

15

God, Man and Nature

Why do bad things happen to good people? This is one of the most interesting, very important and highly unresolved questions in human life. The Bible narrates the story of a good man named Job¹. He is upright, God-fearing and prosperous. But one fine morning, he loses his children, his livelihood and his possessions. Later, he himself falls dreadfully ill and suddenly becomes a broken, dying man.

Job is unaware that God himself has permitted Satan to put his virtue to the test and he refuses to blame God for his sufferings. He accepts the situation stoically and does not grumble. Then he goes through different emotions, indulges in self-pity, tries to justify himself, argues out with his friends, and finally challenges God for an explanation. God who has been silent thus far, comes out in the open, as the Bible says out of the whirlwind or a violent storm, and thunders out a barrage of questions, the first one being: *Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Tell me, if you understand.*²

God does not refute any of Job's arguments about the injustice of life. He does not explain the cause of his suffering. Instead, He just orders Job: *Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.*³

¹ Job 1-42

² Job 38:4

³ Job 38:3

God sets before Job an endless series of questions⁴. Interestingly, many of them are about clouds, rain, snow and hail:

Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail?

What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth?

Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass?

Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice?

Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens when the waters become hard as stone, when the surface of the deep is frozen?

Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water?

Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, 'Here we are'?

Who has the wisdom to count the clouds?

Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens when the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth stick together?

⁴ Job 38

God's question paper is tough, out of syllabus, and too lengthy, there are no multiple choices, and Job is just overwhelmed. He cannot answer any of the questions, he can only quit. But God understands. The story of Job ends on a happy note, God makes him prosperous again and gives him twice as much as he had before. He makes the latter part of Job's life more blessed than the first.

But just imagine God posing these very questions to today's meteorologists. Would they be able to answer them? I really doubt. Yes, we do know in general how clouds form and how they precipitate, but that's about all. There has been tremendous progress in atmospheric and ocean modelling in the last twenty years, but modelling the structure of a cloud still remains a difficult problem and the process of tropical convection presents the toughest challenge to modellers today.

Again, the questions put to Job were rhetorical and they still remain so. God asks those questions not because he does not know the answers, but because he knows them while man does not. The secrets of nature are unfathomable. They are like a mountain range. You cross one mountain with great difficulty only to find another, yet taller mountain standing behind it to be crossed.

To me the reason why God asked these seemingly unanswerable questions was to assert his ownership and his overriding control of all nature including all atmospheric processes. At the same time, he has given enough freedom to man to exploit nature.

The first verse of the Bible expresses the great story of God's creation in just ten words: *In the beginning God*

*created the heavens and the earth.*⁵ Later on, the Bible reasserts: *The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*⁶ Once again it says: *The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.*⁷ There is no ambiguity in the Bible whatever about who owns this earth, it is God.

Immediately after the narration of the sequence of events in the process of creation, the Bible gives a clear indication of the relationship that God wanted to establish between man and nature: God wanted human beings to fill the earth and subdue it, to rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, every living creature on the ground, every seed-bearing plant, every tree that has fruit with seed in it.⁸ Thus everything in nature was made freely available to man for use and enjoyment. The exploitation of nature by man has God's sanction.

The Bible is clear again about man's ownership rights, that he has none: *We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.*⁹ *A man...as he comes so he departs, he takes nothing from his labour that he can carry in his hand.*¹⁰

In any case, no human being can possibly stake a claim to the ownership of the earth. Even what we legally own, be it land, material wealth or intellectual property, is ours only in a temporary and relative sense. One of the most famous short stories of Leo Tolstoy had as its title this question: "How much land does a man need?" The answer provided at the end of the story was "six by three", signifying that a

⁵ Genesis 1:1

⁶ Psalm 19:1

⁷ Psalm 24:1

⁸ Genesis 1:28-29

⁹ 1 Timothy 6:6

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 5:15

plot of that size would be enough to bury not just a man's body but also his ambitions and greed.

There are two parables of Jesus¹¹ about a master who has to go away leaving his property in charge of servants. The master expects his trusted servants to take care of the property and put it to good use in his absence, but that does not happen. These parables are equally applicable to man's use of the environment. Man is still free to use all that nature provides and that includes land, oceans and the atmosphere. Nature does not ask for a payment in return for oxygen, water or sunlight which are essential for our remaining alive. However, with this great power to exploit nature, comes an equally great responsibility. When we get something free, we have a choice. We can either be careless and destroy it, or we can be caring and nurture it. It is very clear that God expects us to reap nature's benefits without being reckless. Man need not bear a feeling of guilt while exploiting nature, but he must be aware of his limits.

Agriculture is perhaps the most legitimate and inoffensive manner of exploitation of nature by man: *A man reaps what he sows.*¹² The Bible does not always speak of this law in its agricultural context, but it also uses it in a figurative and illustrative way. In another parable¹³, Jesus explained the spread of the word of God in terms of the scattering of seed in different environments and the varying results. Paul advised: *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*¹⁴

The law of sowing and reaping, however, is not that linear or straightforward as it appears. One may sow but another

¹¹ Matthew 21:33-44, 25:14-30

¹² Galatians 6:7

¹³ Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 9:6.

may reap.¹⁵ *The race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant, or favour to the learned.*¹⁶ On a spiritual plane, Paul likens sowing and harvest to the resurrection of the dead. *The body is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory, it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.*¹⁷

The sowing-reaping law does not operate on its own. Paul said, *I planted the seed, Apollos watered, but God made it grow.*¹⁸ This is an indication that God can and does have the override switch in the process. David wondered in one of his psalms: *When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?*¹⁹ The truth is that the Maker of heaven and earth does care for each one of us and he does intervene in earthly matters.

It is clear that we have sown carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and we are now reaping the harvest of global warming. Again, like the Teacher of Ecclesiastes, we are experiencing the flaw that while one sows, another reaps. It is the western industrialized nations that have sown carbon dioxide, but it is the poorer developing nations who are reaping the ill-effects through the unified climate system of the earth. And like at many other compelling moments in our lives, we are raising the clichéd question: Where is God and what is he doing? Or is he just a bystander in the climate change process?

¹⁵ Ecclesiastes 6:2

¹⁶ Ecclesiastes 9:11

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:43

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 3:6

¹⁹ Psalm 8:3-4

We have seen in this book that there are innumerable instances mentioned in the Bible wherein God has used nature and natural phenomena in a seemingly supernatural manner to accomplish his purposes. But there is no Biblical account of man having brought about climate change. Thus the present episode of anthropogenically induced global warming and climate change has no analogue in the Bible. However, we have this promise of God to reassure us: *As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, will never cease...Never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.*²⁰ God is certainly mindful of what man is doing to his earth and he will certainly act at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner in order to keep his promise.



²⁰ Genesis 8:22, 9:11