



## THREE QUESTIONS

By Leo Tolstoy

### SUMMARY

The following chapter 'Three Questions' has been written by Leo Tolstoy. The story is divided into two parts and presents a parable (a story with a moral). The parable is about a king who wants answers to what he considers the three most important questions in life.

#### Part - I

##### The King's Mission

Once there was a king, who thought that to be a successful ruler, he must know the answer to three questions. The questions were:

1. What is the right time to begin something?
2. Which people should he listen to?
3. What is the most important thing for him to do?

The king sent messengers in all directions to find people who could answer these three questions in return for which he offered a large sum of money in reward. Many wise men came to meet the king but their answers were all different.

##### The First Question

In reply to the first question, some of them said that the king should strictly follow a timetable. Other wise men said that it was not possible to decide the right time for doing something in advance. So, the king should notice what is going on, avoid unnecessary pleasures and do what is necessary at that time.

Some people suggested that the king should have a council of wise men, who would help him act at the right time. They believed that one man cannot decide when to act without the help of others. Others said that there might be some things which could not wait for the decision of the council. So, the council would not be able to help him

act at the right time. The only right way to know the correct time would be to see the future. So, the king would have to go to magicians.

### **The Second and Third Questions**

The king received different answers to the second question as well. Some wise men suggested that the king should listen to his counsellors, while others thought it was the priest whom the king should listen to. Some suggested doctors while others said that soldiers were the most necessary.

The wise men were also divided in their answers to the third question. Their differing answers included science, war, and religious worship.

### **The King Goes to the Hermit**

The king was not satisfied with the answers, so he didn't give any reward to anyone. Instead, he decided to seek the advice of a wise hermit who lived in a forest. The hermit would only meet simple people, so the king dressed in ordinary clothes. He left behind his horse and bodyguard and went to meet the hermit alone.

The weak and old hermit was busy digging the ground in front of his hut. He welcomed the king and then continued digging the ground. The king told him that he had come in search of answers for his three questions and repeated them. The hermit did not respond and continued digging the ground.

### **The King Helped the Hermit**

Looking at the tired condition of the hermit, the king offered to help him with the digging. The hermit thanked the king, gave him the spade and sat down on the ground. When the king had dug two beds, he repeated his questions. But the hermit did not reply and instead asked the king to rest and to let him continue with his work. The king refused to let the hermit work and continued digging the ground till evening. The king again requested the hermit to answer his questions, but at that moment someone came running towards them.

## **Part – II**

### **The King Helped the Wounded Man**

The king saw that a bearded man who seemed hurt was running towards them. The man was holding his wounded stomach and fainted as soon as he reached them. The king and the hermit removed the man's clothing to see a large wound. The king immediately cleaned the wound and covered it with his handkerchief but the blood would not stop flowing. The king redressed the wound and then the man felt better

and slept. The king also gave some water to the man when he asked for it. Then, the hermit and the king helped him to the hut and laid him on the bed. Soon the king fell asleep on the floor.

### **The Story of the Wounded Man**

In the morning when the king woke up, he saw the wounded man asking for forgiveness. The bearded man revealed that he was actually an enemy of the king. He wanted to take revenge because the king had killed his brother and taken away all of his property. Therefore, he had made a plan to kill the king while he would return from visiting the hermit.

While he was waiting in the woods for the king to return, the king's bodyguard had found him and attacked. The man had escaped with a wound and would have died if the king had not dressed his wounds. He regretted his desire to kill the king and promised to become a most faithful servant to him. The king was glad to turn an enemy into a friend. So, he forgave him and returned all of his property as well. The king also told the man that he would send his servants and doctor to take care of him.

### **The King Seeks the Answers**

The king then went out to look for the hermit and repeated the answers to his three questions for the last time. The hermit was sowing seeds in the beds that the king had dug the previous day. To this, the hermit replied that the king had already found the answers. The hermit explained the answers using their experience with the wounded man.

He explained that, had the king not taken pity on the hermit's condition, he would not have offered to dig up the beds. Then he would have been attacked by the bearded man. So, the most important time was when the king was helping the hermit dig up the beds. The most important person was the hermit and the most important thing was to help him.

### **The Hermit Answers the King's Questions**

Later, with the bearded man, the most important time was when the king was saving the man, who would have otherwise died. The most important person was the wounded man, and the most important thing to do was saving his life.

So, the hermit explained that the most important time is "Now" because that is the only time when people have the power to do anything. The most important person is the person you are with. And the most important thing is to do good to others because we have been sent to this world only for that noble cause.

# Word Meaning

| Word            | Meaning                                                      |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| Messenger       | one who brings a message                                     |
| In advance      | prior; earlier                                               |
| Pleasures       | cheer; zeal                                                  |
| Council         | a body of people formally constituted, and meeting regularly |
| Urgent          | important                                                    |
| Councillors     | members of the council                                       |
| Priest          | a person who performs religious duties                       |
| Hermit          | a person living a simple life alone                          |
| Wisdom          | knowledge and intelligence                                   |
| Wood            | a small forest                                               |
| Seek            | attempt to find                                              |
| Spade           | a tool with a sharp edge                                     |
| Beds            | small patches of ground for plants                           |
| Fainted         | lost consciousness                                           |
| Stretching      | straighten or extend one's body                              |
| Revenge         | the action of hurting someone in return for an injury        |
| Seized          | take hold of suddenly and forcibly                           |
| Swore           | to make a promise                                            |
| Sowing          | plant seed by scattering it on or in the earth               |
| On his knees    | to meet or bend down bending one's knees                     |
| Made peace with | to establish peace                                           |