explain his design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man" (Chesterton).

One of the hardest riddles in this wild kingdom is that the King would let the best person suffer the worst things. That's what happened to Job—but not only to Job. When the time was right, the King himself came into his world not as a whirlwind but as a baby. Baby Jesus grew to perfect manhood, far outshining Job in holiness. Jesus, the God-man, suffered horribly to connect humanity to God and move his wild world toward its splendid destiny. From the dark

mystery of the cross shines the bright hope of resurrection. The supreme sufferer calls his loved ones to share in his suffering so that we may also share in his glory. As God's wild wisdom works all things for the good of those who love him, God's wild wisdom may also cause those who love him to suffer for the good of all things.

As God eventually restored Job, as he eventually resurrected Jesus, so he will raise and restore us. Beyond this wild world lies a world without evil, without tears, where God's people who now suffer will flourish, where even the fiercest animals live in harmony, where the Lord who spoke from the whirlwind and suffered on the cross will gather his faithful around a table of celebration.

Then some of our questions may be answered—but not all. Many questions will simply be swallowed up in wonder and joy. In the new creation, we will delight in knowing more and more about created things and in knowing more and more of the Lord. Yet wondrous as that knowledge will be, there will always remain depths in God that we will never know, mysteries that will remain forever hidden, available not to human thought but only to awe and worship. The thrill and wonder of God will forever be the mystery more satisfying than any explanation.