

THREE QUESTIONS ... which echo across the centuries
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(2 SAMUEL 19: 34; 1 KINGS 18: 2 1; REVELATION 6: 1 1)

Often, in the presentation of truth, it is advisable to bring together texts which originally belonged to different generations. When these are compared and contrasted, listeners are more equipped to understand the teaching of Holy Scripture. It is proposed in this study to illustrate the fact by joining three verses which reach across the centuries.

How Long have I to Live?

David and his faithful friend Barzillai travelled side by side along the dusty highway; both were silently reminiscent, for much had happened in recent days. Insurrection had been overcome, and the evil schemings of Prince Absalom had been completely destroyed. Triumphantly, the king now returned to his palace; but he was destined to remember for ever the old man who had been his stay in the time of trouble. David was grateful, and planned to take his friend to the royal city. " And the king said unto Barzillai, Come thou over with me, and I will feed thee with me in Jerusalem. And Barzillai said unto the king, How long have I to live . . . I am this day fourscore years old . . . Let thy servant, I pray thee, turn back again, that I may die in my own city, and be buried by the grave of my father and of my mother." He recognized that soon would come the summons to appear in an even greater palace, and the necessity of retiring to the privacy of his own home where preparation could be made for the supreme moment in his life. " How long have I to live? " Every soul should ask that question. Barzillai could teach us much, for in these modern times we seem to have lost the wisdom of the ancients. We live for the transient pleasures of time; they thought of the eternal, saw the invisible, and grasped reality.

How Long Halt Ye between Two Opinions?

From the distance, Carmel looked like a mammoth ant-hill. Vast crowds covered the mountain, and seething excitement filled every heart. Elijah had returned! The man whose word had closed the heavens; the prophet who had been sought in vain; the saint upon whose head the king had put a price: Elijah the elusive had returned. " And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word." They heard his challenge, watched the preparation of the altar, and probably joined in the supplication to Baal; but all the while they realized that Jehovah alone could solve their problems. That day they faced their greatest challenge. All around the parched countryside needed water. The entire nation seemed to be dying, and unless relief were forthcoming, all hope of survival could be abandoned. Knowing this, Elijah presented his immortal challenge. If he were present today, he would probably use identical words. The fear of war is heavily upon the nations; homes and communities are being spoiled through sin. Slowly we drift toward calamity. We cry to God when danger threatens; we forget Him when it is gone. We seem to be expert at turning around on the top of a fence. The need of this hour is that men should solemnly consider the facts, and supply an answer to the question asked by the prophet's text.

How Long, O Lord . . . dost Thou not Judge?

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From his prison on the isle of Patmos, John was transported in thought to see "the things which should be hereafter," and when in later days he described his experience, he wrote, " I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? . . . and it was said unto them that they should rest for a little season Some things are made obvious by this verse. (i) Men deserved judgment. Their guilt was undeniable; they had slain the people of God. (ii) Yet God was reluctant to pour out His wrath. His " little season " suggested that judgment should be delayed. The final description is so terrifying that it becomes easy to understand why God graciously desired to extend to the last possible moment the offer of salvation. " And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every freeman, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said . . . Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" (Rev. 6:15-17). God's meteorological office gives warning of the approach of a great hurricane. Happy will be the man who finds a safe refuge before the storm breaks.

The Shocking Will

He was rather rugged, a bit blunt, but a good friend for all that. I had known him for several years, and had cause to be grateful for assistance which he had rendered on several occasions. More often than not I went to him for help, for he was an accomplished workman; yet on the day of which I now speak, he came to me. He seemed thoughtful, and I wondered what could have happened. When he was comfortably seated in my home, I asked what I could do for him; and he replied, "Parson, I want you to help me make a will." I answered, " Certainly. Are you thinking of dying? "

"No, parson; but you can never tell, and I want things to be in order."

When he produced the official forms, I filled in the necessary preliminaries, and then commenced writing down the things he dictated. He had thought of everybody. With great care and deliberation he outlined what he desired each member of his family to inherit, and when he had finished dictating

his wishes, he exclaimed, " That's the lot." I repeated all that he had stated, and when I had finished, he added, "Parson, that's perfect. You didn't miss a thing. Good." I signed his document, and as I handed it back, asked a question.

" How much will you have?

He seemed a little bewildered, and it became necessary to explain my question. " Well," I said, " you have made provision for each member of your family. They will all have so much. I wondered how much you will have? " It was difficult to hide my mirth, for as he stared into my face he was utterly bewildered, and obviously wondered if I had taken leave of my senses. Finally he managed to say, " Parson, don't be silly. How can I have anything? I'll be dead."

"Yes, I know. Of course you will be dead. You have made provision for all the relatives left behind in this world. Have you made any for yourself in the world to which you

THREE QUESTIONS ... which echo across the centuries will be going? When I go overseas, I send money in advance so that I shall not arrive penniless. Have you sent anything into eternity? Will you be bankrupt there, or-well, tell me friend, How much will you have? "

Suddenly he understood what I meant, and as his shoulders sagged, he said, " Good God, I never thought about that." His attitude seems to be very widespread. We think of every eventuality in life except the most important one. We plan for years of progress; we envisage having unlimited time to expend on pursuits of pleasure, and yet-How long have we to live?

The Strange Refusal

During the autumn of 1958, Canadians throughout the country talked of the sad case of a young lad who had accidentally shot himself. He was rushed to hospital, where doctors declared him to be in urgent need of blood transfusions. Alas, the boy's parents belonged to a movement where transfusions were considered evil. Increasing pressure was brought to bear upon the adamant parents, but they refused to reconsider their decision. Suggestions were made in high legal circles that new laws be passed immediately to authorize the transfusions, for arteries had been severed and the boy was obviously dying. Delay followed delay, and finally the news reached the nation that the lad was dead. This was nothing short of a tragedy, especially since the parents had made the decision which was to deprive another of his life. Many Canadians were incensed; yet a similar mistake was being repeated a million times all over the country. Sinners were dying; their own hope seemed to be a transfusion of divine energy. Alas, many people even believed this fact, and yet postponed the operation. "Now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation."

The Man who kept on Living

"How long, O Lord . . . dost thou not judge . . . the earth? " Probably the greatest of all illustrations dealing with the magnitude of God's mercy comes from the Scriptures. Certain critics have expressed their inability to believe that Methuselah lived to be nine hundred and sixty-nine years of age (Gen. 5:27). I quote from Bible Treasures, pages 3 and 4, "The child was named Methuselah. Many and varied interpretations of this strange name have been given. Certain scholars have declared that it means ' Man of the dart, or javelin.' Yet another startling suggestion is that the name means 'It shall not come till he die' (Lange's commentary). . . . It is even more startling to notice that the prediction was fulfilled ... in the year of his death, the great flood devastated the earth.... But Methuselah lived on and on. Possibly some men thought he would never die.... Yet we know now that the length of the patriarch's life was an indication of the overwhelming mercy of God. The homecall of the aged man would coincide with the closure of the offer of mercy to a guilty world. Thus he was allowed to linger. In this instance, God's 'little while' lasted over nine hundred years. How great is the mercy of God."

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