

What is Man

By John Wesley

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Sermon Title What is Man?

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "When I consider thy heaven, the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man?"
Psalm 8:3, 4.

Intro

How often has it been observed, that the Book of Psalms is a rich treasury of devotion, which the wisdom of God has provided to supply the wants of his children in all generations! In all ages the Psalms have been of singular use to those that loved or feared God; not only to the pious Israelites, but to the children of God in all nations. And this book has been of sovereign use to the Church of God, not only while it was in its state of infancy, (so beautifully described by St. Paul in the former part to the fourth chapter to the Galatians,) but also since, in the fullness of time, "life and immortality were brought to the light by the gospel." The Christians in every age and nation have availed themselves of this divine treasure, which has richly supplied the wants, not only of the "babes in Christ," of those who were just setting out in the ways of God, but of those also who had made good progress therein; yea, of such as were swiftly advancing toward "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The subject of this psalm is beautifully proposed in the beginning of it: "O Lord our Governor, how excellent is thy name in all the earth; who hast set thy glory above the heavens!" It celebrates the glorious wisdom and love of God, as the Creator and Governor of all things. It is not an improbable conjecture, that David

wrote this psalm in a bright star-light night, while he observed the moon also "walking in her brightness;" that while he surveyed This fair half-round, the ample azure sky, Terribly large, and beautifully bright, With stars unnumber'd, and unmeasured light, -- he broke out, from the fullness of his heart, into the natural exultation, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man?" How is it possible that the Creator of these, the innumerable armies of heaven and earth, should have any regard to this speck of creation, whose time "passeth away like a shadow?" Thy frame but dust, thy stature but a span, A moment thy duration, foolish man! "What is man?" I would consider this, First, with regard to his magnitude; and, Secondly, with regard to his duration.

I

I. 1. Consider we, First, What is man, with regard to his magnitude? And, in this respect, what is any one individual, compared to all the inhabitants of Great Britain? He shrinks into nothing in the comparison. How inconceivably little is one compared to eight or ten millions of people! Is he not Lost like a drop in the unbounded main?

2. But what are all the inhabitants of Great Britain, compared to all the inhabitants of the earth? These have frequently been supposed to amount to about four hundred millions. But will this computation be allowed to be just, by those who maintain China alone to contain fifty-eight millions? If it be true, that this one empire contains little less than sixty millions, we may easily suppose that the inhabitants of the whole terraqueous globe amount to four thousand millions of inhabitants, rather than four hundred. And what is any single individual, in comparison of this number?

3. But what is the magnitude of the earth itself, compared to that of the solar system? Including, beside that vast body, the sun, so immensely larger than the earth, the whole train of primary and secondary planets; several of which (I mean, of the secondary planets, suppose that satellites or moons of Jupiter and Saturn) are abundantly larger than the whole earth?

4. And yet, what is the whole quantity of matter contained in the sun, and all those primary and secondary planets, with all the spaces comprised in the solar system, in comparison of that which is pervaded by those amazing bodies, the comets? Who but the Creator himself can "tell the number of these, and call them all by their names?" Yet what is even the orbit of a comet, and the space contained therein, to the space which is occupied by the fixed stars; which are at so immense a distance from the earth, that they appear, when they are viewed through the largest telescope, just as they do to the naked eye?

5. Whether the bounds of the creation do or do not extend beyond the region of the fixed stars, who can tell? Only the morning-stars, who sang together when the foundations thereof were laid. But it is finite, that the bounds of it are fixed, we have no reason to doubt. We cannot doubt, but when the Son of God had finished all the work which he created and made, he said, These be thy bounds, This be thy just circumference, O world! But what is man to this?

6. We may take one step, and only one step, farther still: What is the space of the whole creation, what is all finite space that is, or can be conceived, in comparison of infinite? What is it but a point, a cipher, compared to that which is filled by him that is All in all? Think of this, and then ask, "What is man?"

7. What is man, that the great God who filleth heaven and earth, "the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity," should stoop so inconceivably low as to "be mindful of him?" Would not reason suggest to us, that so diminutive a creature would be overlooked by him in immensity of his works? Especially when we consider,

II

II. Secondly, What is man, with regard to his duration?

1. The days of man, since the last reduction of human life, which seems to have taken place in the time of Moses, (and not improbably was revealed to the man of God at the time that he made this declaration,) "are threescore years and ten." This is the general standard which God

hath now appointed. "And if men be so strong," perhaps one in a hundred, "that they come to fourscore years, yet then is their strength but labour and sorrow: So soon passeth it away, and we are gone!"

2. Now, what a poor pittance of duration is this, compared to the life of Methuselah! "And Methuselah lived nine hundred and sixty and nine years." But what are these nine hundred and sixty and nine years to the duration of an angel, which began "or ever the mountains were brought forth," or the foundations of the earth were laid? And what is the duration which has passed since the creation of angels, that which passed before they were created, to unbeginning eternity? -- to that half of eternity (if one may so speak) which had then elapsed? And what are threescore years and ten to this?

3. Indeed, what proportion can there possibly be between any finite and infinite duration? What proportion is there between a thousand or ten thousand years, or ten thousand time ten thousand ages, and eternity? I know not that the inexpressible disproportion between any conceivable part of time and eternity can be illustrated in a more striking manner than it is in the well-known passage of St. Cyprian: "Suppose there was a ball of sand as large as the globe of earth, and suppose one grain of this were to be annihilated in a thousand years; yet that whole space of time wherein this ball would be annihilating, at the rate of one grain in a thousand years, would bear less, yea, unspeakably, infinitely less, proportion to eternity, than a single grain of sand would bear to that whole mass." What, then, are the seventy years of human life, in comparison of eternity? In what terms can the proportion between these be expressed? It is nothing, yea, infinitely less than nothing!

4. If, then, we add to the littleness of man the inexpressible shortness of his duration, it is any wonder that a man of reflection should sometimes feel a kind of fear, lest the great, eternal, infinite Governor of the universe should disregard so diminutive a creature as man? -- a creature so every way inconsiderable, when compared either with immensity or eternity? Did not both these reflections glance through, if not dwell upon, the mind of the royal Psalmist? Thus, in contemplation of the former, he breaks out into the strong words of the text: "When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars

which thou has ordained, What is man, that thou shouldest be mindful; or the son of man, that thou shouldest regard him?" He is, indeed, (to use St. Augustine's words,) aliqua portio creaturuci, "some portion of thy creation;" but quantula portio, "how amazingly small a portion!" How utterly beneath thy notice! It seems to be in contemplation of the latter, that he cries out in the hundred and forty-fourth Psalm, "Lord, what is man, that thou hast such respect unto him; or the son of man, that though shouldest so regard him?" "Man is like a thing of naught." Why? "His time passeth away like a shadow." In this, although in a very few places,) the new translation of the Psalms -- that bound up in our Bibles -- is perhaps more proper than the old, -- that which we have in the Common Prayer Book. It runs thus: "Lord, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him; or the son of man, that thou makest account of him?" According to the former translation, David seems to be amazed that the eternal God, considering the littleness of man, should have so much respect unto him, and should so much regard him: But in the latter, he seems to wonder, seeing the life of man "passeth away like a shadow," that God should take any knowledge of him at all, or make any account of him.

5. And it is natural for us to make the same reflection, and to entertain the same fear. But how may we prevent this uneasy reflection, and effectually cure this fear? First. By considering what David does not appear to have taken at all into his account; namely, that the body is not the man; that man is not only a house of clay, but an immortal spirit; a spirit made in the image of God; an incorruptible picture of the God of glory; a spirit that is of infinitely more value than the whole earth; of more value than the sun, moon, and stars, put together; yea, than the whole material creation. Consider that the spirit of man is not only of a higher order, of a more excellent nature, than any part of the visible world, but also more durable; not liable either to dissolution or decay. We know all the things "which are seen are temporal;" -- of a changing, transient nature; -- but "the things which are not seen" (such as is the soul of man in particular) "are eternal." "They shall perish," but the soul remaineth. "They all shall wax old as a garment;" but when heaven and earth shall pass away, the soul shall not pass away.

6. Consider, Secondly, that declaration which the Father of spirits hath

made to us by the Prophet Hosea: "I am God, and not man: Therefore my compassions fail not." As if he had said, "If I were only a man, or an angel, or any finite being, my knowledge might admit of bounds, and my mercy might be limited. But my thoughts are not as your thoughts," and my mercy is not as your mercy. As the heavens are higher than earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts;" and my mercy," my compassion, my ways of showing it, higher than your ways.""

7. That no shadow of fear might remain, no possibility of doubting; to show what manner of regard the great eternal God bears to little, short-lived man, but especially to his immortal part; God gave his Son, "his only Son, to the end that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." See how God loved the world! The Son of God, that was "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God," in glory equal with the Father, in majesty co-eternal, "emptied himself, took upon him the form of a servant; and, being found in fashion as a man, was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." And all this he suffered not for himself, but "for us men and for our salvation." "He bore" all "our sins in his own body upon the tree," that "by his stripes we" might be "healed." After this demonstration of his love, is it possible to doubt any longer of God's tender regard for man; even though he was "dead in trespasses and sins?" Even when he saw us in our sins and in our blood, he said unto us. "Live!" Let us then fear no more! Let us doubt no more! "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, shall he not with freely give us all things?"

8. "Nay," says the philosopher, "if God so loved the world, did he not love a thousand other worlds, as well as he did this? It is now allowed that there are thousands, if not millions, of worlds, besides this in which we live. And can any reasonable man believe that the Creator of all these, many of which are probably as large, yea, far larger than ours, would show such astonishingly greater regard to one than to all the rest?" I answer, Suppose there were millions of worlds, yet God may see, in the abyss of his infinite wisdom, reasons that do not appear to us, why he saw good to show this mercy to ours, in preference to thousands or millions of other worlds.

9. I speak this even upon the common supposition of the plurality of

worlds, -- a very favourite notion with all those who deny the Christian Revelation; and for this reason, because it affords them a foundation for so plausible an objection to it. But the more I consider that supposition, the more I doubt of it: Insomuch that, if it were allowed by all the philosophers in Europe, still I could not allow it without stronger proof than any I have met with yet.

10. "Nay, but is not the argument of the grey Huygens sufficient to put it beyond all doubt? -- When we view," says that able astronomer, the moon through a good telescope, we clearly discover rivers and mountains on her spotted globe. Now, where rivers are, there are doubtless plants and vegetables of various kinds: And where vegetables are, there are undoubtedly animals; yea, rational ones, as on earth. It follows, then, that the moon has its inhabitants, we may easily suppose, so are all the secondary planets; and, in particular, all the satellites or moons of Jupiter and Saturn. And if the secondary planets are inhabited, why not the primary? Why should we doubt it of Jupiter and Saturn themselves, as well as Mars, Venus, and Mercury?"

11. But do not you know, that Mr. Huygens himself, before he died, doubted of this whole hypotheses? For upon further observation he found reason to believe that the moon has no atmosphere. He observed, that in a total eclipse of the sun, on the removal of the shade from any part of the earth, the sun immediately shines bright upon it; whereas if the moon had atmosphere, would appear dim and dusky. Thus, after an eclipse of the moon, first a dusky light appears on that part of it from which the shadow of the earth removes, while that light passes that the moon has no atmosphere. Consequently, it has no clouds, no rain, no springs, no rivers; and therefore no plants or animals. But there is no proof or probability that the moon is inhabited; neither have we any proof that the other planets are. Consequently, the foundation being removed, the whole fabric falls to the ground.

12. But, you will say, "Suppose this argument fails, we may infer the same conclusion, the plurality of worlds, from the unbounded wisdom, and power, and goodness of the Creator. It was full as easy to him to create thousands or millions of worlds as one. Can any one then believe that he would exert all his power and wisdom in creating a single world?

What proportion is there between this speck of creation, and the Great God that filleth the heaven and earth, while "We know, the power of his almighty hand Could form another world from every sand?"

13. To this boasted proof, this argumentum palmarium of the learned infidels, I answer, Do you expect to find any proportion between finite and infinite? Suppose God had created a thousand more worlds than there are grains of sand in the universe; what proportion would all these together bear to the infinite Creator? Still, in comparison of Him, they would be, not a thousand times, but infinitely, less than a mite compared to the universe. Have done, then, with this childish prattle about the proportion of creatures to their Creator; and leave it to the all-wise God to create what and when he pleases. For who, besides himself, "hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counselor?"

14. Suffice it then for us to know this plain and comfortable truth, -- that the almighty Creator hath shown that regard to this poor little creature of a day, which he hath not shown even to the inhabitants of heaven "who kept not their first estate." He hath given us his Son, his only Son, both to live and to die for us! O let us live unto him, that we may die unto him, and live with him ever!

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