



THE GREATEST OF COMFORTS

I'd like to begin today with an msn conversation I had with a member of our old youth group, a girl called Rosie, back when msn was still a thing.

It started like this:

S: Hey Rosie, you OK? We haven't seen you in a while.

R: I know. I don't know where to start. I still believe that God exists. But I don't know if I want to know Him anymore.

S: OK, why? Sorry if that sounds a bit abrupt.

R: No, it's OK. It's coz religion is so ... controlling. I don't want to feel bad about the music I listen to or my relationship with my boyfriend. I'd rather feel normal and learn lessons for myself. I don't want to live my life by a set of rules in a book, never daring to break them in case something bad happens. And if you really want to know, praying didn't help me or my mum, to get jobs or feel better or anything. I mean, I sang songs for Him every Sunday, I learnt all about Him, but it's done me no favours. Just made me more confused about everything.

S: OK.

R: So, there you go. I talked.

S: You did!

R: The fact is, Steve, life sucks – even if I conform to all a religion says. That’s why you haven’t seen me.

What do you say to that? Well ... I’ll tell you what I said in a minute. But Rosie’s thinking isn’t a million miles away from Job’s. Except with Job, we get, not just a response from his friends, or a response from Elihu, but from God Himself.

Job 38:1-18, 31-41; 39:1-4, 26-30; 40:1-7, 15-24; 41:1-11

God turns up, in answer to Job’s prayer. Not as *Elohim* or *El Shaddai*, but as *Yahveh* or “He Is” (Exodus 3:14). And we’re told He speaks “out of the storm.” What is this storm? Perhaps it’s a poetic description of all that Job has been through, or simply a sign of God’s presence. Whichever, it’s the message that matters: “You got questions, Job? I got some, too. All 70 of ‘em!” Now I was tempted to give you a 70-point sermon today. Fortunately, you can reduce it down to 7 categories – in which God takes Job on a spiritual tour of the universe:

1) “Who is this ...?” (38:2-3). “Who’s insulting Me and doesn’t know what he’s talking about?” We all need a reality check sometimes, because we all live like we’re the leads in this movie. But we’re not – He is! Because *He* is God.

2) “Where were you ...?” (38:4-7). “Where were you when I kickstarted the universe?” 13.5 billion years away! Which means anything we discover about our origins is a looking back. But God was there! Because He is all-time.

3) “Have you been ...?” (38:16-18). “Have you visited the world’s extremities? Seen them all simultaneously? From North Pole to South, from the seabed of the Pacific to the tip of Everest?” God has – because He is all-present!

4) “Can you know ...?” (38:31-33). “Can you know everything about the universe? Are you aware? Of every particle, atom, star, constellation, nebula, galaxy? Can you determine its future? I can – because I am all-knowing!”

5) “Do you give ...?” (38:39-39:4). “Do you hunt prey for the lioness? Do you act as midwife to the gazelle? Do you hold the life of every living thing in your hand? I do – because I am all-loving” (meaning life and death are intertwined).

6) “Could you tame ...?” (40:15-19). “Could you control the largest animal you know: the *behemot* (‘cattle’, but with singular pronouns – the African Elephant, perhaps)? Could you subdue it? Well I can! Because I am all-powerful!”

7) “Would you dare ...?” (41:1-5). “Would you dare put a lead on the scariest animal you know – the *livyatan* (the Nile Crocodile?) – and treat it like a pet? Well, I would! Because I created it. And I am its master and its king.”

Is God being unsympathetic here? Not as such. But He is highlighting His *unlimited* abilities, in contrast with Job's very *limited* ones (hence 70: 7 = completion; 10 = totality). And the point is: "Good news, Job: your friends were wrong, you haven't done anything to deserve this. Bad news: I'm still not going to tell you why it's happened. Because you are a tiny thread in a tapestry so big you will never get your head round it. But I am here. And I am near" (Psalm 75:1).

A Comforting Surrender

How does Job respond? He retracts his statement (42:1-6). And he says, *nichamti* – "I repent." *Nacham* means 'to sigh deeply.' So Job could be saying, 'I surrender', or alternatively, 'I'm relieved.' Or maybe both?! In surrendering to God, Job finds comfort. Not answers per se, but comfort.

Which brings us back to my conversation with Rosie:

R: The fact is, Steve, life sucks – even if I conform to all a religion says. That's why you haven't seen me.

S: Well, you could be right. I mean, look at Jesus! He went through more suckiness than most of us!

R: That's true ...

S: But even so, a relationship with God might be worth it. And that's what those rules are about, ultimately: a relationship with God. Every relationship has its rules. Just ask a married couple!

R: Lol! So, you're saying a relationship with God will protect us in some way? From the crap?

S: No. I'm saying there will still be crap, regardless. Like Kellie's parents – they lost their first child when she was only 3. Pretty crap, right?

R: :(

S: And being married to each other didn't explain why that happened. But perhaps it made it more livable. And I think a relationship with God is the same. Coz that's the only thing that can carry us through the hard times. Not adhering to a bunch of rules coz we're scared, but putting our trust in the one who loves us enough He was willing to live – and die – for us.

At which point, she said she had to go. And that was the last I heard from her. Now my prayer for Rosie is that she has come to know the God who loves her and has a plan for her. But what about you and me?

We will all, at some point, feel like Jesus has dropped us. Praise God: He is more than capable of holding onto us – and He's not going anywhere (John 10:27-30)! But will we hold onto *Him*? Onto the One whose hands are bigger than ours?

Will we trust the One whose Name is Near. Forever?