

Episode Eighty-Five - Thunder and Lightning Part Three - Why Do The Gods Send Thunderbolts Onto Their Own Temples?

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Welcome to Episode Eighty-Five 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 85 we will read approximately Latin lines 340 through 417 as we continue further into Book Six.

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

Munro Notes-

323-378: the thunderbolt derives its velocity from a union of causes: it acquires momentum within the cloud; as it bursts out of it, this is increased on the principle of missiles discharged from an engine; its atoms are extremely fine; add to this the natural tendency downward, which increases continuously; perhaps too it is aided by blows from atoms which it gathers to itself in the air: its subtle atoms pass through the pores of some things; burst asunder others; melt others. In autumn and spring thunder is most frequent, because then there is a mixture of heat and cold, of fire and wind, as well as moisture; all of which are needed to forge it.

379-422: such is the true explanation of thunder, not the follies taught in the Tuscan rolls: if the gods do hurl the bolts, why do they pass over the guilty and so often strike the innocent? why does Jupiter thunder only when the sky is clouded? why does he waste his bolts on the sea? why not tell us to beware, if he wishes us to escape? why thunder, if he wishes to take us unawares? how can he hurl at once in so many places? why destroy his own temples and statues? why so often strike the mountain-tops?

Browne 1743

[340] And lastly, the greater the distance is from whence a body descends, its swiftness in proportion increases. It still gathers strength as it moves, grows more violent, and the blow is the heavier when it falls, for all its seeds are driven down by that length of violence to one point, and unite all their powers in the same motion; or perhaps they carry with them other seeds in their passage through the air which beat them on and keep them steady in their descent.

[348] The lightning makes its way and passes through bodies that are rare, and leaves them safe and unhurt; but other bodies it rends asunder, because its fiery seeds strike through their solid corpuscles which hold them together: And therefore it easily dissolves brass and gold, because it consists of exceeding small and smooth particles, which work themselves without difficulty into the very principles, and in an instant melt the whole contexture, and loosen the ties and bonds by which they were secured.

[357] And in autumn, and when the flowery season of the spring displays its beauty, then the high palaces of heaven with all its shining stars, and the whole earth, are shaken most with thunder; for in the winter there wants fire, and in summer there is no supply of wind, nor will the clouds grow thin in too much heat. But in the middle quarters of the year, all things occur to make the thunder roar. Those seasons are made up of heat and cold blended together; of both these is formed the thunder; that so these jarring elements may raise the greater combustions, and the tormented air toss with more confusion by the strokes of wind and fire; for the end of winter and the beginning of summer make the spring. And then the heat and cold, two enemies so opposite, must needs engage, and when they meet and mix, raise strange confusions in the air. And then the end of summer and the beginning of winter bring on the autumn; now the retiring heat and coming cold engage again. These are the times, we say, when the elements go forth to war. Where is the wonder if loud thunders roar in seasons such as these, and dreadful tempests rattle in the sky, since the elements rage in every way with doubtful war, on one side fire, on the other furious winds mingled with rain?

[379] From hence you must collect the true principles of thunder, and discover how it works and sends abroad its fires, for tis in vain to look back into old Tuscan legends and from thence inquire into the secret purposes of the gods, from what quarters of the heavens the lightning flies, and to what part it points its forked beams, and how it pierces through the walls of houses, and having spent its rage it finds a passage out, and what evil it portends by flashing from the sky.

[387] For if great Jupiter, and the rest of the gods, delight to shake the shining battlements of heaven with horrid noise, and throw about these fires as please themselves, why are not those shot through who love to act flagitious crimes, and why their hearts not struck with fiery bolts, as dreadful monuments to future times? Why rather are the good and innocent scorched with these blasts, and tortured in the flames, and caught up in these whirlwinds of the air, and in the fire consumed?

[396] And why do they spend their shafts on solitary places, and fatigue themselves in vain? Is it to exercise their arms, to try their strength? Or why do they permit their father's bolts to be blunted against the bare earth? Why does he suffer this himself, and not rather reserve his stores to blast his enemies? Why does not Jove vouchsafe to roar with thunder, and smite the earth with his bolts in a clear sky? When the clouds spread over the heavens, does he descend within them, in order to be nearer, and to throw his darts with a surer aim? Why does he send his fires upon the sea? Why does he chastise the waves, the wide ocean, or the plains covered with water?

[406] Besides, if he would have us avoid the stroke of his thunderbolts, why does he not contrive that we may see them as they fly? If he resolves to blast us with his fire before we are aware, why does he first flash out his lightning from that quarter whence his bolts are to be discharged that we may avoid them? Why does he give us notice by raising darkness, noises, and murmurs in the air?

[411] And then how think you that he is able to cast so many darts in many various places at once? Will you offer to say this is never done, and insist there are never more darts flying about at the same time? It is certain that numbers of them are thrown together, and it cannot be otherwise, for as the rain and showers fall upon many countries at once, so many strokes of thunder are discharged at the same time.

[417] In the last place: Why does he with his deadly thunder beat down the sacred temples of the other gods, and the stately fabrics devoted to himself? Why does he dash to pieces the curious statues of the other deities, and destroy with furious strokes the honors offered to his own images? Why does he level his shafts at lofty places, for we discover many traces of this fire upon the tops of highest mountains?

Munro 1886

[340] Then too as it advances with a long-continued moving power, it must again and again receive new velocity which ever increases as it goes on and augments its powerful might and gives vigor to its stroke; for it forces all the seeds of the thunder to be borne right onward to one spot so to speak, throwing them all together, as on they roll, into that single line. Perhaps too as it goes on it attracts certain bodies out of the air itself, and these by their blows kindle apace its velocity.

[348] It passes too through things without injuring them, and leaves many things quite whole after it has gone through, because the clear bright fire flies through by the pores. And it breaks to pieces many things, when the first bodies of the thunderbolt have fallen exactly on the first bodies of these things, at the points where they are intertwined and held together. Again it easily melts brass and fuses gold in an instant, because its force is formed of bodies minutely small and of smooth elements, which easily make their way in and when they are in, in a moment break up all the knots and untie the bonds of union.

[357] And more especially in autumn the mansion of heaven studded with glittering stars and the whole earth are shaken on all sides, and also when the flowery season of spring discloses itself. For during the cold fires are wanting and winds fail during the heat, and the clouds then are not of so dense a body. When therefore the seasons of heaven are between the two extremes, the different causes of thunder and lightning all combine; for the very cross-current of the year mixes up cold and heat, both of which a cloud needs for forging thunderbolts; so that there is great discord in things and the air raving with fires and winds heaves in mighty disorder. The first part of heat and the last of cold is the spring-time; therefore unlike things must battle with one another and be turbulent when mixed together. And when the last heat mixed with the first cold rolls on its course, a time which goes by the name of autumn, then too fierce winters are in conflict with summers. Therefore these seasons are to be called the cross-seas of the year; and it is not wonderful that in that season thunderbolts are most frequent and troublous storms are stirred up in heaven; since both sides then engage in the troublous medley of dubious war, the one armed with flames, the other with winds and water commingled.

[379] This is the way to see into the true nature of the thunderbolt and to understand by what force it produces each effect, and not the turning over the scrolls of Tyrrhene charms and vainly searching for tokens of the hidden will of the gods, in order to know from what quarter 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; also what harm the thunderstroke from heaven can do.

[387] But if Jupiter and other gods shake with an appalling crash the glittering quarters of heaven, and hurl their fire whither each is so minded, why strike they not those whoever they be who have recked not of committing some abominable sin and make them give forth the flames of lightning from breast pierced through and through, a sharp lesson to men? And why rather is he whose conscience is burdened with no foul offense, innocent though he be, wrapped and enveloped in the flames, in a moment caught up by the whirlwind and fire of heaven?

[396] Why too aim they at solitary spots and spend their labor in vain? Or are they then practicing their arms and strengthening their sinews? And why do they suffer the father's bolt to be blunted on the earth? Why does he allow it himself, and not spare it for his enemies? Why again, when heaven is unclouded on all sides, does Jupiter never hurl a bolt on the earth or send abroad his claps? Or does he, so soon as clouds have spread under, then go down in person into them, that from them he may aim the strokes of his bolt near at hand? Ay and for what reason does he hurl into the sea? Of what has he to impeach its waters and liquid mass and floating fields?

[406] Again, if he wills us to avoid the thunderstroke, why fears he to let us see it discharged? Or if he wills to crush us off our guard with his fire, why thunders he from that side, to enable us to shun it? Why stirs he up beforehand darkness and roarings and rumblings?

[411] And how can you believe that he hurls at many points at the same time? Or would you venture to maintain that it never has happened that more than one stroke was made at one time? Nay often and often it has happened and must happen that, even as it rains and showers fall in many different quarters, so many thunderings go on at one time.

[417] Once more why does he dash down the holy sanctuaries of the gods and his own gorgeous seats with the destroying thunderbolt, and break the fine-wrought idols of the gods, and spoil his own images of their glory by an overbearing wound? And why does he mostly aim at lofty spots, and why do we see most traces of his fire on the mountain tops?

Bailey 1921

[340] Once again, because it comes with long-lasting impulse, it is bound to gather speed ever more and more, which grows as it moves, and increases its strong might and strengthens its stroke. For it brings it about that the seeds of the thunderbolt are one and all carried in a straight line, as it were towards one spot, driving them all as they fly into the same course. It may chance too that as it goes it picks up certain bodies even from the air, which kindle its swiftness by their blows.

[348] And it passes through things without harming them, and goes right through many things, and leaves them whole, because the liquid fire flies through the pores. And it pierces through many things, since the very bodies of the thunderbolt have fallen on the bodies of things just where they are interlaced and held together. Moreover, it easily melts bronze and in an instant makes gold to boil, because its force is fashioned delicately of tiny bodies and of smooth particles, which easily force a way within, and being there at once loose all the knots and slacken the bonds.

[357] And most in autumn is the house of heaven, set with shining stars, shaken on all sides and all the earth, and again when the flowery season of spring spreads itself abroad. For in the cold fires are lacking, and in the heat winds fail, nor are clouds of so dense a body. And so when the seasons of heaven stand midway between the two, then all the diverse causes of the thunderbolt meet together. For the narrow channel of the year of itself mingles cold and heat—of both of which the cloud has need for the forging of thunderbolts—so that there is a wrangling among things, and with great uproar the air rages and tosses with fires and winds. For the first part of the heat is the last of the stiff cold, that is the spring season: wherefore it must needs be that different elements, mingled with one another, make battle and turmoil. And again, when the last heat rolls on mingled with the first cold—the season which is called by the name of autumn—then, too, keen winters do battle with summers. For this cause these seasons must be called the narrow channels of the year, nor is it strange, if at that time thunderbolts come most often, and a turbulent tempest is gathered in the sky, since from either side is roused the turmoil of doubtful battle, on the one side with flames, on the other with mingled wind and wet.

[379] This is the way to see into the true nature of the thunderbolt, and to perceive by what force it does each thing, and not by unrolling vainly the Tyrrhenian prophecies and seeking out

tokens of the hidden purpose of the gods, marking whence came the 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, or what harm the stroke of the thunderbolt from heaven can do.

[387] But if Jupiter and the other gods shake the shining quarters of heaven with awe-inspiring crash and hurl the fire to whatever point each may will, why do they not bring it about that those who have not guarded against some sin from which men hide their face, are struck and reek of the flames of lightning, with their breast pierced through, a sharp lesson to mortals? why rather is one conscious of no foul guilt wrapt and entangled, all innocent, in the flames, caught up in a moment in the fiery whirlwind of heaven?

[396] Why again do they aim at waste places and spend their strength for naught? are they then practising their arms and strengthening their muscles? and why do they suffer the father's weapon to be blunted on the earth? why does he himself endure it and not spare it for his foes? Again, why does Jupiter never hurl his thunderbolt to earth and pour forth his thunders when the heaven is clear on all sides? Or, as soon as the clouds have come up, does he himself then come down into them, so that from them he may direct the blow of his weapon from close at hand? Again, with what purpose does he throw into the sea? what charge has he against the waves, the mass of water and the floating fields?

[406] Moreover, if he wishes us to beware of the thunderbolt's stroke, why is he reluctant to let us be able to see its cast? but if he wishes to overwhelm us with the fire when off our guard, why does he thunder from that quarter, so that we can shun it? why does he gather darkness beforehand and rumblings and roarings?

[411] And how can you believe that he hurls his bolts at once to many sides? or would you dare to argue that this has never come to pass, that several strokes were made at one time? Nay, but very often has it happened and must needs happen, that as it rains and showers fall in many regions, so many thunderbolts are fashioned at one time.

[417] Lastly, why does he smite asunder the sacred shrines of the gods and his own glorious dwelling-places with hostile bolt? why does he destroy the fair-fashioned idols of the gods and take away their beauty from his images with his furious wound? And why does he aim mostly at lofty spots, so that we see most traces of his fire on mountain-tops?