

Job's Three Questions And Their Answers

by H. L. Rossier

Bible quotations are from Darby's 'New Translation'

Introduction

Hardly is man born than he is full of questions. From his early childhood he faces numberless problems and unsolvable riddles. This must be so, for man should not pass through this earth in indifference. But how many questions remain unanswered – or what is much worse – are answered wrongly!

Most people in the days of outward prosperity are content with satisfying their earthly needs. They pass their days as a dream and put away all disquieting thoughts. But when they get into trouble and straits when all human supports break down; then they ask for the original causes of things, seeking comfort in some reply to their questions. Unfortunately it often happens then that the 'liar and murderer from the beginning' gives the answer and drives them to despair, or what is worse still, by poisonous lies numbs their minds again. True believers have, through Jesus, received a satisfactory answer to all questions. Blessed be His name! God Himself is fully satisfied, why should not the believer be so also?

In the book of Job we find the highest and deepest questions, and some of them elucidated in a way far exceeding any other revelations in the Old Testament. It is marvellous to see how in this book all-important questions that man can put in his seeking for forgiveness, and in his searching out the mysterious ways of God are satisfactorily answered. Even the presumptuous cavillings of the doubter are here silenced. For these reasons the study of the book of Job can only be a blessing to the believer and especially in these days when many Christians are, perhaps, like Job, tempted to argue with God. May the Lord therefore help us to learn from the book of Job, to the glory of His Name!

Job was evidently a man of fine perceptions and deep emotions. All the more then must he have suffered from the blows that Satan was allowed to deliver. But no word of murmuring escaped his lips. The temptation only brought to light his perfect submission to God's will. Even whilst suffering the greatest bodily tortures and when his wife spoke as 'one of the foolish women' he still uttered words of wisdom and devotion, which have since then instructed and comforted many a soul. Although not

understanding why all this calamity came over him. he yet held fast the assurance that God had permitted it, and that it would work together for good. He had received good from God's hand should he not also receive evil?

How this puts us to shame to whom God's love in Christ Jesus has been so fully revealed, and to whom God's word distinctly says that all things must work together for good! How often do minor trials make us disagreeable and rebellious or cause doubts to arise in our hearts. One thing is worthy of notice; it was Satan not God who killed Job's children, who destroyed his possessions, and smote him with boils. God certainly permitted it; not only in order to prove Satan a liar but also to teach Job a needed lesson. The lesson which Job and his friends learnt was of such great importance that he later indeed considered his suffering of no account compared with it.

At first, of course, everything seemed incomprehensible to him. At the end of the first chapter we read 'in all this Job sinned not nor ascribed anything unseemly to God.' In Job 2:10, however, it says only: 'In all this Job did not sin with his lips.' Surely God would have wished to spare Job his sufferings; also what Satan was permitted to do did not come directly from the hand of God. This is a mystery, hard to understand, and if Job later on did charge God foolishly it was partly because he did not understand this mystery. Job's patience was admirable and has rightly become proverbial. When his three friends arrived, however, and through their seven days' silence showed only that they had no words of comfort for him but rather thought in their hearts that Job was receiving the due reward of his deeds, then he began to despair of all and in the bitterness of his heart uttered his first presumptuous 'why?' 'Wherefore is light given to him that is in trouble, and life to those bitter of soul?' 'Why, yes why?' Many millions have asked the same question since. Why do I live at all? Would it not be better if I had never been born? See Job 3:10-20. In Isaiah 45:9-12, we see a grave woe pronounced on those who ask such questions.

1. WHEREFORE WAS I BORN?

The first question of Job: Why has God given me life only to send me such suffering now? is the language of the natural man in rebellion against his Maker (Job 3). Contending with the Almighty man wants to instruct Him (Job 40:2). He curses the past, reviles the present and all his future hope is gone, just as Jeremiah not only bemoans his torments but also his very existence (Jer. 20:14-18). What a state to be in!

Yet both Job and Jeremiah were faithful and devoted men of God. How did they come to forget themselves? What led them even for a moment to despair of the power and goodness of God? First of all, these men passed through very unusual exercises of soul. All blessings seemed to them to be changed into curses, and instead of hearing words of comfort and sympathy, they were covered with reproach. Their best friends had ceased to show loving sympathy; but, worse than all, they themselves could no longer understand why they should so suffer, and saw neither purpose nor profit in it. Just as Asaph in Psalm 73 they came to the conclusion: 'Truly I have purified my heart in vain and washed my hands in innocency,' and with the Preacher, looking only on visible things, they said: 'All is vanity.'

The original cause of such despair lies deeper. If the creature had not in the beginning turned away from his Creator he would not now curse his existence. The fact that men like Job and Jeremiah were capable of cursing the day of their birth, only proves how far man has drifted away from God. As long as all goes well the rebelliousness and sullenness of the human heart do not show themselves, but trials bring them to light. Temptations are therefore good and necessary, not in order that God may find out what is in man's heart (to Him the hidden things of the heart are manifest, and whatever comes out of it does not increase His knowledge), but that man may learn to know himself.

By nature, as we have said, man is in rebellion against God, and even when born again still the old nature constantly shows itself in times of temptation. Let no one think, however, that he is more capable than Job of bearing temptations. Scripture tells us: 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall' (1 Cor. 10:12). Although Job in bitterness of soul said many perverse things, the result of it all was to God's glory and to the blessing of His servant. Many of the questions which he in anguish asked, became clear to him in the course of his pleading in defence of himself. Others were answered for him by Elihu, and again God answered some in the whirlwind and that mostly by counter questions.

Every question can be asked in two ways, either in humility and with the sincere desire to learn, or else in presumptuous rebellion against the solution, be it what it may. In the first case the questioner honestly takes the place of a learner, which is

the right thing for him to do; in the second case he takes for granted that there is no satisfactory answer or else that it is definitely withheld. A man comes before God in sincerity and with the prayer which later Elihu taught Job: 'What I see not teach Thou me' (Job 34:32), or he asks in rebellion: 'Why is everything so different from what it ought to be?'

He who does not wish to sit at the feet of the Master and say: 'I will demand of Thee and answer Thou me', takes the place of judge against his God. The vessel says to the potter: 'What makest thou?' Foolish as the question is, we yet find it frequently among the children of Adam, the generation of backsliders. The so-called Higher Criticism that has done so much harm in Christianity puts all its questions in the latter way. In our day, when the spirit of independence forces an entrance everywhere, and all men want to be free to think and do as they please, this fundamental error is almost universal. Even believers must take heed lest they be affected by the spirit of the times. Moreover there is nothing new under the sun. In reality the men of Job's time had to solve the same problems as we have to-day; only with this great difference, that God's counsel has since then been more clearly revealed. There may be some excuse for Job arguing with God, but for the Christian professor who possesses the whole word of God, it is a terrible thing to doubt the wise and loving providence of God.

Job's first great question implies a doubt about the purpose of human existence, and therefore also about the wisdom of the Creator. This is an insult against God Himself, answered by Him at the end of the book and by a series of counter questions. Then Job submits, and his tormenting questions find a satisfactory answer in the power and goodness of God. But for the man without God, and without a Saviour, there is really no adequate answer to Job's question: 'Why have I been born?' What is the purport of the terrible words pronounced by the Lord Jesus over the traitor Judas: 'It were good for that man if he had not been born,' for all the millions who have since then gone to their own place? Will mockers like Tom Paine, Voltaire, and others in the place of torment, indeed curse their day through all eternity? Yea, truly, he who does not submit to God's verdict and accept Christ as the Redeemer, will never receive light about the purpose of man's existence nor about creation generally. Only in the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21), promised by God and pledged through the cross, will the problems of present day suffering be solved. Only when the groaning creation is delivered from the bondage of corruption (Rom. 8:21), will all questions be satisfactorily answered. This was strewn to Job figuratively in his own experience.

It is only in the New Testament, however, that God has revealed His plan for man. Only since the Holy Spirit has come down has the Third Person of the Godhead made known to the nations through the apostles' writings that 'the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us' (Rom. 8:18). It is only in our time, to him who hears and believes, that it has been proclaimed that we according to God's will are heirs of His glory through Jesus Christ. This Spirit, also called the Spirit of promise, is the pledge of our heirship (see Eph. 1:13, 14).

Therefore the viewpoint of the Christian cannot ever be so dark as that of Job. Job

saw only as from afar off and groped in the dark, but we are brought nigh to God through Christ and walk in the light. Should we not, therefore, so much the more guard ourselves from harbouring doubting thoughts and from presumptuously arguing with the Almighty? We may, indeed, in all humility, ask what the purpose of our life is, but let us beware of the rebel's spirit and of the language of the presumptuous. It is also good for the Christian to remind himself daily what the ultimate aim of his life is and when he does this in the spirit of communion with the Lord, he comes to the point where he can 'glory in tribulation.'

When the ungodly man, however, because of the vanity of earthly things curses his very being, or when the mere professor in times of trial, loses his apparent faith and argues with God, then he adds rebellion to his sin. The spirit of independence develops into open rebellion, and the state of mind previously hidden shows itself in action. May the Lord grant to every child of God to keep the purpose of his life and the end of his course always before his eyes, so that he may be kept from the presumption of Job in arguing with the Almighty! And if there be one of my readers who has not yet accepted God's answer to Job's question, oh, let him shake off his indifference, and flee from the ranks of the rebellious before it is too late! Do not seek the answer with the pride of the rebellious, or the perversity of the doubter, but with a humble and submissive heart. Then only in learning of Jesus will you find rest unto your soul.

2. HOW CAN A MAN BE JUST WITH GOD?

The oldest of Job's three friends had answered the first argument. Eliphaz was a wise, eloquent, and pious man, and his first speech is perhaps, the best of the speeches of the friends, (none of the speeches were equal to Job's either in form or contents, not to mention those of Elihu and Jehovah's own). In this speech Eliphaz takes trouble to show Job that everyone on the earth reaps what he sows. 'Even as I have seen, they that plough iniquity and sow mischief reap the same' (Job 4:8). All he says is true in principle, but in Job's case false. Although right in itself it is wrong in its connection, for often the wicked become old in sin, and the good in the strength of their youth are cut off. The ungodly often live in plenty while the god-fearing have to do without the common necessities of life.

Eliphaz and his two friends drew false conclusions, just as it often happens nowadays. According to his opinion, Job's sufferings proved that his former righteousness was only malicious hypocrisy. He describes with great eloquence a dream, in which a spirit was revealed to him, in order to show Job that the reason of his suffering was to be found in his own folly. Job had expected, and rightly too, more understanding for, and deeper sympathy with, his sufferings. He says: 'For him that is fainting kindness is meet from his friend,' and soon after: 'Return, I pray you, let there be no wrong; yea, return again, my righteousness shall be in it' (Job 6:14, 29). He cannot admit that he deserved such a trial.

The words of his friends are now harder to bear than the sufferings of his tortured body. The death of his children and the loss of his goods were terrible blows; the sickness with which Satan had visited him was of the most trying and horrible kind, but both the silence and the speeches of his friends were as the innumerable poisonous arrows which pierced his soul. In these three men Satan had found unconscious but all the more efficient tools. Instead of really comforting Job they brought him to despair. Instead of reminding him that the goodness of God endures for ever, and that the reason of his ways although hidden for a time, would in the end be revealed as glorious, they accused the poor man, first in their hearts, then openly, of the grossest crimes, simply because they could not account for his sufferings in any other way. Who then can still be surprised that Job became vexed and wished that God might destroy him? (Job 6:9). He saw deeper than his friends and recognised the dealings of God clearer than they did. For this reason they received at the end a sharper rebuke from God than he did. His mistake consisted in taking for granted it was God who tormented him, and in his presumption in calling God to account. And yet in his bitterest speeches we find gleams of light which break out as rays of hope in the darkest night, and cause him to see from afar God's salvation out of all his troubles. Thus his sad speech ends with a request to God Himself and not to his friends, and he already admits that he needs forgiveness for his transgressions, and pardon for his misdeeds (Job 7:20, 21).

Bildad the Shuhite answers Job's second question. He is more personal than Eliphaz and calls Job's words a 'strong wind.' At the same time he declares that Job and his children are only receiving the due reward of their deeds. The story of Job's friends should be a solemn warning to us. There is nothing so dangerous as a truth falsely applied. One can do the greatest harm with a word of Scripture in a wrong place. This is one of the devil's methods, and only unbroken communion with God can keep us from it. How important then is the exhortation 'be slow to speak,' especially in spiritual matters. Conclusions too quickly drawn and hasty judgments are often bitterly repented of, just as Job's friends were surely ashamed of their mistakes when it was too late. At the end of his speech Bildad points out that God will not forsake the perfect man but assuredly fill him with joy and gladness, whereas he could hardly know that this would in Job's case be fulfilled to the letter.

Bildad's speech is poetical and picturesque, as are all the other speeches, but he does not bring out anything new. His words do not help to a better understanding of the question which troubles poor Job. Therefore the latter begins his third speech with the words: 'Of a truth I know it is so, but how can man be just with God?' (Job 9:2). And the words about God which follow are words of insight which are becoming for the creature towards the Creator. Job's question shows that all Bildad's statements were worthless and comfortless for him. Morally it is the vital question of man's being on earth since the Fall. Peace for the heart of man is dependent on the answer. Here lies the mystery of a conscience brought to rest. The believers of the Old Testament from Adam onwards, sought to solve this problem. Both before and after the Flood, before and after the Law, every sincere soul puzzled over this question.

What does the expression 'be just with God' mean? First of all we must remember that in God's vocabulary there are no words of uncertain meaning. Any comparison or diminution of adjectives is here not admissible. That which is good in His eyes does not require any improvement, and to be just before Him implies to think, to speak, and to do what is right; and to be as is meet to be before the eyes of a thrice holy God. With Him alone is the standard of measure. Think a little over this, dear reader, and you will agree that so it must be. Whoever has understood this, does not need to be told that, 'There is none righteous, no not one.' He who does not deceive himself must admit that the thoughts of his heart are often impure and corrupted, that his words are frequently wrong and irresponsible, and his actions again and again unjust and wicked. In short, that he in his innermost being (and the question here is about this) is anything but 'just with God.'

And now perhaps someone will say: 'Although that is man's condition it does not necessarily follow that he must remain so. What is not can be. Have not the sages and teachers of religion from ancient times onward been working for the moral betterment of mankind? Is there no progress visible in the development of the human spirit? Do not thinkers and poets of all generations teach us that we should further our powers for good? Is there no remedy? Is there no hope of recovery? Has man neither strength nor gift nor invention to fight against unrighteousness, that greatest of all evils, and cast it out of the world?'

All these questions can only be answered by a decisive 'No.' Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Who can bring a clean man out of the unclean? Not one. Can a slave whose whole time is spent in weary working for a hard taskmaster earn his ransom? Can man escape the bondage of sin? Will Satan allow him to go? Can man outwit the devil? or is he able, after having been captured by him, to fight and overcome him? Can prisoners put the hosts of the enemy to flight? Has that 'murderer from the beginning' left any weapons for his victims with which they could fight for their freedom? These questions are all to be answered in the negative. There is no hope of salvation to be looked for from the side of fallen man. The exertion of all his strength, the display of all his learning cannot make him 'just with God.' There is no remedy from within. There is no improvement to be hoped for on the part of man, neither from the individual or from mankind in general.

The talk of a progress towards goodness, towards human virtue, is a phantom, a deception, a lie of Satan's, that 'liar from the beginning.' What then? Is the fall of man quite hopeless? Is there none capable and willing to redeem the slaves of Satan? Can no strong hero be found in the whole universe who is able to wrest the spoil from the strong man? Is there nowhere a physician capable of healing the death wound of the human race? God be praised! Job already received satisfactory answers to these questions although not so clear and detailed as we find them developed in the New Testament.

First the Spirit of God leads him to give utterance to the words, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth,' and later Elihu speaks to him of a messenger, 'an interpreter, one among a thousand' (Job 19:25; 33:24), so that God can have mercy on him and (to the messenger) say: 'Deliver him from going down to the pit. I have found a ransom.' We do not know to what extent the believers of the old covenant understood these words, for the Scripture says that they, for the most part, ministered not unto themselves but unto us the things which are now reported unto us (compare Job 33:23 with 1 Pet. 1:2). But doubtless Job heard in spirit the words 'I have found a ransom', as he in shame and repentance threw himself at his Judge's feet. And that is the only way to be 'just with God.' The eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews shows clearly that all the saints of the Old Testament were only justified through faith, and only so could they be well-pleasing to God. What, however, was the ground of their faith? For faith must have a person whom it can trust, a staff on which it can lean, an object to which it can look. Was it not the Seed of the woman, whose heel the serpent bruised, that should destroy death and bring life and incorruptibility to light through the gospel? Yes, the object of Job's faith was no other than the one we have, although it could not then be told him in so many words that God is now just when He justifies him whose faith is in Jesus. See Romans 3:26.

Now it goes without saying that the man who is justified by faith should henceforth walk in righteousness. That is indeed another part of the truth which is explained in Romans 6:1, and elsewhere in the New Testament. But before we turn to the third and last question of Job I would entreat the reader who has not yet found a satisfactory answer to the question, 'How can man be just with God?' prayerfully to look for the same in the word of God and that without delay.

3. IF A MAN DIES, SHALL HE LIVE AGAIN?

Job asks his third question in his fourth speech (see Job 14:14), where he also answers Zophar's hard words. This man had called Job a prattler and had challenged him to put his wickedness away. In this, his attitude resembled that of the other friends. He points out that the hope of the ungodly (and such he considers Job) ends in the breathing out of life (Job 11:20). In other words the motto of the ungodly is, 'Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die' (Isa. 22:13). It is really astonishing to see what a lack of discernment Job's friends showed at that time. But are we to-day more intelligent than they? Do we not often judge before the time? Do not the children of God very often judge according to appearance in spite of the solemn warning, 'Judge not that ye be not judged.' It is no wonder that Job, with biting irony, answers, 'Truly ye are the people and wisdom shall die with you!' What was the use of reciting truisms in flowery language? Such speeches brought neither comfort nor light to the sufferer. 'Who does not know the same?' asks Job, and then he shows that he had already long ago carefully thought over their questions and that he can develop them in all their variety not in a one-sided way as Zophar. 'I also have understanding as well as you, I am not inferior to you.'

Yes, Job recognized the unsolved questions of man's moral existence much clearer than these glib-tongued talkers, and quite rightly did he tell them plainly, 'Ye indeed are forgers of lies, ye are all physicians of no value.' And then he turns again to the Almighty and seeks to justify himself before Him. He is convinced of his innocence and wishes to convince God. He desires rest and wonders whether he will find it in death. Man withers as does a flower, and dies off as a tree. 'Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and put forth boughs like a young plant.' The tree dies and lives again, but what happens to man, who clearly in this earthly life seldom gets what he deserves? For very often 'a derision is the just and upright man,' while the 'desolators are in peace' (Job 12:4-6). The houses of the wicked are 'safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them' (Job 21:9). If death is the end for both, then the motto of the godless ('Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die') is after all the best.

But then, what would become of God's righteousness? Would not mankind sink into a desperately hopeless selfishness, every man's hand against the other for evil? No-one feels deep down in his heart that life on earth is the only or the final existence. Some may deny life after death, others may spend their days in indifference to this question; but the majority of men have, throughout the ages, demonstrated through the practices of their religions (wrong and corrupt as most may be) that in reality they do not suppose that all ends with death. From the mummies and pyramids of the ancient Egyptians to the ancestral worship of the Chinese (which to be sure is already thousands of years old) man shows that he believes in a resurrection or at least in a continuance of existence after death.

Certainly this belief is in most cases unconscious or else subconscious. It is misty and indistinct and seldom clearly formulated. The myths and fables of the nations offer no firm foundation for the faith of the heathen. Concerning the resurrection of the body, Job is perhaps the only one in the Old Testament who clearly asks this question and who in Job 19:25, 27, through the Spirit, answers it. The wonderful words: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth and the Last, He shall stand upon the earth. And (if) after my skin this shall be destroyed, yet from out of my flesh I shall see God; Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold and not another, my reins are consumed within me,' may have been in Job's restoration partially fulfilled, but doubtless they find their definite fulfilment in Him who is the Resurrection and the Life.

And how precious it is for faith to find out that Job already in the prophecy was able to suggest how close the life of the Redeemer is connected with the resurrection. 'Because I live ye shall live also,' said the Lord before He departed from His disciples, and the apostle points out in 1 Corinthians 15 that because Christ has risen those who sleep in Him shall be raised through Him. The life of the Redeemer is always in the present. He lives for ever, as the Last One He will stand on the earth. He is the last Adam, a 'quickening spirit.' From all those whom the Father has given Him, He would lose none but raise them at the last day. Job had the assurance that he himself in his own person (not merely in spirit as some perverse dreamers fancy) would see God. And our Redeemer says in His so-called high-priestly prayer, 'Father (as to) those whom Thou hast given Me I desire that where I am they also may be with Me that they may behold My glory.'

What a blessed hope! What a glorious outlook! No wonder that Job in the consciousness of his present sufferings adds, 'My reins are consumed within me.' The contrast between such a glorious hope for the future and the torture he had to bear in the present was so great that he nearly fainted for the longing after this unspeakable bliss. But after his restoration and recovery it is certain that he often strengthened himself with this hope. Surely many a time did he think over, and enquire as to what the full significance of those wonderful words might be which the Spirit of Christ had revealed to him. But he had to satisfy himself with the assurance that God was ruling all in wisdom and righteousness and that He would yet bring all to a glorious end.

Only at the appointed time could God's counsel with regard to the resurrection be fully revealed. Now there is no more excuse for the fools who raise stupid questions concerning the resurrection. There is a kind of ignorance that is criminal. It springs from the preconceived disinclination to learn about things which might disturb man's false security. He who believes in a resurrection of the dead, must arrange his life in the light of eternity. He who waits for the 'last Adam' will prepare himself for His reception. But he who has to fear a reckoning after death acts often like the ostrich when he is pursued and sees no escape; he hides (so they say) his head in the sand and denies the presence of the hunter. An unpleasant truth simply does not exist for that class of people. The judgment on such fools will be dreadful but deserved.

Boeken om de Bijbel 2009

