

"What is man?"

W. W. Fereday.

(Extracted from Truth for the Last Days, Vol. 4, 1905, page 25.)

Three times in the Old Testament Scriptures we meet with the query, "What is man?" The very repetition of the words is sufficient to arrest our attention; we naturally pause to enquire what connection there is between the passages in question, and what are the lessons that the Spirit of God would convey to our souls.

We turn first to Job 7: 17-19, where we read: "What is man, that Thou shouldest magnify him, and that Thou shouldest set Thine heart upon him, and that Thou shouldest visit him every morning, and try him every moment? How long wilt Thou not look away from me, nor let me alone till I swallow down my spittle?" (R.V.) This is the language of petulance, wrung from the lips of a deeply tried man. The story is a well-known one. God, in the beginning of it, raised a question with the enemy concerning His servant; and was answered with the sneer that he was only pious for gain, and that if all his worldly advantages were taken from him, he would readily renounce his Creator. Job was accordingly tested. The malicious adversary was permitted to strip him of his possessions, family, and even health itself. He then had to retire from the case, completely baffled, for the saint maintained his integrity in spite of all his afflictions. If the matter had been allowed to rest there, the experience would probably have proved harmful to Job, for he might have said with complacency that he had stood true to God both in prosperity and in adversity. The twenty-ninth chapter makes it plain that there was already a weed of self-satisfaction springing up within him, unknown, probably, to himself, but manifest enough to the holy eye of God. God, therefore, went on with the work at the point where the enemy was compelled to abandon it, that He might effectually rid His servant of the noxious weed, and so do him good in his latter end.

How did Job bear the divine hand? The Spirit truly tells us of his "patience" (James 5: 11), but has He not also recorded for our instruction not a little *impatience*? Let us deal tenderly here. Who among us would have stood the strain of suffering better than Job? How amazed we have been at times at the amount of perversity and unbelief suffering and trial have discovered within ourselves! With humble gratitude, therefore we welcome the portrait of the human heart as given to us in the book of Job; for it is no small help to our souls even in this most privileged day.

Job saw the hand of God very clearly, and confessed it, but he did not understand it; nor could his three friends enlighten him upon the subject. The patriarch looked at the almightiness of God, and then at his own weakness and insignificance, and he marvelled that He could occupy Himself so intensely with him. Hence his exclamation: "What is man, that Thou shouldest magnify him? . . . How long wilt Thou not look away from me?" In his deep distress he wished that God would turn His eyes in some other direction, and give attention to someone else.

Poor Job! How much he would have missed, how much the whole family of faith would have missed, if God had taken him at his word!

The interest of God in the individual soul, though so inexplicable to Job at that moment, is most precious. What greater proof could we have of its reality than the book of which we are speaking? Think of one of the largest books of the Bible (for not many exceed forty-two chapters) being entirely occupied with the history of God's dealings with *one soul*, and he not of Abraham's seed! Such was God's interest in His servant that He did not "look away" from him, nor "let him alone," spite of his

prayer; but went forward with His gracious work until it was completed, and the full blessing of it had been reaped.

Our second passage is Psalm 8: 3-6: "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained; what is man, that Thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that Thou visitest him? For Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour; Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet." This, as 4, seems to be one of David's night psalms. It was, perhaps, written on one of those nights when he was watching his father's sheep in the fields of Bethlehem. As the pious shepherd looked above, and contemplated the heavens and their glorious host, he was so overwhelmed with the majesty of Him who made them all that he burst out with the words we have just transcribed. Why should One who has such marvellous things before Him as the moon and the stars give such a large place in His mind to man, and the son of man? It is undeniable all Scripture being witness, that man has a place in the Divine thoughts that even angels have not, with all their superior glory and might. How is this to be explained? What is the answer to the Psalmist's query? The Spirit of God gives us the answer in Hebrews 2: 5-10. There He quotes the words of this psalm and applies them to Christ. He is the man who fills the mind of God; He is the ideal Son of man for whom all dominion is purposed. He having become man in His grace explains in the fullest way God's tender interest in our poor race. Having been made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, in resurrection He has brought man (i.e. believers) into a higher place and a nearer relationship to God than angels have ever known, or ever will know.

As Son of man He will shortly have all things placed beneath His feet; the Church, His body, being associated with Him in His glory (Eph. 1: 22). Adam in his extensive dominion was but a figure of Christ (Gen. 1: 26-28). The first man failed in his divinely appointed place of rule, and ruined the whole system that God had made dependent upon him; the Second man, with an even wider dominion, will fill all the earth with the excellence of Jehovah's name, ministering withal fulness of blessing to all His subjects. Then will be creation's jubilee after ages of bondage and groaning, as Romans viii. speaks. John, in a bold figure in Rev. 5: 13, 14, represents all created things, including the denizens of the sea, as praising God and the Lamb in the day of their deliverance and blessing.

Our third passage is Psalm 144: 3-6: "Lord, what is man, that Thou takest knowledge of him? Or the son of man, that Thou makest account of him?*" Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth away. Bow Thy heavens, O Lord, and come down; touch the mountains, and they shall smoke. Cast forth lightning, and scatter them: shoot out Thine arrows and destroy them." In these verses David has his enemies before his mind. He was God's Anointed, known and owned as such years before he sat on Israel's throne (2 Sam. 23: 17; 2 Sam. 24: 20); yet there were never wanting enemies, both before and after his accession, who did their best to frustrate the purposes of God concerning him. He speaks of these in Psalm 144. Filled with thoughts of the resistless power of God, he marvels that He should permit man who is like to vanity to so constantly fling himself across His path, and seek to obstruct Him in the accomplishment of His counsels. He follows this up with the fervent appeal: "Bow Thy heavens, O Lord, and come down . . . Cast forth lightning, and scatter them." It is the old problem of God's permission of evil. This has perplexed the godly in every age. The wicked triumph, and the righteous suffer; the plans and purposes of the one are carried through to a successful issue, while those of the other too often meet with disappointment and discomfiture. God could so easily order it all otherwise, yet He does not act! *Heaven is silent.* Who has not felt the strain and trial of this!

{*There is an interesting difference between this Psalm and Psalm 8 that should be noticed. Here "man" in the Hebrew is "Adam," and "son of man" is "son of enosh," in Psalm 8 the words are used in

the reverse order. "Enosh" means "feeble, mortal man."}

Here let us turn to Rev. 10. A mighty angel is seen coming down out of heaven, clothed with a cloud, having a rainbow upon his head, his face as the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire. Surely this is God's Christ. With one foot upon the sea and the other upon the earth, he lifts up his hand to heaven, and swears by Him that liveth for ever and ever, that there shall be no longer delay, " but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God shall be finished, according to the good tidings which He hath declared to His servants the prophets" (R.V.) "The mystery of God," i.e., the mystery of His non-intervention, of His permission of evil, will then be cleared up. The heavens will no longer be silent, but opened. The rightful Lord of all will come forth, and take His rights; evil shall be dethroned, and righteousness will be exalted in peace. Every riddle will then be explained; every difficult problem will be solved; and we shall see that, spite of all appearances, no purpose of God has really been hindered by the enemy; but that, on the contrary, God has been silently working out to a completion all His counsels of grace, for His own glory, and for the blessing of men. In the midst of wreck and ruin all around us, this thought is full of comfort and hope to the exercised soul.

Let us take heart. Faith will yet be constrained to say with the adoring Apostle: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! . . . For of Him and through Him, and to Him are all things, to Whom be glory for ever. Amen." (Romans 11: 33-36).