

What's the Question? By David Feddes

If a man dies, will he live again? Job 14:14

I'm not a big fan of bumper sticker religion. Sometimes you see cars with religious messages on the bumper, and some of you may have such messages on your own car. If so, that's okay. I'm not against Christians using bumper stickers to let others know they're Christians. But there's a lot more to following Jesus than a bumper sticker can say. Bumper sticker religion can be canned and simplistic. It can't handle difficulty or complexity.

"Honk if you love Jesus" doesn't have quite the same impact as Jesus' saying, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15) or his saying, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). It's easier to paste on a bumper sticker or honk a horn than to obey Jesus and give your life for others.

The demands of faith can't be captured on a bumper sticker, and neither can the challenges life throws at us. A relationship to God is more complex than a short slogan. If you suffer a terrible injury or illness, or if someone you love dies, it's not very helpful to see a car race past with a bumper sticker saying, "Smile, God loves you." Even if God does love you, you'd rather cry than smile. When you're suffering and struggling, trite slogans and easy answers do more harm than good.

For a while there was a bumper sticker that blared, "Jesus is the Answer." Then another bumper sticker fired back, "If Jesus is the answer, what's the question?" Now there's a bumper sticker worth remembering! We don't need more slogans spouting simple answers about Jesus. We need to be asking the right questions.

If you want a smiley-face faith that fits on a bumper sticker, you won't like the Bible book of Job. If you think faith means never crying or questioning, Job will turn you off.

Job lost his property, his children were killed, and he came down with a terribly painful illness. Through it all, Job stayed loyal to God, but he cried and complained and asked lots of questions. That bothered Job's friends. They tried to give Job simple answers to explain his problems, and Job wouldn't accept their formulas. Instead, he kept asking questions and kept demanding a meeting with God. When God did show up, he overwhelmed Job with a flurry of questions that Job couldn't answer, showing Job that he'd better get used to not being able to figure God out. But God also stood up for Job and made it clear that he accepted Job and that he liked Job's hard questions better than the easy answers of Job's friends.

If you've ever wondered, "If Jesus is the answer, what's the question?" then the book of Job is for you. Job's painful questions and agonizing "if onlys" can do more to help you know Jesus than any bumper sticker you will ever see. To get beyond bumper stickers to reality, to get beyond canned formulas to the living God, you need to ask the right questions.

What is Man?

One question Job asked God was, "What is man, that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention?" (7:17) Why would Almighty God make such a big deal of small humans? At times Job wished God wouldn't make so much of us. When Job was going through his troubles, he sensed that God was watching him—and he wished God would look away. Job sensed something enormously important was at stake—and at times he wished God would just leave him alone. Why should a mere human have to live every moment under the gaze of God?

Why can't we just go through life, enjoy some simple pleasures, cope with various pains, and then vanish from the scene? Why do we have to matter so much? Why must we be caught up in the conflict between God and Satan? Why must there be vast, eternal consequences connected with our day-to-day affairs? Why should someone as great as God pay such close attention to someone as small as mere humans?

Job's friends had an easy answer. To Job's question, "What is man?" their answer was, "Not much. Don't flatter yourself, Job, by thinking you matter to God a great deal." They figured that if Job was suffering, it was because of his sin, but they didn't think Job really mattered much to God. If Job sinned, God would do his job and punish Job—but the Lord would do it while hardly taking notice, the way we might swat a fly or a mosquito. By the same token if Job was good, it would bring automatic rewards from God, but it wouldn't affect God or benefit him.

Job's friend Eliphaz said, "Can a man be of benefit to God? Can even a wise man benefit him? What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous? What would he gain if your ways were blameless? (22:2-3) According to Eliphaz, we can't benefit God or add to his enjoyment or profit him in any way. God is blissfully beyond being affected by whether we love or hate him, by whether we obey or disobey him.

Another of Job's friends had a name that's the punch line for would-be comedians. They say, "Who was the shortest man in the Bible?" and their answer is, "Bildad the Shuhite." Well, I'm sure Bildad was taller than the height of a shoe, but his view of humanity was lower than shoe height. If Bildad the Shuhite made you feel like a heel, he'd think he was flattering you. Bildad told Job, "Dominion and awe belong to God" (25:2). In light of God's majesty, man is "but a maggot... only a worm" (25:6). In fact, that is the friends' last word to Job: "Worm!"

Bildad was wrong to think that just because God is great, man is a maggot. Bildad thought that one way to honor God was to badmouth anything that isn't God. When God created the moon and the stars, he saw them as good (Genesis 1:18), but Bildad said that God is so holy that even the moon and stars are not pure in his sight. When God created the first humans—in his own image—he saw that what he made was "very good" (1:31), but Bildad saw man as a maggot. Bildad thought he was honoring God by emphasizing how everything else is nothing by comparison—but God created the very things Bildad was badmouthing. God is not honored when we despise his handiwork. To insult God's creatures is to insult their Creator. God is loving toward all he has made (Psalm 145:13), and humanity is the crown of his creation (Psalm 8:5-6). Even when people sin, they are not slime.

As for the claim of Eliphaz that even if we love and obey God, it doesn't affect him or benefit him, that too is a case of good theology carried to a bad extreme. Of course God is all-sufficient and doesn't need us—but even so, God still makes a big deal of us, and we really can bring him pleasure. The Bible says, "He will take great delight in you... he will rejoice over you with singing" (Zephaniah 3:17). Indeed, the occasion for Job's trouble (though Job and his friends didn't know it) was the great pleasure God took in Job and God's boasting about Job in the spirit world. So it's dead wrong to say humans are too puny to matter to God or to give him pleasure.

What is man, that God makes so much of him? Man, both male and female, is the image of God, the apple of his eye. At times that can be terrifying, as it was for Job, but it is true. You can't escape your own greatness or the importance God places on you. God will never simply look away and let you relax in your own pleasure and comfort. He designed you for something far greater: to glorify him, to enjoy him, and to bring him joy.

If Only

Meanwhile, though, what about the huge gap between man and God? His power is so vast and ours so puny, his mind so infinite and ours so limited, his character so pure and ours so muddled—God is so far beyond us that it seems nothing can bridge the gap. When we're suffering and confused and we're crying for the Lord to give us a fair hearing, what hope is there? How can you or I relate to God, when the inequality is so great?

There were times when Job wished he could agree with his friends, when he wished God wasn't so interested in him. But he knew better, so he held on to God, even as he kept questioning. Job was so intimidated by God's greatness that he cried out, "He is not a man like me that I might answer him, that we might confront each other in court. If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both... Then I would speak up without fear of him, but as it now stands with me, I cannot" (Job 9:32-35). Job felt utterly defeated by the fact that God wasn't a man like him, and he cried out this huge *if only*: "If only I had someone to stand between God and me, someone with power and wisdom equal to God's and yet someone who has lived through human temptations and trials. Then I could relate to God without such a sense of terror and distance."

Do you know anybody who can lay one hand on God and the other hand on you? Do you know somebody who is both God and man? Job lamented that "God is not a man like me" and longed for a go-between. In that lament and longing, Job was raising a question to which Jesus would be the answer. In the person of Jesus, God has become a man like me. Jesus bridges the gap between God and humanity, for Jesus is both divine and human.

Job lived a long time before the Son of God came to earth, but his desperate wish for a friend to stand between God and man was more than a desperate wish; it became a growing certainty for him. Job concluded that there had to be a go-between, a mediator, to plead his case with God. "Even now," Job said, "my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God; on behalf of a man he pleads with God as a man pleads for his friend" (Job 16:19-21). Job didn't know the full truth about Jesus' coming, but he was counting on a friend somewhere who could bridge the infinite gap between him and God.

What a friend we have in Jesus! Job could speak only in blind trust of a mediator and advocate. When Job asked, "What is man?" he didn't fully understand that man matters so much to God that the Son of God would actually become one of us. When Job asked, "Is God a man?" the obvious answer at the time was, "No, of course not." But in Jesus, we meet somebody who is God and also man. In Jesus, the God who is so unlike us has become like us. Jesus is eternal God, yet he became human and was "made like his brothers in every way" (Hebrews 2:17). He is not ashamed to call us brothers (Hebrews 2:12). He knows how we feel and he sympathizes with our weaknesses and struggles (Hebrews 4:15). "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5).

How Can I Be Right With God?

Job asked another excellent question in the course of his struggles: "How can a mortal man be righteous before God?" (9:2). Job refused to believe that some particular sin of his caused God to make him suffer the loss of his children and his health. Job was right about that. But Job also knew that he wasn't perfect and that no good deed of his could put God in his debt. Nothing Job did could obligate God to accept him or reward him. God would never *owe* anyone anything. It can be frustrating to know that you can't establish your own standing with God. It's a bleak feeling to realize you can't obligate God to give you good things. You can't help wondering with

Job, “If I can’t make myself right with God, what other way is there? How can a mortal man be righteous before God?” God is so great and holy that we can’t even understand his requirements fully, let alone obey them perfectly or put God in our debt. Job concludes that if God has some requirement that must be met to ensure his approval, then God himself will have to supply what he requires. So Job pleads, “Give me, O God, the pledge you demand.” (17:3) In other words, “Whatever it is that you require, Lord, please give it to me.”

That prayer is answered in Jesus Christ. The inexpressible holiness of God (which we can’t even understand, let alone measure up to) has been fully satisfied by the holy Son of God in his perfect life and sacrificial death. The Bible teaches that when we put our faith in Jesus, God credits Jesus’ perfection to our account. God’s attitude toward his people is based not on what we do but on what Christ has done. And when God accepts us, his Holy Spirit empowers us to become more and more the kind of people God calls us to be. In other words, God gives us the very thing he demands of us, just as Job pleaded. Like Job, you and I must base our assurance of God’s acceptance not on our own goodness, not on our financial status or success in life, but on the fact that God provides the righteousness he requires. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:22).

If we don’t ask Job’s question, “How can a mortal man be righteous before God?” and if we don’t pray Job’s prayer, “Give me what you demand,” we will not grasp what Jesus has done or be made right with God through faith. It’s quite common nowadays to ask, “Why should I accept God?” Some preachers work hard to answer that question. They plead with people to make a decision to accept the Lord, as though we are in a position to judge God and decide what to do with him. But what if God is the one who decides what to do with us? When we start with the wrong question, it’s hard to get the right answer. The main question is not, “Why should I accept the Lord,” but “Why should the Lord accept me? How can I be right with God? How can I possibly meet God’s requirements?” That’s the question to which Jesus is the answer. In Jesus God has met his own requirements and has given to us what he demands from us, so that we become acceptable to him and are placed in a right relationship to him.

Is There Life After Death?

Still another question Job asked was, “If a man dies, will he live again?” (14:14) Job saw so much death: his employees were massacred, his children were killed in a storm, and Job himself was so sick he didn’t know how much longer he would be alive. In the face of so much death, Job wondered if there was life after death.

It doesn’t look that way. When people die, they’re dead. When they’re gone, they’re gone. Sorrow and death seem to get the last word. We can’t bring back the past, and dead bodies can’t renew themselves. Job looked around at trees that had been cut down, and he wondered whether trees are better off than humans. “At least there is hope for a tree,” he said. “If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail” (14:7). There may be nothing left but a stump, but it may still put forth new shoots and grow into another tree. “But,” says Job, “man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more” (14:10).

If only things were different! If only what happens to trees could happen to people! If only we could have another life after we’ve been cut down! If only there could be hope beyond tragedy, life beyond death! Job cried to the Lord, “If only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me till your anger has passed! If only you would set me a time and then remember me! If a man dies, will he live again?” (14:13-14). Job said he could put up with suffering and even bide his time in the grave if he knew there was life after death. A life beyond this life would mean that

all was not lost after all.

Again, what began as a painful question and a desperate longing developed into a growing certainty. Job went from wishing for life after death to being certain of it, and certain of a Redeemer who could guarantee it. Job declared, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another” (19:25-27). Death was all around Job, and Job even wondered at times whether God was against him. But Job came to realize that the Lord who seemed to be his enemy was really his Redeemer, his Rescuer. Even if Job died and his body decayed, he believed that he would have his own body and his own personality back and that he would see his Redeemer with his own eyes.

“If a man dies, will he live again?” That’s a vital question, and the Lord Jesus Christ is the answer. Every Sunday is a fresh reminder of that first Easter Sunday when Jesus rose from the grave and defeated death. Every Sunday is a fresh reminder that Job’s faith was not in vain, and the faith of all God’s people is not in vain. My Redeemer lives, and so will I!

Living in Wonder

When a bumper sticker declared, “Jesus is the answer,” another bumper sticker replied, “If Jesus is the answer, what’s the question?” We’ve seen three huge questions to which Jesus is the answer. First, what is man? Man is God’s image bearer, so dear to God that the Lord himself became human in the person of Jesus to connect us with him. Second, how can a mortal man be righteous before God? Only through faith in the perfect obedience and sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Third, if a man dies, will he live again? In Christ the answer is a resounding yes. Jesus died and rose again in order that we too could be raised from the dead and live forever.

So if you’re asking about the meaning and value of human existence, Jesus is the Answer. If you’re asking how to be right with God, Jesus is the Answer. If you’re asking about life after death, Jesus is the Answer. If you don’t care about those questions, Jesus might make you yawn. But if you want to be all that humanity is meant to be, if you want a relationship with God, if you want to live forever, then Jesus is the answer to your questions, the fulfillment of your longings.

Now, even if we know God in Jesus, we shouldn’t think we have everything figured out. Part of living in relationship to God is living in wonder: wondering about questions that remain unanswered, and wondering at the sheer mystery of God.

Near the end of the book of Job, after Job asked a lot of questions of God, including some questions that accused God of being unfair, God replied to Job. God didn’t reply with direct answers but with a barrage of questions Job couldn’t answer. Job’s only response was to put his hand over his mouth and offer no further objections. Even if God did explain everything, how could we understand it all, any more than a two-year-old could understand a physics lecture from Albert Einstein? God spoke to Job of behemoth and leviathan, animals that were too wild and strong for any human to tame. If we can’t even tame some animals that God made, how can we expect God to be tame and easy to figure out? God isn’t tame—but he’s good.

As it turns out, God had a plan for humanity so wild and wonderful that even the angels were amazed when God’s plan came to light in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If Job’s suffering was undeserved, Jesus’ suffering was even more undeserved. But out of Jesus’ suffering came the salvation of the world and victory over death. We may still wonder about some questions we can’t figure out, but we should also wonder in a different sense. We should be filled with wonder and awestruck amazement at the Answer which God has already provided: Jesus Christ, the only Answer we will ever need.