

RIVER OF LIFE

by

JAMES S. STEWART

1972

ABINGDON PRESS
Nashville and New York

VI RUMOUR OR REALITY?

'Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou Me . . . Then Job answered the Lord, and said . . . I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes'—Job 38:1-3; 42:1, 5, 6.

'I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear.' Well, that is something at any rate. Not much of a creed perhaps, but at least better than nothing: hardly a trumpet-toned confession, but always a beginning.

In one sense, of course, hardly anyone goes through this world without hearing of God by the hearing of the ear. Even our sceptics and agnostics and secularist critics have at least heard of Him. And as for most of us in this church today, we have heard of God from our earliest days and our mothers' arms. One Name above all glorious names has thrust itself upon us, all down the journey of the years. 'Have you not known,' cries Isaiah, 'have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning, from the foundations of the earth?'

But now observe—this is very important—the period of Job's life to which these words apply. 'I have heard of Thee'—that was in his prosperous, untroubled days. That was when everything was stable and normal and secure. He was then the typical, decent, well-to-do citizen, accepting his privileged social status as a right. Religious? Oh yes, he was religious. In fact, he could be quite eloquent about that, with a warm glow of sentiment at the thought of his religion and what it meant to him. Not that it would ever have occurred to him in those days to call him-

self a 'miserable sinner'. He was not miserable, and he did not feel much of a sinner. Those Chaldeans over the border, they were sinners all right—those beastly brigands always indulging in border raids and thieving their neighbours' cattle—miserable sinners indeed: but for himself, his life and character were satisfactory enough. That was Job as he had been once upon a time. That was the period of his life of which, looking back now, he says 'I had heard of Thee, Lord, with the hearing of the ear.'

Now let us pause there for a moment. For this is where a good many of us who profess and call ourselves Christians stand today. 'I have heard of Thee.' So often it stops at hearsay. In fact, we rather like to have it that way—inherited, or traditional, or conventional, rather than real and alive and experimental. We believe in God coolly and objectively, but not with any kind of breathless gratitude, not with the desperate passionate intentness of the man who cried—'My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?'

'I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear.' It is the difference between studying the map of a country and actually living in the country itself. You can be quite a connoisseur in maps, without once setting foot abroad. You can know a lot of theology, and yet be detached and non-committal as to the divine reality.

I am not decrying maps—nothing so foolish. They tabulate what others have discovered; they are necessary for anyone who is to go travelling. I am not minimising the theology which is the map of the Kingdom of God: it tabulates what generations of Christians have found, and it is necessary for anyone who would be a pilgrim. But surely the important thing is not to know all about the map: it is to get into the country ourselves. Why should we, why should anyone, stop short at—'I had heard of Thee with the hearing of the ear'? It is so stale and sterile, that religion! Job did not stop there. Suddenly he adds—'But now—now mine eye seeth Thee!' What had come in between? What had turned hearsay into direct encounter?

Two things: an experience and a revelation. An experience of life in the depths, and a revelation of God in the heights: two events—which were really not two, but one. In actual fact, they interlocked and interpenetrated each other indissolubly. But it

will help us to clarify what happened if for the moment we view them apart.

First, the experience. It is there in the early chapters of the book: this man's experience of trouble, dreadful, heartbreaking trouble. And mark this well: it was not only his health and his home and his happiness that had crashed in one all-engulfing cataclysm—though that was true. But something else as well had gone with the wind of that frightful hurricane: his philosophy of life, his conventional code which had never faced up to the depth and tragedy of existence, his conscious rectitude and religiosity—that too had crashed in ruin. And the man looked up from the wreckage, 'I had heard of Thee with the hearing of the ear; but now—now out of the depths—mine eye seeth Thee!'

Now we all know there are many different ways of encountering God. Other men have met God along quite different roads—Wordsworth in nature, Haydn in music, Teillard de Chardin in science, and so on. But here is one of the classic ways—the way of trouble, the way of the wind and the whirlwind. When a man faces the night and the tempest; when civilisation finds the old secure foundations shaking and tottering beneath it; when a nation looks out over a final abyss, as we did after Dunkirk, or as all the nations do today, poised on the precipice of this nuclear age; when the great inexorable questions about the meaning of life and the purpose of it all hit our souls like a tornado—it can be then, in the mercy of providence, that the hour of vision comes.

John Bunyan was thrown into prison. It was a terrible experience. But listen! 'Never in all my life,' he declared, 'have I had so great an inlet into the Word of God as now. Those Scriptures that I saw nothing in before have begun in this place to shine upon me.' The Covenanters, hunted and harried over the moors, declared that never had they experienced such fellowship with Christ as when the enemy dragons were after them. 'I was not persuaded into religion,' wrote Cowper the poet, 'I was scourged into it'—not persuaded, scourged. And anything that crashes violently through the defences of our common days can be a potential preparation for a new coming of the Lord. 'I had heard,' said Job, 'in my secure untroubled days that now seen

so fantastically remote, I had heard of Thee with the hearing of the ear; but now—in the devastating experience that has torn up my life and battered my defences—now mine eye seeth Thee!'

I am not saying, mark you, that trouble always has this effect. That would not be honest. Trouble does not automatically sanctify. Sometimes it does the opposite. Sometimes it breeds not saints but cynics. Sometimes it does not soften the spirit, but makes it hard and bitter. The fact is, trouble in itself is neutral. It needs something else—it needs the Spirit of God—to make it not neutral but positive and creative. Listen to one who had found this great secret. 'It doesn't matter,' wrote Hudson Taylor of China, 'how great the pressure is; it only matters where the pressure lies—whether it comes between you and God, or whether it presses you near and ever nearer to His heart of love.' That is the great question. Is the pressure of life to thrust you into unbelief and denial—or to thrust you into the arms of the eternal?

So we come back to Job. I have said there were two things that turned his hearsay, second-hand religion into direct, first-hand encounter—two events that were really not two, but one. There was experience—we have seen that now, the experience of life in the depths. Along with that, there was revelation, the revelation of God in the heights.

Job, of course, had no vision of Christ, such as we have to help us through the dark places. But he did have a revelation of another kind.

It was indeed an overpowering revelation. You must read again those magnificent closing chapters of the book, where God speaks out of the whirlwind, that colossal cataract of questions from the mouth of the Almighty. 'Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up thy loins like a man, and answer Me! Do read it: it is so relevant today when there are voices, influential confident voices, telling us that man's cosmic achievements have dethroned the God of the Bible, so that we are now free to start playing at being little gods for ourselves. What crazed and fatuous nonsense! Here, to demolish it, is this torrent of questions from the mouth of the Almighty, rapid, relentless, resistless—more than one hundred and twenty verses

of them: 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Hast thou commanded the morning forth? Canst thou bind the Pleiades or loose the bands of Orion? Canst thou play with the stars? Hast thou an arm like God?'—and so the torrent of questions rolls on and on, till you almost expect to hear Job shouting, 'O God, that's enough! Have mercy. Stop before You bludgeon me unconscious!'

But now, look! What was actually happening was this—that under the hammering of those questions something that had been hard and frozen in Job's heart was melting. Under the self-disclosure of God Almighty, he was beginning to see himself as he truly was: to see, in the light of the overwhelming power of the eternal his own powerlessness, in the light of the infinite wisdom his own infantile pretensions, in the light of that blazing holiness his own smudged radical corruption. 'Now mine eye seeth Thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'

How does it strike you, that revulsion and self-abhorring? Is it just the nauseating piety of a grovelling self-depreciation? That is certainly what our Freudian friends would call it. Most of us do not take kindly to Job's language, do we? We shrug it off with the word 'morbid'. We say to the poor preacher, 'Why in all the world choose a text like that? Couldn't the man have found something more cheerful in the Bible to talk about?'

No, it is not congenial to the modern mood. It is not considered appropriate to man's maturity and mastery of nature in this technologically sophisticated age. The modern mood is to say—'What a wonderful architect of destiny man is! What a brave new world he is fashioning! What a marvellous Utopia he is heading for!'

Yes, perhaps. I am not minimising any of this twentieth century's colossal achievements. One would have to be an ungrateful fool to do that. What I do have to say is this: that unless I have stood where Job stood when he bowed his head and cried 'I abhor myself, I am stripped of everything; nothing in my hands I bring', unless I have been there, I have never begun to grasp what Christ's religion is all about—dying in order to live—and certainly I have never reached the point where my human personality can have its conventional crust broken up, and be ready

to receive at the depths of its being the seal and impression of God.

'I repent in dust and ashes', declared Job. Suppose we ask: what does that word repent mean today, in the light of the Christian revelation? It means change direction, reorientate my life, face resolutely the fact of my human impotence to be my own redeemer—and then turn right round and *face Jesus Christ*, with all the windows of my being flung wide open to the inrush of His triumphant power.

It is all focused in these two words: face Christ. We have seen how God confronted Job in an experience of darkness, and in a sudden flash of revelation. Today for us it is the same, yet gloriously different.

God confronts us in the darkest hour of terrible trouble that ever entered history: we call it now Good Friday. God meets us in a place of darkness such as was never seen nor known since time began nor ever again shall be. He meets us at the cross, the place where Jesus takes all the troubles of the world upon Himself. There in that death of violence and glory, in that fierce whirlwind hour of cruelty and passion; there, not sitting remote and aloof in some high untroubled heaven, but down in the ferocious shambles of this tragic earth, which still today is so full of muddle and misery, violence and devilry; there on the eternal gibber of history—God meets us there. Out of the whirlwind the Almighty answers, the whirlwind of Calvary. And what can I say but this? 'I had heard of Thee with the hearing of the ear: but now—now at the cross—mine eye seeth Thee!' And if that means dust and ashes, as it does, it certainly does not leave me there; for this is the vision of God that gives beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, so that the dirge of self-abhorrence changes into the shouts and hallelujahs of the redeemed.

Let me, in closing, make this quite personal. Today someone has a heavy burden. I plead with you: do look out beyond yourself to the great burden-bearer of humanity!

Surely you must believe it—that if out of that terrible trouble of Calvary the eternal love brought victoriously the salvation of the world, it is not beyond its power to bring something positive

and shining and creative out of your trouble.

This is the logic of the gospel. It is not in any sense an emotional appeal. It is an appeal by the strict logic and rationality of faith.

The question is this. Do you think it likely that, having died on the cross for love of you, He would then refuse the minor gift you are needing now? That having given His life, He would then refuse a cup of cold water?

I do not know the particular private problem that may be tormenting the soul of someone here today, nor what secret sorrows may be present. I do not know what the darkness of the future hides. I only know that Christ, who died for love of you, has given His promise and is quite certain to be there. I only know that, because He is there, you can see the dark hour through and lead captivity captive. I only know you can face the wind and the whirlwind by His reinforcing grace.

And I pray it may be one result of this hour of worship that someone who came in here weary and heavy-laden may go out with spirit made strong and calm in the ineffable serenity of Jesus.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;

Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness . . .

I triumph still if Thou abide with me.

Do you remember how Bunyan's pilgrim, at the beginning of his journey, met Evangelist and asked him for directions about the way? Evangelist pointed into the distance, and said 'Do you see yonder wicket-gate?' Christian looked, and looked again, and had to answer 'No.' Then said Evangelist, 'Do you see yonder shining light?'—almost as though to say 'Do you see one spot where the darkness is not quite so dark as all the rest?' And Christian gazed, shading his eyes with his hand, and then answered—'I think I do.' Then said Evangelist, 'Keep that light in your eye. That is the way for you!'

Today it is not always easy to see the gate—the gateway that leads through to a truly authentic existence and to fullness of life. There is so much that is perplexing and difficult to understand, perhaps doctrines and dogmas of the Church that leave

you cold. But today, I offer you Christ—the only thing, after all, the Church exists to do—and I ask: Do you see you shining light? Or at least, do you see one spot in the darkness where the darkness is not quite so dark as all the rest? And if you say, 'Yes, I think I do,' then that is salvation. That is everything you need. 'I had heard of You, O God, with the hearing of the ear; but now, in the face of Jesus, my eye sees You, luminous against the darkness of the world.'

That is the way for me, for you, for all mankind. Do believe this thing I am telling you. Do act upon it. And God bless you, pilgrim soul, upon the way.

And in that light of life you'll walk
Till travelling days are done.