

Series: Answering God's Questions

1. WHERE WERE YOU WHEN I LAID THE EARTH'S FOUNDATION?"

Job 38v4: a question for Job

Robert Farrar Capon is a strange hybrid of theologian and food critic. He writes: *"Let me tell you why God made the world. One afternoon, before anything was made, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit sat around in the unity of their Godhead, discussing one of the Father's fixations. From all eternity, it seems, he had this 'thing' about being. He would keep thinking up all kinds of unnecessary things – new ways of being and new kinds of things to be. And as they talked, God the Son suddenly said, 'Really, this is absolutely great stuff. Why don't I go out and mix us up a batch?' And God the Holy Spirit said, 'Terrific! I'll help you.' So they all pitched in, and after supper that night, the Son and the Holy Spirit put on this tremendous show of being for the Father. It was full of water and light and frogs; pine cones kept dropping all over the place and crazy fish swam around in the wineglasses. There were mushrooms and grapes, horseradishes and tigers – and men and women to taste them, to juggle them, to join them and to love them. And God the Father looked at the whole wild party and said, 'Wonderful' Just what I had in mind!"* (1)

Did it happen like that? Of course not! Capon captures something of the creativity and delight and love behind creation, and of course the glorious co-operation of Father, Son and Spirit. But, it didn't happen exactly like that did it? And Capon isn't claiming he was there to witness it.

Which brings me to the first question in this new teaching series: **"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?"** On the surface it is a very strange question, but not a difficult one to answer. It was addressed to a man called Job, who could say, *"I was nowhere! I didn't exist."* We would have to say the same. So this could be a very short message. What then is this question all about? To answer this I need to introduce the book of Job.

The Book of Job

Most of us have only a passing acquaintance with *Job*, but before you can make the most of it you need a bird's eye view of the whole work. All 42 chapters! So much for a short sermon!

The book of Job is part of Old Testament "Wisdom" literature. This is the voice of reflection on the way God governs the world, and how to apply practical wisdom for daily life. Its great motto is *"the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"*.

The style of the book is that of a drama. The Bible often teaches us about God through stories rather than abstract concepts. This drama has a

prologue, debates, precisely drawn characters, a “curtain” (or interval) mid way, and a powerful final scene and epilogue. It is set in the patriarchal period (the days of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) – but outside the Promised Land. Job is a man of great renown.

The story opens with a scene in the council of heaven with God expressing His delight in Job. Satan replies with two accusations: on the surface they are levelled at Job but really they are aimed at God. First – it is easy to be devoted to God when you are comfortably off, and second, it is easy to be righteous when you’re not the one who is in physical pain. So God gives Satan permission to test Job but not kill him. The “audience” is aware of this background but the principal characters are not.

Satan throws everything at Job. He suffers material ruin, his children die in tragic circumstances, he experiences crippling disease and he ends up in social disgrace. Even his wife urges him to curse God and die – presumably lightning would strike him from heaven! Job’s bitter experience turns his worldview upside down. He and his friends have always believed that good people prosper and the wicked suffer. God blesses the righteous! If they sin they are chastised – but in proportion to their wrongdoing. Yet Job knows that what he is experiencing is out of all proportion to anything he might have done, and he is perplexed.

Three of his friends visit Job and debate with him (chapters 3 - 31). Their way of making sense of the world is also under attack so they are more concerned with defending their system than they are with consoling Job.

Eliphaz is the mystic; he has had a vision which is now his infallible yardstick for measuring everything & everybody, including Job. (4v12-19) Bildad is the dogmatist. He is sometimes joked about as the smallest man in the Bible; Bildad the Shuhite! In fact his name means “god’s darling”. He lives by religious tradition. What is true is not new; what is new is not true. (8v8-10) Zophar is the “common sense” man and blunt with it! He actually talks a lot of sense, but goes too far. He is a little too quick to expound the unknowable!

There is no humility as these men talk of God’s awesome power and righteousness - this simply provides them with a foundation for their theories. *“The all-might of God is a handy-weapon” to smite Job with!* (2) You can see why we have the expression “Job’s comforters” describing people who make our suffering worse! The only thing to be said in the friends’ favour is that they increase Job’s anguish so much that they drive him back to God.

A fourth character, called Elihu, appears when the other three have finished (chapters 32-37). He is an “angry young man”, challenging the wisdom of the other friends and emphasising how God speaks through suffering - it is educational. This may be true but it misses the point. We know from the Prologue that Job’s suffering is not to teach him anything. However, Elihu is much nearer the mark when he says that the perplexities of life are not because of any injustice on God’s part. It is our limited understanding which prevents us from knowing why things are as they are.

Then God appears! (Ch. 38v1 - 42v6) The clouds gather, the scene darkens, the wind howls, there are rumbles of thunder and flashes of lightening. Is Job about to be struck down? Will the friends be proved right? *“Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?”*

In the depths Job has been looking for answers. He has stored up lots of questions for God, the biggest of which is *“Why?” “Wait till I see God! I’ve got some questions for Him!”* But now that God has appeared He is the One asking the questions, not Job. **“Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?”**

In fact this is the first of *seventy* questions God asks in the next three chapters as he is taken on a “magical mystery tour” of creation by God. (Ch. 38-41) Michael Lloyd writes *“He introduces him (imaginatively) to the secret places of our world, and to some strange inhabitants– the stars, the constellations, the ocean depths, the mountain goats, the wild donkeys, the ostrich and horse, the eagle and hawk, and mysterious creatures.”* (3)

Job was taken through David Attenborough’s full BBC back-catalogue. But why? Why the grand tour of creation?

1. The glories of God’s creation are faith building.

Creation is there to stir faith in God. Job’s faith needed some help.

Most of all Job needed to be reassured that God was in control. God was speaking, *“to the hidden fear, hardly realized by Job, that there might be somewhere where the writ of God did not run, where God was not all-sovereign”* (2) Taking Job on a tour of the immensity and complexity of creation was God’s way of doing that.

The glories of creation are there to stir faith. That is why, in the west, the origin of the universe is the biggest issue in the debate about the existence of God. The central plank of atheism is a theory of impersonal evolution. This is protected tenaciously like religious dogma. This should come as no surprise, because the only viable alternative is creation by an Infinite Personal God. So celebrity atheists love to caricature Christians as mindless and portray evolution as fact.

By contrast, in the Bible, the mystery and glory of the universe is a glorious sign to point us to faith and help us make sense of life and the world around us. For example in Romans 1v20 Paul says, *“since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”*

Is this why many astronauts are believers? John Glenn returned to space in 1998 at the age of seventy seven and on his return told reporters that, almost immediately, he had been overwhelmed with the presence of God. He said *“Looking at the Earth from this vantage point, looking at this kind of creation and not to believe in God, to me, is impossible.”* (4)

The structure of the universe offers so much striking evidence of purpose and design. In fact scientists talk of the *anthropic principle* which states that the physical structure of the universe is exactly what it must be in order to support life. This is especially true of planet earth. If it was even slightly closer to the sun, all its water would boil away and life would be impossible. But if earth were slightly further away from the sun all its water would freeze and there would be nothing but a desert landscape. And human life can only function within a narrow temperature range. For this to happen the earth must remain about the same distance from the sun in its orbit; so its orbit must be circular. Most other planets in our solar system do not have a circular orbit. There are many more examples we could consider. (5) Are these *“cosmic coincidences”*? We believe they point to a Personal and Purposeful Creator.

So, don't be seduced by scientific humanism. It robs God of glory. It also seeks to rob you of this basis for trusting God, and rob you of your dignity as someone made in God's very own image. You are not the product of impersonal chemical forces; you are created by a loving purposeful God to know Him and enjoy Him and worship Him, and be with Him throughout eternity. Don't let atheism rob you! Like Job, in the midst of his trials, God wants to use this great truth to strengthen and uphold you.

But our text takes us even further. When we are in pain and at our most distraught God invites us to take a tour of His creation. This is behind God's question to Job: **Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?** How does this help?

2. The beauties of God's creation are therapeutic.

Job had not been experiencing much joy or delight. So God took Him on this whacky tour of creation to begin his healing *“God is applying the beauty of His creation to Job's pain. ... Beauty and wonder are therapeutic.”* (3)

The beauty of God's creation is especially therapeutic when you are overwhelmed and feeling low. In his book on *Job* David Atkinson reflects on God taking Job on this tour of creation. *“Sometimes we will most help distressed people – help them draw nearer to God, from the depths of depression – not by teaching them doctrine, or by preaching our best sermon, or by showing them the error of their ways, but by walking with them round the garden, by taking them to see a waterfall or a sunset, by helping them recover an enjoyment in the world.”* (6) This is what God did with Job.

But we need the therapeutic properties of God's creation all the time – whether we are feeling low or not. Author Clyde Kilby made up eleven

personal resolutions for *“staying alive to God’s glory.”* Creation has a significant role in his list. For example here is his first resolution. *“At least once every day I shall look steadily up at the sky and remember that I, a consciousness with a conscience, am on a planet travelling in space with wonderfully mysterious things above and about me.”* And number six: *“I shall open my eyes and ears. Once every day I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud, or a person. I shall not then be concerned at all to ask what they are but simply be glad that they are. I shall joyfully allow them the mystery of what (C.S.) Lewis calls their ‘divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic’ existence.”* (7)

Perhaps some of us need to make more time to look at God’s creation. When did you last visit the Lake District or walk the Cheviots or get in a boat to the Farne Islands? Buy some binoculars and take up bird watching! Any pursuit, like painting, which involves lingering as you look at the world around you, will be therapeutic. Watch Attenborough’s brilliant body of work through the lens of faith - you will enjoy it even more. Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote: *“Earth’s crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God.”*

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?” Consider what the answer would be if this question were to be addressed to Jesus. The New Testament is very clear. He was there! *“Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made”*; *“by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible”*; *“(God) has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”* (8) The glory of the universe points us to Jesus. And this great truth becomes yet another source of strength and faith and joy when we face the perplexities of life.

* * *

In the grand climax of the story Job is vindicated. (42v7-17) The first three friends are chastised, (Elihu is not included in this censure) and Job’s fortunes are restored. God has not directly answered any of Job’s questions. He has made no reference to his sufferings. Yet Job bows before God; all his questions are forgotten. *“Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.”* (42v3-5) Job had lost everything, but now he has found God afresh.

John Wilthew. April 2008

(1) R.F. Capon: ‘The Third Peacock’ . Harper & Row. 1986 .Quoted by Michael Lloyd (3)

(2) H.L. Ellison: ‘From Tragedy to Triumph’ – the Message of the Book of Job. Paternoster 1958

(3) Michael Lloyd: ‘Café Theology’. IVP. 2005

(4) Quoted by Gary Thomas: ‘Sacred Pathways’ Zondervan,. 1996

(5) See for example Charles Colson & Nancy Pearcey: ‘How Now Shall We Live’ Marshall Pickering. 1999; & John Blanchard: ‘Does God Believe in Atheists’ Evangelical Press. 2000)

(6) David Atkinson: ‘The Message of Job’. IVP. 1991.

(7) Quoted by John Piper in ‘The Pleasures of God.’ Multnomah 1991

(8) John 1v3; Colossians 1v16,17; Hebrews 1v1,2.