

"WHAT IS MAN?"

"What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" Psalm 8:4.

Three times this question is asked in the Scriptures -- once in the presence of Nature, once in the presence of History, and once in the presence of Life. Nature, history, and life are the three sources of knowledge; from them our theories are deduced, with them our practice is concerned.

This Psalm is a song of praise, equally adapted for men of every nation, color, and clime. Its author was David, who, as a shepherdboy, had cast an observant eye on the works of God, both in the heavens above and on the earth beneath; and the habit of doing this reverently and devoutly grew with the passing of the years. As a lad, keeping watch over his father's flocks by night, David often gazed reverently into the star-spangled heavens, and was deeply impressed with the goodness and greatness of God. As the twilight hours brought out the marvelous beauty of the starlit heavens, David was awed by the spectacle of their grandeur and glory.

As his thoughts turned to himself, he was perplexed by the startling contrast between the starlit sky and the insignificance of man. While meditating on the littleness of man, he asked, "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?" In view of this vast magnificent universe, he appears as a speck, an atom, or a vapour that appears and then vanishes. The word that the Psalmist uses for man is very remarkable. It is not the word which is usually employed to signify humanity; but rather it signifies a being in himself frail, weak, and mortal. In calling our attention to the littleness and feebleness of man, he asks, What is man that God should think of him, have anything to do with him, or care for him?

David's question is certainly one which no thoughtful person can forbear asking. How important is man? Once the question was colored only by humility. It was asked in that spirit which indicated that surely man cannot claim to be anything much. But now, in some quarters, the words have taken on an arrogant meaning. Instead of looking upwards to God, and saying, "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" suggesting our human littleness in contrast with His Divine Majesty, some people have impudently reversed that and seem to say, "What is God, that man should be mindful of Him?" How tragic!

What is man? He is a special creation. He was created in the image of God. He is a spiritual being. "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul." Genesis 2:7. The littleness and greatness of man are set before us here in powerful contrast. In this text, God is not minimizing the place, the importance, or the power of man. Rather, He is magnifying man. "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?" verses 3-4. God is picturing here the glory of the heavens, the glory of the moon and the stars, and the majesty of the marvelous creations as a background to show the place and importance of man, the crowning piece of His creation. In other words, He is saying, "If I have given such consideration in creating things, clothing them with beauty, wrapping them with the mantle of majesty, over-arching them with the canopy of heaven, planting the earth with trees, carpeting it with grasses, embroidering it with flowers, bedecking it with jewels, what is there that I would not do for man?" "For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour." verse 5. Of course, this applies to man only as he is rightly related to God.

The Psalmist reminds us that, although little in himself, man is Divine in his origin, and though weak and frail in his present life, he is capable of a glorious future, and that future God has in store for him. The thought of our high origin and our glorious destiny awakes and fosters in us the religion of hope. There is something in every man which separates him from all other creatures on the face of the earth, something which makes it possible for him to think of God, to know God, and to love God.

I. God Has Done Much For Man.

1. He created him.

Man is a product of the divine thought and love and power. There is nothing which gives such dignity to humanity as this. If we but appreciated the real significance of the fact that we are God-made -- products of His thought and love and power -- how it would elevate our conception of manhood, how it would dignify our lives, and how it would deliver us from every mean motive, from every unworthy thought, and from every ungodlike act.

God made man the crowning achievement of all creation. He laid foundations for greatness within him. He endowed him with the ability to think, dream, hope, aspire, invent, reason, grow, and build. One difference between man and the rest of creation is in what he sees. A sheep will look out upon a meadow and see grass, but a man, looking out on that same meadow, will see beauty. The rest of creation accepts the world as it is, but man undertakes to make the world over into what he thinks it ought to be.

2. He gave him dominion over the created things on the earth.

No wonder man has ribboned the earth with railroads and highways, charted the oceans, whitened all the seas with commerce, built powerful, pulsating, throbbing cities, perfected inventions, harnessed the airwaves, and caused nature to serve him in a thousand ways. This is what God intends for man to do. We are not just to play; we are to work. Our function is not to obstruct; our function is to construct.

God has given man dominion over his environment. An individual is not responsible for the environment into which he is born; he is responsible for the environment in which he lives. Some of the brightest chapters of human history have been made possible by the fact that men and women have risen above and beyond their environments, converting the swamps of sin into beautiful rose gardens. It is amazing what an individual can do when linked on to God.

3. He has cared for him.

For him the sun shines, and the stars appear; for him the birds sing, the brooks babble, and the zephyrs blow; for him the seasons come and the earth yields her abundance, her beauty, and her fragrance. He meets our deepest needs, disciplines our follies, and educates our noblest traits. Being mindful of us, He cares for us every day. His works for us display amazing wisdom, power, and goodness.

4. He has saved him.

Parents have done much for their children. They give to the limit of their love, ability, ingenuity, etc., in order that their children may have a fair chance in life. They get great joy in the sacrifices they make for their children. Our Heavenly Father has done more than any earthly parent can do. His love is broader, His interest is more intense, and His sacrifice is greater. He sent His Son into the world to seek and to save the lost. No good gift will He withhold from those who trust and follow Him.

II. God Sees Much In Man.

1. The possibility of salvation.
2. The possibility of happiness.
3. The possibility of success.
4. The possibility of service.
5. The possibility of overcoming handicaps.

Some of us who are strong physically are abashed as we observe what others accomplish under great physical handicaps. The story of Helen Keller is a well-known example of what can be accomplished under the direst handicaps. Deaf, dumb, and blind though she is, she has come to be one of the most radiant characters of her generation. Abraham Lincoln rose from a log cabin, dynamited the obstacles that obstructed his road out of his way, and achieved the presidency of these United States. Lloyd George of England lost his father when he was a small boy, but his uncle aided him in securing an education, which enabled him to reach the heights in statesmanship.

6. The ability to overcome poverty.

A brilliant young preacher was a student in college. All his funds were exhausted. He came to the end of one term without any money in sight to pay his bills or fees for the next term. His parents were very poor. He went home. His mother met him at the gate of that country home and kissed him. He took her hands in his and noticed that they were stained and very rough. A little later she took him aside and showed him a huge pile of walnuts that she had hulled with her own hands for the purpose of putting them on the market. A little later she placed seventy-five dollars that had come from the sale of walnuts and like labors of love, and with a smile she said: "Son, you are going back to college." That is an example of the overcoming of poverty. But being poor did not keep that young man from crawling out and climbing up the ladder of success and usefulness. You too can overcome poverty and get an education if you want it bad enough. Personal testimony.

A contractor and his pastor stood before an open window, looking down on the busy street ten stories below, when the former said to the latter, "Do you see that building across the street?" "Yes. What's peculiar about it?" asked the preacher. "Well, it's like a lot of people I know. It was planned, originally, as a ten-story structure, and the foundation was put in for such a building, but something happened after the work was started and only the first two stories were completed. There it stands -- a two-story building on a ten-story foundation." The contractor was right; all about us two-story lives are to be seen standing on ten-story foundations.

III. God Expects Much From Man.

1. He expects us to reveal the spirit of self-denial.
Doubtless you know the difference between the Greek and Roman and Christian philosophy of life. The Greek philosophy is, "Know thyself." The Roman philosophy is, "Control thyself." The Christian philosophy is, "Deny thyself." God is displeased if we fail to manifest the spirit of self-denial.
2. He expects us to be faithful.
The Bible places strong emphasis upon faithfulness. Jesus said, "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much." Faithfulness is universally recognized and appreciated. It is appreciated wherever it is found, even if it is in a dog.
3. He expects us to do our very best.