

Episode Eighty-Three - Meteorology: Thunder and Lightning Part One

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Welcome to Episode Eighty-Three of Lucretius Today.

I am your host Cassius, and together with my panelists from the EpicureanFriends.com forum, we'll walk you through the six books of Lucretius' poem, and discuss how Epicurean philosophy can apply to you today. We encourage you to study Epicurus for yourself, and we suggest the best place to start is the book, "Epicurus and His Philosophy" by Canadian professor Norman DeWitt.

For anyone who is not familiar with our podcast, please visit EpicureanFriends.com where you will find our goals and our ground rules. If you have any questions about those, please be sure to contact us at the forum for more information.

In this Episode 83 we will read approximately Latin lines 68 through 164 as we continue to open Book Six.

Now let's join Don reading today's text.

Munro Notes-

43-95: once more I mount my chariot, to tell what remains to be told of the things which go on above us, and to dispel the causeless fears of men who believe such things to be tokens of divine wrath : the gods will indeed plague you, if you so believe; not that they will themselves do you any hurt, but the images proceeding from their holy bodies will stir up these vain fears and poison existence. I have now therefore to sing of thunder, of tempests, of other things that take place in the sky.

96-120: thunder conies from the collision of clouds; the denser they are, the deeper the rumbling; sometimes the noise is like that of a sheet of canvas blown about, sometimes like the crackling of paper; sometimes the clouds graze each other sideways and occasion a dry protracted sound.—We again come to matters beyond the certain test of sense; of which therefore many explanations may be and consequently are equally true: the remarks appended to v 533 will apply here and to what follows.

121-131: sometimes the thunder makes a noise like the crack of doom, when a storm of wind eddies round within a cloud and hollows it out, until at last it explodes with a frightful crash.

132-159: thunder may likewise come from winds blowing through rough branchy clouds ; or from the wind bursting the cloud by a direct onset; or waves may break in the clouds, like those

on the sea; or the hot bolt may fall into a wet cloud and hiss like hot iron ; or into a dry one and make it crackle like bay-leaves in the fire; again the crash of hail and ice in the clouds compressed by the wind may be the cause.

160-172: the flashes of lightning are struck out by the collision of clouds: the flash is seen before the clap is heard, because light travels faster than sound.

Browne 1743

[68] Unless you purge your mind of such conceits, and banish them from your breast, and forbear to think unworthily of the gods, by charging them with things that break their peace, those sacred deities you will believe are always angry and offended with you; not that the supreme power of the gods can be so ruffled as to be eager to punish severely in their resentments, but because you fancy those beings, who enjoy a perfect peace in themselves, are subject to anger and the extravagances of revenge: and therefore you will no more approach their shrines with an easy mind, no more in tranquility and peace will you be able to receive the images, the representations of their divine forms, that form from their pure bodies and strike powerfully upon the minds of men: From hence you may collect what a wretched life you are to lead.

[80] That the rules therefore of right reason may keep these evils at the greatest distance from us, though I have offered many things upon this subject before, yet much still remains to be observed, which I shall adorn with the smoothest verse. And first, the nature and phenomenons of the heavens must be explained. And now I sing of tempests, and the flaming blasts of lightning; how they fly and from what cause they dart through all the air, lest, when you view the several parts of heaven, you tremble and, mad with superstitions, ask whence comes this winged fire, and to what quarter of heaven does it direct its course; how does it pierce through walls of stone, and having spent its rage goes out again? The causes of which events, since men cannot assign by the laws of reason, they must, they suppose, be effected by the power of the gods.

[92] And thou Calliope, my skillful muse, the joy of men and pleasure of the gods, lead on the course and guide me to the goal, that by thy conduct I may gain a crown and end the race with glory.

[96] First, the blue arch of heaven is shaken with thunder because the airy clouds, flying aloft, are forced by adverse winds and strike together; for where the sky is clear you hear no noise; but where the clouds are thick and drive in troops, thence comes the louder sound and murmur through the air. Besides, the clouds are not so solid in their contexture as stones and wood, nor so thin as mists and flying smoke, for then, depressed by their own weight, they would either fall abruptly down as stones, or like smoke they would disperse, and not be able to keep in the chilling snow and showers of hail.

[108] They give the crack through the wide space of heaven, as curtains strained upon the posts and beams in lofty theatres, when ruffled by the boisterous winds and blown to pieces,

they make a rattling noise like paper torn. This thunder, you observe, will sound like cloths spread out, or flying sheets, when tossed by strokes of wind they roll and flutter through the sky. And sometimes the clouds will not directly meet, and engage front to front, but in their different motions will rudely shock the sides of one another as they pass. Hence comes that dry crashing sound we hear that lasts for some time before it breaks its close prison and roars out.

[121] All things, you see from hence, will shake and tremble at the dreadful clap. And the heavens (the mighty walls of this wide world) are torn and burst asunder in a moment when a collected force of restless wind gets suddenly within a cloud, and there enclosed it rolls furiously about, and stretches the hollow space, still more and more, until the sides grow thick and are condensed, and when it summons its whole strength, and rages to get free, then comes the frightful break; it flies abroad with horrid noise. Nor is this strange when a small bladder full of wind will likewise give a mighty crack when it is suddenly burst.

[132] When the winds strike violently upon the clouds this may produce a noise, for we see the branched clouds, with their rough edges, are driven about in various manners, as the blasts of south-west winds, blowing hard upon the thick woods, the boughs give a sound and the branches rattle through the air.

[137] And sometimes the violent force of a fierce wind will beat directly, with all its rage, upon a cloud, and cut it asunder. That the winds will shatter the clouds is evident by experience, for here below, where their power is much weaker, they will overturn the strongest trees and tear them up by the roots.

[142] And then the clouds, like waves, roll about in the wide ocean of the air, and cause a roaring noise by dashing together. The same happens in large rivers, and in the wide sea, when it is broken and rages with the tide.

[145] And sometimes the fiery force of lightning falls from one cloud into another. If a cloud full of moisture receives this fire it extinguishes it with great noise, as a red-hot iron, just taken out of the glowing heat, hisses when we plunge it hastily into cold water. But if a dry cloud receives the flame, it takes fire instantly, and rattles in the air, as when a fire, raging with mighty force, is driven by rushing winds upon a hill covered with laurels, and sets all in a blaze. For nothing burns with a more dreadful noise and crackling flame than the leaves of the Delphic Laurel, sacred to Apollo.

[159] And lastly, pieces of ice and showers of hail, enclosed in mighty clouds, will often sound like thunder, for the winds have driven and pressed them close; these mountainous clouds, being condensed, will burst and discharge their weight of ice and hail.

[160] It lightens when the clouds, by violent strokes in meeting, beat out many seeds of fire and strike as flint and steel, or stone and stone; for then the light leaps out and scatters shining sparks of fire.

[164] But we never hear the thunderclap til we have seen the lightning, for the images of things approach our ears much slower than they reach our eyes. This you prove when you observe a

fellow at a distance is cutting down a tree; you see the blow struck before you hear the stroke. And so we see the lightning before we hear the thunder, though the noise and flame fly out together, and proceed from the same cause, the same shock and bursting of the clouds.

Munro 1886

[68] Now unless you drive from your mind with loathing all these things, and banish far from you all belief in things degrading to the gods and inconsistent with their peace, then often will the holy deities of the gods, having their majesty lessened by you, do you hurt; not that the supreme power of the gods can be so outraged that in their wrath they shall resolve to exact sharp vengeance, but because you will fancy to yourself that they, though they enjoy quiet and calm peace, do roll great billows of wrath; nor will you approach the sanctuaries of the gods with a calm breast, nor will you be able with tranquil peace of mind to take in those idols which are carried from their holy body into the minds of men as heralds of their divine form. And what kind of life follows after this, may be conceived.

[80] But in order that most veracious reason may drive it far away from us, though much has already gone forth from me, much however still remains and has to be embellished in smooth-polished verses; the law and aspect of heaven have to be grasped; storms and bright lightnings, what they do and from what cause they are borne along, all this has to be sung; that you may not mark out the heaven into quarters and be startled and distracted on seeing from which of them the volant fire has come or to which of the two halves it has betaken itself, in what way it has gained an entrance within walled places, and how after lording it with tyrant sway, it has gotten itself out from these.

[92] Do thou, deft muse Calliope, solace of men and joy of gods, point out the course before me as I race to the white boundary-line of the final goal, that under thy guidance I may win the crown with signal applause.

[96] In the first place the blue of heaven is shaken with thunder because the ethereal clouds clash together as they fly aloft when the winds combat from opposite quarters. For no sound ever comes from a cloudless part of heaven, but wheresoever the clouds are gathered in a denser mass, from that part with greater frequency comes a clap with a loud growl.

[108] Again, clouds cannot be either of so dense a body as stones and timbers, nor again so fine as mists and flying bodies of smoke; for then they must either fall borne down by their dead weight like stones, or like smoke they would be unable to keep together and hold within frozen snows and hail showers. They also give forth a sound over the levels of the wide-stretching upper world, just as at times a canvas-awning stretched over large theaters makes a creaking noise, when it tosses about among the poles and beams; sometimes too rent by the boisterous gales it madly howls and closely imitates the rasping noise of pieces of paper: for this kind of noise too you may observe in thunder: you may observe again the sound which is heard when the winds whirl about with their blows and buffet through the air either a hanging cloth or flying bits of paper. For sometimes the clouds cannot meet front to front indirect collision, but must rather move from the flank and so with contrary motions graze leisurely

along each other's bodies; whence comes that dry sound which brushes the ears and is long drawn out, until they have made their way out of their confined positions.

[121] In this way also all things appear to quake often from the shock of heavy thunder, and the mighty walls of the far stretching ether seem in an instant to have been riven and to have sprung asunder; when a storm of violent wind has suddenly gathered and worked itself into the clouds and, there shut in, with its whirling eddy ever more and more on all sides forces the cloud to become hollow with a thick surrounding crust of body; afterwards when its force and impetuous onset have split it, then the cloud thus rent gives forth a crash with a frightful hurtling noise. And no wonder, when a small bladder filled with air often emits a hideous sound if suddenly burst.

[132] It can also be explained how the winds, when they blow through the clouds, make noises: we see branching and rough clouds often borne along in many ways; thus, you are to know, when the blasts of the northwest blow through a dense forest, the leaves give forth a rustling and the boughs a crashing.

[137] Sometimes too the force of the strong wind in rapid motion rends the cloud, breaking through it by an assault right in front: what a blast of wind can do there, is shown by facts plain to sense, when hereon earth where it is gentler it yet twists out tall trees and tears them up from their deepest roots.

[142] There are also waves among the clouds and they give a kind of roar as they break heavily; just as in deep rivers and on the great sea when the surf breaks.

[145] Sometimes too when the burning force of thunder has fallen out of one cloud into another, if haply the latter contains much moisture when it has taken the fire into it, it drowns it at once with a loud noise; just so iron glowing hot from the fiery furnaces sometimes hisses when we have plunged it quickly into cold water. Again if the cloud which receives the fire is drier, it is set on fire in an instant and burns with a loud noise; just as if a flame should range over the laurel-covered hills through a whirlwind and burn them up with its impetuous assault; and there is not anything that burns in the crackling flame with a more startling sound than the Delphic laurel of Phoebus.

[159] Then often too much crashing of ice and tumbling in of hail make a noise in the great clouds on high; for when the wind packs them together into a confined space, the mountains of storm-clouds congealed and mixed with hail break up.

[160] It lightens too, when the clouds have struck out by their collision many seeds of fire; just as if a stone were to strike another stone or a piece of iron; for then too light bursts out and fire scatters about bright sparks.

[164] But we hear the thunder with our ears after the eyes see the flash of lightning, because things always travel more slowly to the ears than those which excite vision travel to the eyes. This you may perceive from the following instance as well: when you see a man at a distance cutting with a double-edged axe a large tree, you perceive the stroke before the blow carries

the sound to the ear: thus we see lightning too before we hear the thunder, which is discharged at the same time as the fire from the same cause, being born indeed from the same collision.

Bailey 1921

[68] And unless you spew out all this from your mind and banish far away thoughts unworthy of the gods and alien to their peace, the holy powers of the gods, degraded by thy thought, will often do thee harm; not that the high majesty of the gods can be polluted by thee, so that in wrath they should yearn to seek sharp retribution, but because you yourself will imagine that those tranquil beings in their placid peace set tossing the great billows of wrath, nor with quiet breast will you approach the shrines of the gods, nor have strength to drink in with tranquil peace of mind the images which are borne from their holy body to herald their divine form to the minds of men. And therefore what manner of life will follow, you may perceive.

[80] And in order that truest reasoning may drive this far from us, although much has already gone forth from me, yet much remains to be adorned with polished verse; we must grasp the outer view and inner law of the sky, we must sing of storms and flashing lightnings, of how they act and by what cause they are severally carried along; that you may not mark out the quarters of the sky, and ask in frenzied anxiety, whence came this winged flash, or to what quarter it departed hence, in what manner it won its way through walled places, and how after tyrant deeds it brought itself forth again: the causes of these workings they can by no means see, and think that a divine power brings them about.

[92] Do thou, as I speed towards the white line of the final goal, mark out the track before me, Calliope, muse of knowledge, thou who art rest to men and pleasure to the gods, that with thee to guide I may win the wreath with praise conspicuous.

[96] First of all the blue of the sky is shaken by thunder because the clouds in high heaven, scudding aloft, clash together when the winds are fighting in combat. For the sound comes not from a dear quarter of the sky, but wherever the clouds are massed in denser host, from there more often comes the roar and its loud rumbling. Moreover, the clouds cannot be of so dense a body as are stocks and stones, nor yet so thin as are mists and flying smoke. For either they were bound to fall dragged down by their dead weight, as do stones, or like smoke they could not hold together or keep within them chill snow and showers of hail.

[108] Again, they give forth a sound over the levels of the spreading firmament, as often an awning stretched over a great theater gives a crack, as it tosses among the posts and beams; sometimes, too, it rages madly, rent by the boisterous breezes, and imitates the rending noise of sheets of paper—for that kind of sound too you may recognize in the thunder—or else a sound as when the winds buffet with their blows and beat through the air a hanging garment or flying papers. For indeed it also comes to pass at times that the clouds cannot so much clash together face to face, but rather pass along the flank, moving from diverse quarters, and slowly grazing body against body; and then the dry sound brushes upon the ears, and is drawn out long, until they have issued from their close quarters.

[121] In this way, too, all things seem often to tremble with heavy thunder, and the great walls of the containing world to be torn apart suddenly and leap asunder, when all at once a gathered storm of mighty wind has twisted its way into the clouds, and, shut up there with its whirling eddy, constrains the cloud more and more on all sides to hollow itself out with body thickening all around; and then, when the force and fierce onslaught of the wind have weakened it, it splits and makes a rending crash with a frightful cracking sound. Nor is that strange, when a little bladder full of air often likewise gives forth a little noise, if suddenly burst.

[132] There is also another way, when winds blow through clouds, whereby they may make a noise. For often we see clouds borne along, branching in many ways, and rough-edged; even as, we may be sure, when the blasts of the north-west blow through a dense forest, the leaves give out a noise and the branches a rending crash.

[137] It comes to pass, too, sometimes, that the force of a mighty wind rushing on tears through the cloud and breaks it asunder with a front attack. For what the blast can do there is shown by things clear to see here on earth, where the wind is gentler and yet it tears out and sucks up tall trees from their lowest roots.

[142] There are, too, waves moving through the clouds, which as it were make a heavy roar in breaking; just as it comes to pass in deep rivers and the great sea, when the tide breaks.

[145] This happens too, when the fiery force of the thunderbolt falls from cloud to cloud; if by chance the cloud has received the flame in deep moisture, it straightway slays it with a great noise; just as often iron white-hot from the fiery furnaces hisses, when we have plunged it quickly into cold water. Or again, if a drier cloud receives the flame, it is at once fired, and burns with a vast noise; just as if among the laurel-leaved mountains flame were to roam abroad beneath the eddying of the winds, burning them up in its mighty onset; nor is there any other thing which is burnt up by the crackling flame with sound so terrible as the Delphic laurel of Phoebus.

[159] Again, often the great cracking of ice and the falling of hail makes a noise in the mighty clouds on high. For when the wind packs them tight, the mountains of storm-clouds, frozen close and mingled with hail, break up.

[160] It lightens likewise, when the clouds at their clashing have struck out many seeds of fire; just as if stone should strike on stone or on iron; for then, too, a flash leaps out and scatters abroad bright sparks of fire.

[164] But it comes to pass that we receive the thunder in our ears after our eyes perceive the lightning, because things always move more slowly to the ears than things which stir the eyes. That you may learn from this too; if you see some one far off cutting down a giant tree with double-edged axe, it comes to pass that you see the stroke before the blow resounds in your ear; even so we see the lightning too before we hear the thunder, which is sent abroad at the same moment with the flash, from a like cause, yea, born indeed from the same collision.