

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

JEHOVAH'S ANSWER TO JOB'S DOUBTS.

JOB xxxviii.—xlii.

“ THEN the Lord answered Job out of the tempest.” *And what did He say?* The reply to that question has disappointed and perplexed even candid and thoughtful minds for more than a thousand years; it still perplexes and disappoints every earnest student of the Word. For when the only wise God speaks, we expect to hear the perfect utterance of a perfect wisdom; when He answers, we expect his answer to be complete, final, conclusive. But his answer to Job seems incomplete, illogical, inconclusive.

Driven from the peace of faith by the scourge of Calamity, Job passes through the agonies of doubt and fear, of wounded trust and love. In the excitement of his agony he gives the most varied and magnificent expression to the fluctuating passions of a heart torn from its rest, to the questions which we all ask but cannot answer, to the great moral problems which we all raise but cannot solve, when we are brought face to face with the mysteries of Providence and human life. His friends yield him no help, but simply aggravate the burden of his grief: as we follow them through the several cycles of the Poem, we cry with Job himself, “ Miserable comforters are ye all!” we feel, as he felt, that they do but “darken counsel with words devoid of wisdom.” Even Elihu has little help to give, and knows it. He convinces us, indeed, that Job was in the wrong in that he justified himself rather than God, and that his “friends” were still more hopelessly in the wrong

in that they could not answer Job and yet condemned him. But "this wise young man," this earlier "Daniel come to judgment," cannot himself answer, though he will not condemn, Job; he feels that he has no adequate reply to the deep and awful problems in which the afflicted Patriarch is entangled. *He* is not the Light, but has come to bear witness to the Light; he cannot justify the ways of God to men: he can only prepare the way for the Lord, who, Himself, is coming to end and crown the argument.

As Elihu's eloquent rebukes draw to a close, our hearts grow full of expectation and hope. The mighty tempest in which Jehovah shrouds Himself sweeps up through the darkened heaven; it draws nearer and nearer; we "hear the tumult of his voice;" we are blinded by "the flash which He hurls to the ends of the earth:" our hearts "throb and leap out of their place,"¹ and we say, "God will speak, and there will be light." But God speaks, and there is no light. He does not answer one of the questions Job has asked, nor solve one of the problems Job has raised. He simply overwhelms us with his majesty. He causes his "glory" to pass before us. He claims to have all power in heaven and on earth, to be Lord of the day and of the night, of the tempest and of the calm. He simply asserts, what no one has denied, that all the processes of Nature and all the changes of Providence are his handiwork; that it is He who calleth forth the stars and determines their influences on the earth, He who sendeth rain and fruitful seasons, He who provideth food for the

¹ Job xxxvii. 1-5.

birds and beasts and gives them their beauty, their strength, and the manifold wise instincts by which they are preserved and multiplied. He does not utter a single word to relieve the mysteries of his Providence, to explain why the good suffer and the wicked prosper, why He permits our hearts to be so often torn by agonies of bereavement, of misgiving, of doubt. When the majestic Voice ceases we are no nearer than before to a solution of the haunting problems of life ; we can only wonder that Job should sink in utter love and self-abasement before Him ; we can only ask *what* it is that has thus shed calm, and order, and an invincible faith into his perturbed and doubting spirit. We say: "This beautiful Poem is a logical failure; it does not carry its profound theme to any satisfactory conclusion, nay, nor to *any* conclusion: it suggests doubts to which it makes no reply, problems that it does not even attempt to solve: after patient study of it, and with the keenest sense of its charm and power as a work of art, we are none the wiser for having studied it."

Most of those who have really read this Poem must have closed it with some such feeling as that which has just been expressed. Even those who hold it to be the most perfect and sublime poem with which man was ever inspired acknowledge that it does not explain the mysteries with which it undertakes to deal, that the answer of Jehovah is no true answer to the agonized questions and protest of Job. And we can only echo their acknowledgment. We admit that this marvellous Poem does not "assert eternal Providence" so as to satisfy the

intellect and "justify the ways of God to men." We admit that it suggests questions which it does not answer, and to which we know no answer, and problems which it does not solve, and to which we can find no solution save that of faith and trust and love.

1. But is it so certain as we sometimes think it to be that this Poem was *intended* to explain the mysteries of human life? is it certain that God meant it to answer the doubtful questions it suggests? is it certain even that a logical answer to these questions is either possible or desirable?

Let us at least remember that *all* the books which handle the theme of Job, even now that the true Light has come into the world, are equally unsatisfactory and disappointing to the logical intellect. From the "Confessions" of Augustine down to Dr. Newman's "History of my Religious Opinions," there have been hundreds of books that have professed to give the history of an inquisitive human spirit sounding its dim and perilous way across dark seas of Doubt to the clear rest and haven of Faith; but read which of these we may, we observe these two phenomena: first, that so long as the author sets forth the doubts and perplexities by which he has been exercised, we find his words instinct with life, and passion, and power; they commend themselves to our understanding and excite our sympathy; we feel that he is happily expressing thoughts and emotions which have often stirred within our own souls. But—and this is the second and more striking phenomenon—no sooner does he begin to tell us what it was that conquered his doubts, to describe

the several steps by which he climbed back to faith, to explain how much larger and firmer his faith now is than it was before it was tried; no sooner does he enter on this climax of his work than—unless, indeed, we have passed through an experience similar to his—a thick bewildering haze settles down on his words; we read them, but they are no longer instinct with life and force; they do not commend themselves to our judgment, nor convince our reason. We cry in disappointment, “What, is that all? What was there in *that* to induce faith? The man has not fairly met one of his doubts, nor solved one of his problems; he has simply evaded them, and crept, by an illogical bye-path, to a most lame and impotent conclusion.”

No man who, “perplexed in faith,” has read books of this class, hoping to find in them aids to faith and answers to doubt, can be an entire stranger to this sensation of disappointment and defeated hope. Written, as such books commonly are, by wise and good men, men of the most genuine sincerity and earnestness; written, too, for the express purpose of leading the sceptical inquirer from doubt to faith, there is no one of them which does not disappoint us just as the Book of Job disappoints us. They may command our admiration; they may touch our hearts; but they do not satisfy our reason nor answer our doubts: they fail just at the one only point at which we are concerned for their success.

What should the fact teach us? Surely it should teach us that the path of logic is not the path to faith. It should lead us to ask whether it may not be impossible to solve, in human words, and to the

human intellect, the mystery of God's dealings with men, whether, if possible, it would not be undesirable. Logic can do much, but not all. It may convince the reason, but it cannot bend the will or cleanse the heart. Prove to me, if proof be possible, that God is good in permitting pain and sorrow and loss to come upon me ; but if I do not *feel*, or want to feel, that He is good, and do not love Him for his goodness, mere proof will not do much for me. "*With the heart* man believeth unto righteousness;" and logic does not address itself to the heart. It is doubtful, even, whether the human intellect, at least while it is prisoned in the flesh, could so comprehend the infinite providence of God as to prove its equity and kindness, or even understand the proof, if proof were to be had ; but it is very certain that, were such a proof within our reach, we might still distrust his goodness, and even hate it when it thwarted and pained us.

If proof were possible, if God could inspire and man could write an argument which should once for all interpret our life to us, which should solve all its problems and disperse every shade of mystery, it is still open to doubt whether it would be kind of God to inspire it ; or, rather, it is very certain that it would not be kind. For the mystery which encompasses us on every side is an educational force of the utmost value. We fret against it, indeed, and strive to be quit of it : and it is well that we do ; for it is this very strife and fret by which we are strengthened, by which our character is developed, and by which we are compelled to look up to Heaven for guidance and consolation. If we no longer had

any questions to ask, any problems to solve, if we saw the full meaning and final purpose of God's dealing with us, we should lose more than we should gain. With certainty we might be content ; and we might *rest* in our content. But with mystery within us and on every side of us, compelling us to ask, "What does this mean? and that? and, above all, what does God mean by it all?" we lose the rest of content to gain a strife of thought which trains and educates us, which forever leads us onward and upward, and for which, in the end, we shall be all the wiser, and better, and happier. It may be, it surely is, inevitable that, with an infinite God over us, and around us, and within us, we, finite men, should be encompassed by mysteries we cannot fathom ; that, if the mysteries which now perplex us were removed, they would only give place to mysteries still more profound. Even logic suggests so much as this. But quite apart from speculation, here stands the fact,—that it *is* part of God's scheme for our training that evil and pain should be in the world, that they should excite in us questions we should not otherwise have asked, and endeavours after freedom and holiness we should not otherwise have made. And God is wise. His scheme for us is at least likely to be better than any we could frame for ourselves. But if it be his scheme to educate us by the mysteries around us, and the questions and endeavours those mysteries excite, He can give us no book, no argument, no revelation which would dispel those mysteries ; the craving intellect *must* be left unsatisfied in order that faith may have scope ; the mental faculties must be perplexed both that

they themselves may be strengthened by exercise, and that the moral faculties, which are even more valuable and of a superior force, may be trained for their lofty task.

What is it that kindles and trains the intelligence of our children, that chastens their will and develops their moral qualities and powers? Is it not that a mysterious world lies all around them, a world in which things look differently from what they are and hold out another promise than that which they fulfil:—is it not *this* which for ever sets them asking questions which we can very hardly answer, and wondering over marvels which we perhaps have ceased to admire? Is it not the uncertainty as to what the next moment may bring or teach which makes their eyes bright with expectation and hope? Is it not because *we* often do that which they cannot comprehend, and even that which pains and disappoints and perplexes them,—is it not this which braces and enlarges their character and makes room for faith and trust and love? If we could condense all the wisdom of the world and of life into a tiny manual which they could master at an early age, should we venture to place it in their hands? If we did, we should simply rob them of their youth, of their keen enjoyment of the changes and surprises of life: imperfectly and by rote they would acquire what they now learn so much more truly and thoroughly and happily by experience and by efforts which strengthen and develop them. God teaches us, then, as we teach our children—by the mystery of life, by its illusions and contradictions, by its intermixtures of good with evil, of joy with sorrow:

by the questions we are compelled to ask even although we cannot answer them, by the problems we are compelled to study although we cannot solve them. And is not his way the best way ?

2. We have seen how and why the Book of Job disappoints us, why the answer of Jehovah strikes us as of an insufficient logic. Can we now see how it came to pass that this insufficient logic was nevertheless sufficient for Job ; how it was that this answer, which answered nothing to the intellect, satisfied him,—nay, swept away all his doubts and fears in the transport of gratitude and love into which it threw him ?

We often *make* the difficulties over which we perplex ourselves in vain, and then look for answers everywhere but straight before our eyes. Thus, for instance, when we read that “Jehovah answered Job out of the tempest,” we forthwith ask, “And what did He say ?” expecting to hear some conclusive argument that will pour the light of eternal wisdom on the difficulties and perplexities of human life : we overlook the immense pathos and force of the fact, *that Jehovah spake to Job at all*. And yet, so soon as we think of it, it is easy to believe that, if Job had not understood a single word Jehovah uttered, the mere fact that Jehovah spoke to him would excite a rush of emotion before which all memory of his doubts and miseries would be carried away as with a flood. *This*, indeed, was that which Job had craved throughout. In how many forms does he cry, “O that God would meet me ! O that He would speak to me ! O that He would fix a day, however distant, in which to visit me and hear my

plea! O that He would even come to question and judge me!" The pain at the very heart of his pain was not that he had to suffer, but that in his sufferings God had forgotten and abandoned him. He could bear that God should "take" the children He had given. He could bear to receive "evil" at the Hand from which he had received so much good. He could even bear that his "friends" should forsake him in his calamity, that they should sit in judgment on him and condemn him of crimes which he knew he had not committed. What he could not bear was that *God* should abandon him, *abandon* as well as afflict him, that when he cried for pity or redress Heaven should not respond.

I have sinned!

Yet what have I done to Thee, O Thou Watcher of men?

Why hast Thou made me Thy target,

So that I am become a burden unto myself?

And why wilt Thou not pardon my transgression,

And cause my sin to pass away?¹

* * * *

If it be that I have erred,

My error rests with myself.

But if ye will magnify yourselves against me,

And urge against me my reproach,

Know ye that God hath wrested my cause,

And flung his net about me.

Behold, I exclaim at my wrong, but am not answered;

I cry aloud, but there is no justice!

He hath fenced up my ways, so that I cannot pass,

And set darkness in my paths.

Have pity on me, have pity on me, O ye my friends!

For the hand of God hath touched me!

Why should ye persecute me, like God,

And not be satisfied with my pangs?²

* * * *

¹ Chap. vii. vers. 20, 21.

² Chap. xix. vers. 4-8, 21, 22.

Still is my complaint bitter,
 And my stroke heavier than my groaning.
 O that I knew where I might find Him !
 I would press even unto his seat ;
 I would set out my cause before Him,
 And fill my mouth with pleas :
 I should know the words with which He would answer me,
 And understand what He would say to me :
 Would He contend against me in the greatness of his strength ?
 Nay, He would make concessions to me :
 There might the upright reason with Him,
 And once for all I should be acquitted by my Judge.
 Behold, I go toward the East, but He is not there ;
 And Westward, but I cannot perceive Him ;
 Toward the North, where He is working, but I cannot see Him ;
 Where He veileth Himself in the South, but I cannot discern Him.

* * * *

O that I were as in months of old,
 As in the days when God kept me,
 When his lamp shone on my head,
 And by its light I walked through darkness ;
 As I was in my Autumn days,
 When the favour of God was on my tent ;
 When the Almighty was yet with me,
 And my children round about me. ²

* * * *

I cry to Thee, and Thou answerest me not ;
 I stand up, and Thou eyst me :
 Thou art become very cruel to me,
 And dost press me hard with Thy strong hand :
 Thou hast caught me up and made me to ride on the blast,
 And causest me to evanish in the crash of the storm.
 I know : Thou wilt bring me to death,
 To the house of assembly for all living.
 Prayer is vain when He stretcheth forth his hand,
 When men cry out at calamity.
 Have not I wept with him whose day was hard ?
 Hath not my soul been grieved for the needy ?
 Yet when I waited for good, there came evil,
 And darkness when I looked for light !³

* * * *

¹ Chap. xxiii. vers. 2-9.

² Chap. xxix. vers. 2-5.

³ Chap. xxx. vers. 20-26.

O that I had One who would hear me !—
 Here is my signature !—that the Almighty would answer me !
 That my Adversary would write his indictment !
 Would I not carry it on my shoulder,
 And bind it about me like a chaplet ?
 I would tell Him the very number of my steps,
 I would draw near Him like a prince.¹

Can we listen to these bitter sighs of a breaking heart and not feel what it was that was breaking it—that it was the cruel pain of *desertion*? Are they not but echoes and variations of the most terrible cry that ever broke on the air, “My God, my God, why hast *Thou* forsaken me?”

And if, now, through the tempest and the darkness, there should sound a Voice from heaven; if, however it came, the conviction should come to Job that the God he could not find had found him, and was speaking to him, would it matter very much what God said? Would it not be enough that it was God who was speaking, that the Divine Friend had come back to him, that He had never forgotten him, nor forsaken him; that He was in the tempest which had swept over him; that He had listened to him even when He did not answer him, and had loved him even when He afflicted him? It was *this*—O, it was *this*—which dropped like balm into the torn and wounded heart of the sufferer: it was the resurrection of faith and hope and love in the rekindled sense of the Divine Presence and favour that raised him to a life in which doubt and fear had no place, a joy on which even repentance was no stain. Not what God said, but that God spoke to him and had come to him,—it was *this* which cast

¹ Chap. xxxi. vers. 35-37.

him in the dust, which quickened in him that humility which is man's true exaltation, and which constrained from him the happiest words he utters, although they sound so sad :

I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear,
But now mine eye hath seen Thee :
Wherefore I retract, and repent
In dust and ashes.

And surely, it is this sense of an auspicious Divine Presence, that comes we know not how, before which *all* the darkneses of doubt flee away. It is an experience which lies beyond the scope of language. No man who has passed through it can explain it, or adequately express it in words, since words are incapable of fully rendering any of our deepest emotions. All we can say of it is, that it is not produced by logic, by argument, by answers nicely adapted to the questions we have asked or to the doubts on which we have brooded ; and that, as it did not spring from logic, so neither can it be expressed in logical forms. It is too deep for words to reach, too subtle and spiritual for words to hold.

If a difference has sprung up between two friends long and tenderly attached, are they ever reconciled by mere argument ? was it ever known that they *convinced* one another into renewed affection ? If the reconciliation comes, it comes from a sense of reviving or unaltered and unalterable love, which lies deep down in the heart beyond the reach of argument. No man could ever say why he loves, or tell what "love" means. "Love laughs at logic" ; and if love for man or woman, why not love for God ?

3. Still the question recurs, "*What* was it that recovered Job to faith and trust and peace? Was there absolutely *nothing* in what Jehovah said to meet his doubts and answer his questions?"

Well, yes, there was something, though not much. There *is* an argument in the Divine Answer which may be reproduced in logical forms, though it is only an argument of hints and suggestions; it does not touch the profounder questions which Job had raised, nor would it be difficult to pick holes in it, if we took it simply as an argument addressed to the inquisitive and sceptical intellect. It does **not** go very deep. It is addressed to the heart rather than the brain, to faith rather than to doubt. It would not convince a sceptic, however reasonable and sincere he might be. Nothing would, or can, convince him save that sense of a Divine Presence and Love of which we have just spoken,—and *that* no argument can give.

Nevertheless, let us mark what the Divine Answer was viewed simply as an argument. Viewed thus, it met that painful sense of mystery which oppressed Job as he sat solitary and alone among his friends, and all the more alone because they were with him. One element in his pain was that he could not tell what God was aiming at, that the Divine Providence was all dark to him, that he could see no reason why a good man should be vexed with loss and misery and a bad man live out all his days in mirth and affluence. And this is a pain we have all felt, of which we should all be gladly rid. The injustice, the inequalities, the pains and degradations which enter into the human lot perplex and afflict us; we

can see no good reason for them: we cannot approve and vindicate them.

Does Jehovah, then, when He answers Job out of the tempest, answer the questions which this spectacle of human misery suggests? Does He assign a good reason, a sufficient motive, for the inequalities of the human lot? He does nothing of the kind. He does not lift an iota of that painful mystery. He simply teaches us that we should not let that mystery pain and perplex us, and hints that it may have a nobler motive and a happier end than we conceive. The argument of the Poem is Butler's argument—the argument from analogy. To the perplexed Patriarch, who sits brooding painfully over the dark problems of life, Jehovah points out that equally insoluble mysteries are over his head and under his feet; that he lives and moves and has his being amid them; that, look where he will, he cannot escape them: and that, as he finds them everywhere else, he should expect to find them in human life. Briefly put, taking only the argument which underlies its sublime poetry, the Divine Answer runs thus:—"You fret and despair over the one mystery which has been brought home to you by the pangs of sorrow and loss; you are perturbed because you cannot interpret it. But, see, there are mysteries everywhere; the whole universe is thick with them:—can you interpret these? Can you explain the creation of the world, the separation of land and sea, and the interwoven influences of the one on the other? Have you mastered all the secrets of light and darkness, of wind and rain, of snow and ice, of the migrations of birds, of the structure and instincts

of the beasts? Yet, instead of fretting over *these* mysteries, you accept and profit by them; you *use* sea and land, day and night, wind and rain, birds and beasts, and make them serve your turn. You live, content, amid a thousand other problems you cannot solve, and turn them to account. Should you not look, then, to find mysteries in the creature whom I have set over all other works of my hand—in man, and in his lot? Will it not be wise of you to use your life rather than to brood over it, to turn your lot, with all its changes, to good account, rather than to fret over the problems it suggests?"

Another argument may be hinted at in the Divine Answer. In his sublime description of the heavens and the earth and all that in them is, Jehovah may have meant to suggest to Job: "Consider these mysteries and parables of Nature, and what they reveal of the end and purpose of Him by whom they were created. You cannot adequately interpret any one of them, but you see that they all work together for good. You cannot tell how the world was made, how the firm earth and flowing seas were formed; but the earth yields you her fruits, and the sea carries your ships and brings you the wealth of distant lands. You cannot command the wind, or the clouds that bring rain; but you can see that the winds carry health and the rains fertility wherever they go. You cannot explain the migration of the birds that travel all the year, but you can see that God feeds and fosters them by the instinct which drives them from shore to shore. The world around you is full of mysteries which you cannot solve; but so far as you can judge, is not their end a beneficent

end? And if the world within you also has mysteries which you cannot fathom, cannot you trust that, somehow, here or hereafter, those too will reach a final goal of good? The mystery of life, the mystery of pain,—may not these be as beneficent as you admit the marvels and mysteries of Nature to be?”

This is the argument of the Divine Answer, so far as it has an argument; and even this is suggested rather than stated. And, as we have admitted, it does not go very deep. It does not solve the problems over which we brood; it only points us to other problems equally difficult, equally insoluble. It does not affirm even, it only hints, that the end of all these mysteries may be a good end, an end of mercy and grace. There is enough for faith to think over and to rest upon, but there is no clear satisfying answer for doubt; there is enough to nourish the heart, but not enough to convince the intellect and stop the mouth of gainsayers. We are not told—much as we long to know it—why God permits evil to exist, or why He permits it to take so many painful and apparently injurious forms for the righteous. We are simply invited to trust in the God whom we have found to be good, and to believe that out of evil itself He will educe a greater good. God does not argue with us, nor seek to force our trust; for trust and love are not to be forced, but won. You cannot force even your own child to love and confide in you. All you can do is to surround him with a large pure atmosphere of kindness, to shew him that you are worthy of his confidence and affection. When you have done your best and

utmost, he may abuse your confidence and repay your kindness with a thoughtless ingratitude. It may be necessary that he should go out into the world, and discover its coldness, its selfishness, its indifference, before he can learn to value your tenderness and repay your love with love. And it is thus with us and God. He is good, and gentle, and kind. But we are wilful, careless, ungrateful. In his wisdom and kindness He sends us out to contend against the adversities of life; He permits us to serve the sinful passions we love more than we love Him, that we may find how cruel and degrading a bondage their service is. The "tempest" sweeps through our darkened heaven, through our darkened hearts, strewing them with wrecks: and, *now*, if the kind tender Voice speak to us out of the tempest with an unalterable affection, if the conviction come to us that God is our Father and loves us, our love springs to meet the love of our Father in heaven; we wait for no arguments, we ask no proofs: it is enough that our Father speaks to us once more, that He loves us still, that He rejoices over us as we bow in penitence and renewed affection before Him. Not by logical arguments which convince our reason, but by tender appeals which touch and break our hearts, our Father conquers us at last, and wins our trust and love for ever. CARPUS.
