

What is Man?

The Subject of God's Bountiful Grace

In a number of passages in the word of God the question is posed, ***“What is man?”***, and according to the difference in the context so the question is variously answered.

We find it raised in Psalm 8. Having spoken of the greatness of God, and the excellence of Jehovah's name, the psalmist proceeds, ***“What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him? For Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet”*** (vs. 4-6). Here the context views man in relation to creation, and presents him as a highly favoured part of it. What is man? a **CREATURE**. If the question in the Psalm implies man's nothingness and lack of merit when compared with the Creator, yet see that he as a creature has been greatly honoured, being set originally in authority over the earthly sphere to act as God's regent.

The psalm speaks of man in general, of man as man, yet we know that it was realised in the first man Adam. This shows that the title “son of man” is not equivalent to “son of a man”; and does not signify human origin but rather human nature. The importance of this point will be appreciated when we remember the application of the title to the Person of Christ. We note this point because we will have to consider the New Testament application of this scripture to Christ later on.

In the creation record in Genesis the verbs “created” and “made” are both used of man’s formation (e.g. Genesis 1:26,27; 5:1,2). Though Adam was made “**of the dust of the ground**”, and though Eve was made of “**the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man**”, they are both said to have been “created” by God. Indeed Solomon exhorts those of his and succeeding days to “**Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth**” (Eccl. 12:1), so that even those born by natural generation are no less the creatures of God. This is because He made the first parents of the race, He appointed the way of procreation, and He superintends the functioning of it in each individual case (Job 10:8-12; 34:19; Psalm 100:3; 139:13-16).

The account of man’s original creation as recorded in Scripture was accepted by Christ as the literal truth (Mark 10:6,7). In this passage the two accounts of creation in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 are quoted in successive verses and combined, showing that the Lord regarded them as referring to the same creation. See also 1Cor. 11:8-12 and 1Tim. 2:13, and note how that for the New Testament writers Adam was as real a person as Jesus Christ (e.g. Rom. 5:12-21; 1Cor. 15:21-23,45-49).

That man is a creature of God’s hand is a fact which affects his outlook and manner of life radically. For one thing it must be recognised that man is here for a purpose, and his object in life is not to please himself

or do his own will. He was created for God’s glory, and is set upon earth to do God’s will and to further His interests (Eccl. 12:13; Daniel 5:23). For another thing it assures him of God’s interest in him and provision for him (Psalm 124:8; 145:15,16; Isaiah 40:28-31). Man’s proper attitude is one of complete dependence upon the One who gave him life, who sustains him in life, and who made all that exists around him (Acts 17:28). So also is it one of humble adoration and worship (Psalm 33:6-9; Psalm 100). Moreover if man is both responsible and dependent; so is he accountable. Before every man lies a day of judgement in which he must give an account to his Creator for the life which he lived on earth (Eccl. 12:14). These are basic facts which men everywhere are seeking to deny today, but which, by very reason of their being facts, can never be escaped.

As to the nature of his person, man has been created a tripartite being. According to 1Thessalonians 5:23 the whole or entire man includes “**spirit and soul and body**”. The body is the material part of man, “the outward man”, that through which he is world-conscious. The spirit and soul are both immaterial and together form “the inner man”. The soul is that part of man by which primarily he is self-conscious, the spirit, the higher element, that by which he is God-conscious. When Adam sinned he allowed natural, soulish desires to override spiritual duties, giving to the soul the place of mastery over the spirit. From that day to this the natural man has been a “soulish” man. When a person is born again by the Spirit of God, the spirit, by the help of God’s Spirit, is restored to the place of supremacy over the soul, and the regenerate man is enabled to become a “spiritual” man. Although the spirit and soul are distinguishable (Heb. 4:12), it is most unlikely that they are ever separable, though by the dissolution of death the spirit and soul together are separated from the body until the day of resurrection. It was man’s spiritual nature which demonstrated the reality of his

having been made in the image and after the likeness of God, and which fitted him for his place of lordship over the terrestrial creation.

In Job 15:14ff., we read the words of Eliphaz the Temanite, “**What is man, that he should be clean? and he which is born of a woman, that he should be righteous? ... How much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water**”. What is man? – a **SINNER**. If man is a creature, he is a fallen creature. God’s original handiwork was “**very good**”. “**God ... made man upright**” (Eccl. 7:29). Alas, sin entered into the world, our first parents fell by disobedience, and consequently their progeny have inherited a nature that is ruined by sin. The witness to this tragic fact is the presence of sin in every human life. Every man, with the sole exception of “**the man Christ Jesus**”, is a sinner by nature (Job 14:4; Psalm 51:5; Jer. 17:9; John 3:5-7; Eph. 2:3) and a sinner by practice (1Kings 8:46; Eccl. 7:20; Rom. 3:19-23; 1John 1:8,10).

As to the extent of man’s fall by sin, Scripture is quite explicit that his ruin is complete. Being vitiated in the very springs of his being, all the thoughts, all the words, all the actions of man in the unregenerate state are unacceptable to God, and unclean in His sight. “**I know that in me**”, says Paul, “**that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing**” (Rom. 7:18). This does not mean that the natural man is incapable of displaying desirable moral features, kindness to children, conscientiousness at work etc, but that all these features are neither desired nor practised from right motives, to please and to glorify God. Man has lost his true purpose, and nothing is done from a sufficiently worthy motive. Spiritual man has become depraved, and the principle of sin within renders him incapable of pleasing God or serving God with a true heart (Rom. 8:6-8). The bias of man’s fallen nature is away from God and contrary to God, so that he is a constitutional rebel and outlaw in divine and spiritual respects, however benign and amenable he may be

in human relationships. Christ taught His hearers that though they might be good and kind parents, they were nonetheless in absolute spiritual terms **“evil”** (Matt. 7:11). This is why man apart from the new birth is said to be **“dead”** to God (John 5:24,25; Eph. 2:1), and this is why his good works are **“dead works”** (Heb. 6:1), and why even his **“righteousnesses”** are in the sight of God **“as filthy rags”** (Isaiah 64:6). The necessary consequence of this complete ruin is that man is totally unable of himself even to begin to rectify his spiritual condition (Jer. 13:23; John 1:13; 6:44,65; Rom. 5:6; Col. 2:13). Only a work of God in new creation is sufficient to meet his need (John 3:3-7; Eph. 2:1-10).

Then in Psalm 144:3,4 we find, **“LORD, what is man, that Thou takest knowledge of him! or the son of man, that Thou makest account of him? Man is like to vanity (Hebrew; a breath): his days are as a shadow that passeth away”**. The emphasis in this scripture is on the frailty of man and the fleeting character of his life. What is man? – a **MORTAL**. If man has become subject to sin, then has he also become subject to death, for **“the wages of sin is death”** (Rom. 6:23). In the day that Adam sinned he died spiritually, and doubtless would also have died physically to be raised ultimately to die eternally, only that he died substitutionally, died by proxy, in those animals whose death provided him with his God-given covering of skins. Despite the provision, however, the seeds of mortality were sown in his body and he eventually succumbed to physical death. So God permits even the forgiven sinner to experience death, but only as the governmental effect of sin, not the penal effect. How differently death seizes upon saint and sinner! For the sinner death is the penal consequence of sin which carries him away to hell and judgement, whereas for the saint death is only a governmental effect of sin, which comes as the messenger to call away from toil and sorrow into the joy and glory of the Lord’s

presence. Death has lost its sting for the Christian, having been overcome by the Saviour at Calvary (2Tim. 1:10), and ultimately he will be clothed with immortality (1Cor. 15:50-57).

In Hebrews 2:6ff. we read again, **“What is man?”**, as the words of Psalm 8 are quoted, but in this chapter the application is not to the first Adam, but to the last Adam, Christ (1Cor. 15:45). The first Adam was an unfallen man, crowned as head of creation; but he lost his crown in that act of disobedience that plunged his race and the first creation into the bondage of sin and death. The last Adam, being born of the virgin was likewise an unfallen man, and so a man wearing the crown of glory as head of creation, but in His one act of obedience at Calvary, tasting death for all creation to deliver it from the thralldom of sin and death. He passed through death triumphantly, and not only carried His crown of glory up to the throne of God, but also brought with Him **“many sons”**. He won the redemption of the whole new creation including regenerate man. In this passage then, **“man”** is seen in the Person of Christ, and in those united to Him by faith. It is man **IN CHRIST** that is finally brought before us, saved, sanctified and brought by God to glory in Him, His brethren, His church. In Christ the crown of glory which Adam lost has been regained. At His incarnation He took a place **“a little lower than the angels”**, but by the **“suffering of death”** He has lifted regenerate man, His church, to a place of dignity over creation higher than that which Adam lost. So man will be restored, and more than restored, to his original place as regent over creation, when over **“the world to come”**, the redeemed, reformed universe, the new heavens and the new earth, shall be set **“the Son of Man”**, and His brethren shall reign with Him.