

What is Man?

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“Slightly lower than the angels is a whole lot better than slightly higher than the apes. Let's get the order straight.” *Stuart Briscoe*

‘What is man that you are mindful of him?’ (Psalm 8:4).

Throughout the day we had driven along the winding roads that ridge Colorado's great canyons. Breathtaking views had lured us from the vehicles again and again to take photographs, seeking to capture the awesome beauty of the moment. Now, night-time had fallen. The clear blue sky had turned inky black, and millions of stars were shining down on us.

My thoughts moved out across the expanse of space, marveling at the greatness, the vastness of God's creation. I found myself asking question after question: Are there other worlds beyond our own? Are they inhabited? How many other galaxies are out there? What purpose had God in mind in such a vast creation? Could he produce so much and yet confine his concerns to this little planet, Earth?

Will the future age, I wondered, unfold the prospect of our serving God's purpose beyond this earth? Where are the outer boundaries of these created heavens?-they cannot be infinite, for they were created. And, outside their boundary, will we meet him who has no boundary, the infinite God?

But the one persistent thought that pushed its way through every question was: How could God, so vast, so great, concern himself with the details of our personal welfare? *‘What is man that you are mindful of him?’*

That illustrious preacher, Joseph Parker, once said of the greatness of God in relation to our world: *‘He sees the universe like a trembling dewdrop on a leaf of a flower.’*

But, amazingly, this does not mean he is too great to be concerned for us. On the contrary, Jesus assured his anxious disciples that they had no reason to be concerned for food, drink, clothing or shelter. He drew their attention to the birds and the lilies of the field, emphasising God's concern and care for them, and he reminded the disciples how much more they were worth to the Father in heaven.

We cannot help but worship a God who loves us with such intensity, cares for us with such faithfulness, and concerns himself with such detail of our lives.

David, as a shepherd boy on the hills of Bethlehem, would sing out God's praise by night as well as by day. Sometimes he would be startled by the sounds of unseen predators

approaching his flock or the screech of the night owls. What often helped quiet his heart was to gaze up at the stars, seeing them as the bright-robed choirs and orchestral musicians of the night. As he sang his spiritual songs they seemed to shine more brightly, swaying together in dance.

`What is man,' he would think, `that you are mindful of him?' Then, sighing deeply, `Thank you, God!'

While living in Guyana, I recall once feeling utterly drained of energy. The oppressive heat and humidity seemed to take one's breath away.

But that wasn't all. There seemed to be a million mosquitoes to every cubic inch of space! Culturally, I felt a total misfit. I was surrounded by the continuous haunting sounds of Hindu music. I was confronted on every hand with poverty and sickness on a massive scale. The food was completely different.

Everything conspired to make me feel a total stranger, and I longed for the friends I had left in England-to be back where things were comparatively comfortable. I felt so homesick and lonely that night.

Finally, I got into the Volkswagen and drove down to the beach. I walked along the seafront and, sitting beneath a palm tree, looked up at the vast expanse of starlit sky.

I recognised the Plough, the Bear, the Lion. I looked out over the ocean bathed in soft moonlight and recalled how, as a student, I had done the same from the sand dunes of Swansea. Suddenly, I realised this was the same sky, same stars, same moon and, above all, the same God who was over me, and I didn't feel lonely any more. I sat there quietly praising and worshipping before returning home refreshed.

I have never faced those feelings since. I discovered there that, wherever you are and whatever your circumstances, God is always present to be worshipped.

We must never slip back to the state of mind we were in before we met Christ, when God, if he existed at all, was a vague figure who lived a billion miles away. One of the great mysteries of our experience of him is that the God who created all outside of us, and who rules it from the highest heaven, has made his home within us. At no time will that change. Our experience of it may change, but never the reality of it.

One day on holiday I was sunbathing on the beach with my eyes closed, enjoying the warmth from the sun-drenched blue sky above me. Suddenly it darkened, and I shivered. My first ridiculous thought was, `Oh, the sun's gone away!' But peering through my eyelids, I realised, of course, that a cloud had simply come between me and the sun. The breeze blew it along and within half a minute I was again enjoying the full warmth of the sun.

How often we say, `Oh, God has left me!' But the reality is that, just like the sun, God hasn't moved. It is merely that something has clouded our fellowship. And often it is in worship

and praise that one has felt the winds of God blow away the things between. God knows our hearts. He readily responds to our love and desire for unmarred fellowship with him.

Sometimes the cloud is one of reeling unworthy in his presence. I remember one such occasion when I felt so cast down about myself. All day I had been aware of my weaknesses and frailty, turning over in my mind how unlike God I *was* in disposition and character. I longed to please him and to bear his image but somehow I felt so unworthy, unclean.

I think the nearer you approach to God, the more accurately you see yourself, and the more unlike him you feel yourself to be.

The fact was, I had been wrong in the way I had spoken back to a young man who had shared his convictions about the work we were involved in. He had expressed what he believed was wrong with it, what other people were saying, where we were making mistakes and, as I had listened to it all, I had felt indignation rising up inside me.

'What right does he have to speak to me like this?' I thought. "He's never helped us in this work, he's never become involved. Who's he referring to when he says all these other people are saying these things? And what if they are? I prefer my way of doing God's work than their way of *not* doing it.'

My thoughts turned to words, in the rough response, 'There are always those who criticise what others do, while doing nothing themselves.' And so I rationalised the charges against us.

But the young man persisted, until finally I reacted with, 'Get out! I don't want you with your negatives!'

As soon as he'd gone I realised that my reaction had been unrighteous. I felt miserable. 'I can't come before God with an attitude like this,' I said to myself, so I slunk around doing my work, feeling a long way from him.

It's a common misunderstanding—delaying our entry into God's presence because we think that any attempt to come before him in such a state would not be welcome. How wrong I was. Later that evening, as I sat quietly in the room, I turned my heart to the Lord and said, 'God, I'm sorry for reacting the way I did, sorry for the person I've been.'

Instantly, I felt the warmth of his presence. I didn't feel pushed away or held at bay.

'Lord,' I said, 'please forgive me for my wrong reactions'

Immediately, I knew I was forgiven. I felt his peace. I would seek out the young man and ask his forgiveness. But then my mind reacted: 'It shouldn't be as easy as this. I ought to be more miserable. I ought to somehow pay for this wrong I've done. I don't want to find myself indulging in the self-deception of cheap grace.'

Quietly the inner voice said, 'But I'm not like that.'

It dawned on me then how many of us are trapped in wrong images of God and how much we miss of life, its happiness and its joys because of it. We live too long in misery, feeling that, since we have failed him, God will not be in any hurry to welcome us back into his presence. We are afraid to rejoice instantly in forgiveness lest it seem too easy, too cheap.

But God isn't like that. He longs for us to come. Indeed, in worshipping in his presence we find cleansing for our soul, as did Isaiah, who stood before the Lord in the temple and was touched on his unclean lips by the coals from the altar.

We must not worship a God of our own making, a God made in the image of man. We must learn to worship in spirit and in truth, which is to love, rejoice and worship him for who he is, not what we think he might be. When God forgives he doesn't keep us in a spiritual isolation block to deprive us of the sense of blessing. He's not like that. He is swift to receive us, instant to forgive us, ready to love us, longing to bless us.

Whenever you feel threatened, perplexed by what is happening to you, remember that the same fingers that wove the heavens together are weaving the threads of love and life, grace and glory in the wonderful mystery of the divine purpose for *you*.

When earth threatens, consider the heavens and cry out joyfully, 'What is man? What am I? But thank you, God!'