

3. Man in the dock: What is Man?

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[0 : 00] A portion of scripture that we read, Psalm number 8, page 450 in the Visitor's Bibles. I must say the singing does sound very lovely in here. I'm enjoying that very much.

Well, we're in our series on the questions that God asks to men and women through his word. And today our text is Psalm 8 and verse 4.

Now, we like to think, don't we, that we are in control of all the awkward questions, that they're going in God's direction. If God exists, he's on the defensive and he has to give an account of himself to us.

But you see, if we take the Bible at all seriously, we discover that God can play that game too. And in fact, he can put to us some really very penetrating questions indeed.

Today's question actually is a question that both man and God can ask. Look at verse 4. What is man? Now, human beings ask that question and God asks that question, but they ask it in very, very different ways.

[1 : 23] We ask it, we're secular people today in particular, we ask it really as meaning, well, how do we explain the meaning of life? How do we explain our existence and so on?

And for most people, they ask that question really knowing that God doesn't fit into the equation anywhere, not at all. We don't want God intruding into our answer to that question.

We have all sorts of other ways of finding out the answer. But you see, God asks the question in a very different way. He challenges us and he says to us as human beings, how do you explain man, mankind, humankind?

And how do you explain the world that we live in without reference to me? That's God's question.

And God, you see, says that the first part of any question about man's significance must begin with the question, who and what is God?

Because if we don't first establish that, then actually everything else is incoherent. So God's question when he asks what is man is really, how do we as human beings explain to ourselves and to one another the paradoxes of our human condition that we know to be true, that we know to be the case?

[2 : 43] On the one hand we have, don't we, man's greatness. We have a great capacity for good in humankind, for glory, for splendor. Think of all the culture in our world.

Think of the beauty of reason. Think of love. Think of so much nobility in the human sphere. It's all there, isn't it? But there is also another side to man, isn't there?

There's the greatness, but there's the baseness. There's a great capacity for evil, and for hurt, and for destruction, and for horror. There's the great selfishness of human beings.

There's man's significance, on the one hand, and his stature, as the shaper and the controller of the universe, the cosmos. We can send people to the moon, we can send ships to Mars.

And yet, there is also, isn't there, our finitude, our smallness, when we compare ourselves to the wonder of the stars, and the universe, and the galaxies, and so on.

[3 : 46] Well, how do you explain these things, these two sides, of our human reality? Well, you see, in Psalm 8, God gives us his explanation. And, of course, elsewhere, the secular world gives us their explanation, the clever thinkers, and the philosophers, and the experts, and so on.

And the question is, which explanation fits the facts better? Which explanation fits the reality that you and I know to be true by our experience of life? Is it God's explanation of humankind?

Or is it secular man's explanation? That's what I want to think about for a few moments this morning. First of all, let's look at the psalm, and let's give God the first chance.

Let's look at God's answer to this question of what is man. Well, notice that although our question comes in verse 4, right at the very beginning, in verse 1, the psalm begins with an

acknowledgement of God.

He is the glorious ruler of the universe. Verse 1, His glory is majestic in the highest heavens. And yet here, look at verse 2, the astonishing thing is that it seems that an even more powerful display of God's glory is found when you look at humanity, even in the most weak and fragile form, the mouth of babes and infants.

[5 : 09] Isn't that striking? It's hard to believe that, isn't it, when you're trying to think about the most glorious thing in all the world. You tend to think, don't you, of one of the great vistas that you've seen from a viewing point in some beautiful part of the world.

Perhaps it's some glen in the north of Scotland. Perhaps it's out in the desert. Perhaps it's a seascape. Something that just takes your breath away. I remember feeling that when, some years ago, I was traveling through southern Africa and in the north of Botswana, we camped for a night in a place called the Mechari-Chari Salt pans.

Huge, great salt pans. Really looked rather like a moonscape. And we camped just on the edge of these, but after we'd set up camp and it was pitch dark, we walked out into the middle of these salt pans.

We walked and walked and walked until we could no longer see even a glimmer of light from our campfire. And then we all lay down on our backs and we looked up at the night sky. And I have never, ever seen anything so awesome and so splendid as what we saw.

A whole hemisphere of the most beautiful stars. And at that point, I remember feeling a catch in my breath. How utterly tiny and insignificant we are in comparison to that.

[6 : 25] And so we think of that, don't we, that question, what is man when we seem so insignificant in this universe of ours? And of course, it's easy to feel that, isn't it?

There are many people around today who are so awed by the wonders of nature that in fact, they think that the earth would be far better if only man could be all removed altogether.

You get serious people arguing that the future of the earth depends upon the demise of man. You see it to a lesser degree, don't you, sometimes in the extremists who are willing to maim and even to murder people in order to save trees.

That might be a good thing to save trees. But there's a perversity there, isn't there? But there is a sense, isn't there, you can understand it, that there is a sense that we as human beings in the face of the splendors of the universe feel so small, so ugly in comparison with the beauty of nature.

And yet, look at what this psalmist says. man, mankind, human beings, are the very center of this universe. Look at verse 4.

[7 : 39] God is mindful of man. That means God is what takes up, man rather, is what takes up the thoughts of God. He cares for man. That is, mankind has the special, intimate protection of God.

Now the psalmist finds that astonishing, and yet he's stating fact, because what he's saying here all comes back to this. According to God, you can't understand humanity and this world without reference to the name that begins this psalm, the name of God himself.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. That name, of course, is the name of the Lord, the Lord Jehovah, Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, the God who created all things.

And that's how you begin to explain mankind, according to the psalmist here. And that's how you begin to explain all the paradoxes of our existence. You see, look at verse 5.

You made him, says the psalmist. Now that is the central affirmation of the Bible about creation, isn't it? That God made man. On that fact, when you think about it, depends all human civilization.

[8 : 56] all justice and all human dignity and all liberty and all responsibility. The fact that we did not make ourselves, but that God made us. We are responsible.

It all depends on the fact that God created man, not that as a secular thinker thinks, man created God. That's what the world thinks.

Gods and religion are a creation of the human mind. But the Bible is absolutely clear, you see, and unless we take notice of that, any attempts at explaining humanity will ultimately collapse into confusion.

And I can tell you that societies and civilizations which ignore that fact will also always ultimately tend to pure inhumanity and barbarism. History has shown that.

Future history will confirm it. Look at verses 5 to 8. Just a very, very clear explanation in those few verses, isn't it, of the Bible's consistent theology right from the beginning, right from Genesis

chapter 1, of how and what God has made man.

[10:07] First of all, do you see, in verse 5, man is not God. You have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings. Man is lower than the heavenly beings and yet, according to the psalmist, he is elevated with a unique honor and glory.

You have crowned him with glory and honor. See, according to the Bible, man is the chief revelation on earth of God's glory. He is lower than the heavenly beings, but he is made in God's image.

But also, man is the chief manifestation in this world of God's rule. He is made as God's image in this world. He is made to be God's viceroy, God's ruler.

And verse 6 tells us that dominion has been given to humankind by God. Verse 6, you have given him dominion over the works of your hands. You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, also the beasts of the field, the bird, the fish, whatever passes along the sea.

It's just repeating the message of Genesis chapter 1, isn't it? God has made man. He is not God, but God has exalted man and given him a special place to have dominion over this world.

[11:29] Now, sometimes, of course, that fact brings a great reaction. There are some environmentalists who blame all the ills of the earth upon the biblical account in Genesis in places like Psalm 8 that God has given man dominion, that is, therefore, given man a blank check to exploit this whole universe and that's why we're in the mess that we're in.

But really, when you look at it, that's really rather an ignorant thing to say, isn't it? If you're a king, if you're a ruler or a landlord and you give an underling oversight over your business, the last thing you expect them to do is wreck it for you, isn't that right?

You choose somebody who will make a profit for you. You choose somebody who will look after your things. Now, God has given mankind his world to steward on his behalf, to bring out of it its full potential.

And that was man's purpose. God put all creation under our rules so that we can make it all that it can be for the glory of God. God's purpose for man at the beginning, Genesis tells us, in putting him in the garden is to tell him to make the whole cosmos like the beautiful garden that God himself has planted.

man is not God but he is responsible to God for that task. And yet, according to the Bible's account of the world, man is nevertheless a creature.

[12:59] But he's not just a beast like all the rest of the creatures. He is crowned with that special glory and honor. And his purpose derives from his identity. We are in the image of God.

And to human beings alone is given the dominion and the rule and the authority to fill the earth and to bring God's authority to bear throughout the earth. In other words, as God's image, we are to fill the earth with man's glory.

And that is to fill the earth with God's glory if we're doing it properly because we image him. Man is God's chief worshipper. And we serve God.

We glorify him. We enjoy him forever as we carry out the task that God has given us to do. Now that is God's answer to that question, what is man?

It's just summing up the message of the whole of the scriptures from beginning to end. And you can't understand man and human nature and humankind without understanding the God who made us.

[14:03] well, that's all very well. You might say if you're a skeptic, you might say that's all very well to talk about this picture of God imaging himself in man and man bringing the creation into all its wonder and glory.

But hang on a second, that's not what we see. That's not at all what I see as I look at the world, is it? That's an illusion, that's a fantasy. You see? You Christians, you're just making it all up.

That's pie in the sky. We don't see the cosmic harmony of man on earth, do we? We see just exactly the opposite. We see, as we look at our world, we see nature rebelling against man.

We see earthquakes and tidal waves. We see volcanoes and hurricanes and floods. We don't see the animal kingdom in harmony with man, do we?

We see animals against man. It's not just the nasty things like the crocodiles and the snakes and the sharks. All the bacteria, it's all the viruses, all the tiny things you can't even see. No, man doesn't seem to be very domineering over that.

[15:09] There's no harmony of man and nature. Not under our feet, not under our control. Floods, global warming, creeping deserts, famines, eco-disasters.

No, that explanation of the Bible must be wrong. Well, all right then, let's talk sense. We better listen, haven't we, to the world's explanation of man and humanity.

An answer to that question, what is man? What are human beings? But an answer that leaves God out of the equation. So, here's our contemporary secular thinker.

Here's the truth, he says. First, man is not specially created. Of course not. Man is not the crown of God's creation and God's image. Man is just an animal like all the rest.

Man has evolved from an amoeba. Perhaps he came on a satellite or a comet from Mars way back billions of years ago. And that must mean that verse 4 and 5 is nonsense in our psalm, mustn't it?

[16:16] And Richard Dawkins must be correct, mustn't he? Because, just like all the other organisms, humans are, and I quote, robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.

And Bertrand Russell, the great philosopher, must be right too, mustn't he, when he says human beings are merely the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms. Well, they must be right, mustn't they?

And we must bow to their wisdom and admit defeat. I was listening to Professor Dawkins on the radio the other day crowing about the number of languages that his book, *The God Delusion*, has been translated into, about 140 I think.

I felt like phoning up and saying the Bible's had quite a few more than that. But, but if we're going to bow to that wisdom and that explanation of the world, which would be held, I guess, by the majority of people in our country, then we must be consistent with it, mustn't we?

So, mankind, therefore, if he is not specially created, has no special dignity. We're just dancing to our DNA. DNA. And human life can have no special sanctity, can it?

[17:23] Because we're just a chance chain in the river of DNA. And therefore, our lives must be very cheap, mustn't they? My life and yours can't be of any more value than a dog or a fish or an amoeba.

That's the logical end of secularism. It's a world where we treat life as very cheap. It would be a society, wouldn't it, for example, where abortion would be rampant.

But when a miserable and a guilt-ridden woman sought help, we would say, oh, don't worry, it's just your DNA. Cheer up. Or it might be a society, as it is in some places in the world, where infanticide is rampant.

Where if you have the wrong sex of child, well, you just get rid of it. But life is cheap. We're not specially created. It would be a society, wouldn't it, where murder is rampant, even for the most trivial of reasons.

And somebody might just be driving down the motorway on their motorbike and get shot. Well, there might be a young boy just coming out of school and he gets stabbed and killed. But what does it matter?

[18:32] Just DNA. It would be a society, wouldn't it, where we could exploit the vulnerable, the elderly, or the children, or the handicapped, or the weaker ones.

But hey, survival of the fittest. It would be a dog-eat-dog world, wouldn't it? Where survival of the fittest was the thing and we should be glad about it.

Now, don't you think that would be a great, great comfort to somebody who's suffering and distraught? Wouldn't you like to be able to say to the person, the woman who's been raped, or the child who's been abused, whose life has been ruined, or the person who's been a victim of brutal violence, would you say, well, cheer up.

It's all just part of the river of selfish genes. Don't take it too seriously. It's all in the DNA. Well, that's being consistent, isn't it?

See, if we're consistent with that explanation of humanity, we must face up to the terrible suffering in this world, to the manifest evil, to the rampant injustice. And we must just say, so what? It's just the way it is.

[19:37] That has special significance. But friends, if that is true, if we are just animals like dogs, or cats, or amoebas, or flies, why is it that we can't actually live like that?

Do you know anybody who lives like that? Why is it that we're always asking that question, why, when these things happen? Have you ever seen a dog ask why? Or a cat?

Or an amoeba? You see, it's one thing to think like that in theory, isn't it? It's another thing altogether to actually live as though that was true. But of course, not only does the world say we're

just animals, we're not specially created, we have no special glory and honor and value. Secondly, the world says, man is not created at all. See, when the Bible says, man is not God, the world says, there is no God. No God to create man.

And no God for man to serve or be responsible to either. So there's nothing higher than me. I must be my own God then, wasn't I?

[20 : 48] So must you. Because man has no authority above himself to buy down to and no responsibility below himself either to steward or rule for the God who is the creator.

So not only is life cheap, but at the same time we must deny also good and evil, mustn't we? There's no God to make rules to tell us what's right or wrong, so I decide and you decide. Anybody decides whatever they want is right and wrong. Because mankind's behavior can't be governed by a transcendent authority, can it? We can't have an absolute morality where we say God says this is right and God says that is wrong and God will hold us to account for what is right and what is wrong.

No, we must have absolute power for ourselves as human beings, mustn't we? And we decide what's acceptable and we decide what's not. You see, the Bible says that man is created and is under God's authority and therefore human beings have great value and dignity by relation to God above.

But we also have great responsibility by our relationship to the creation below us. Whereas secular humanism and scientism says precisely the opposite. Man has no authority above to anything, there's no God, and we have no responsibility therefore to the world below.

[22 : 18] Well, where does that explanation of reality leave us? Well, I'll tell you where it leaves us. It leaves us, doesn't it, in total confusion. Because what it means is man is only a beast.

He's just an animal. But at the same time, man is also his own God. And so we have a beast who is God with absolute power. It's a terrifying thought, isn't it?

But doesn't that describe our world in the way it thinks? See, if we say we don't see the picture that the Bible presents of the world as it should be and as God created it to be, we certainly do not see the utopian dream of the secular humanist, do we?

Who would have us believe that by abandoning religion altogether, we would at last have the wonderful world that we all want. Listen to John Gray, who is the professor of European thought at the London School of Economics.

He's not a Christian man, but he makes a very trenchant observation. He says this, the role of humanist thought in shaping the past century's worst regimes is easily demonstrable.

[23 : 33] But it's passed over or denied by those who harp on about the crimes of religion. Yet the mass murderers of the 20th century were not perpetrated by some latter-day version of the Spanish Inquisition.

They were carried out by atheist regimes in the service of the Enlightenment ideals of progress. Stalin and Mao were not believers in original sin. Even Hitler, who despised Enlightenment values of equality and freedom, shared the Enlightenment faith that a new world could be created by human will.

Each of these tyrants imagined that the human condition could be transformed through the use of science. history has demolished these ambitions.

Isn't that true? And yet elsewhere, as he goes on to say in that book, liberal humanism, he says, is now established as the unthinking creed of thinking people.

But that's what we're left with, friends, if we insist on trying to explain humanity with all its complexities without reference to God, our Creator. we remove the sanctity and dignity of mankind created in the image of God and we remove the responsibility that we have to the God who created us and to the world that he has given us, to steward.

[24 : 55] And what we're left with is powerful human bestiality. Not the mindless utopian ideal that people like John Lennon sung about, if only there was no hell below and above us only sky.

Imagine all the people living life in peace. Well, that is pure imagination. It's that thinking that has resulted in what John Gray was describing in that quote, genocide upon genocide.

It's precisely because we have imagined that there is no God above us and no judgment to come that humankind have made the world as it is and as we see it today. Why don't we see the pattern of Psalm 8 with humanity in harmony with the world with a beautiful and perfect rule of human beings over the world?

Well, it's because man has rebelled against his creator. It's the chaos of a beast who has made himself God and has made his own desires of what is right and wrong. It's a beast dancing to his own DNA. See, the modern secularists will say always, well, where's your God in the light of an earthquake or a famine created by dreadful dictators or a terrorist incident or something like that.

[26 : 17] But you see, the Bible says, where is man? You are responsible for this world. But by our own admission, we're saying, well, we're helpless. We're just dancing to our DNA.

Well, what is the answer to the world that we do see outside our doors and in our newspapers and on our TV screens? See, when we are faced with the truth and cannot deny it, we could despair, couldn't we?

And despair is such a feature of today's secular world, isn't it? Apathy and hopelessness and suicide. I can never get my head around that statistic that the biggest cause of death for young men in our society is suicide.

Can you believe that? It's true. People with a lost identity, with lost purpose, because, friends, they have left God out of the equation.

They can't cope with the resulting chaos that will inevitably ensue whenever we do that. Well, yes, we could despair, especially when we live in an era that has shown up the proud claims of science to usher in utopia to be absolutely hollow.

[27 : 31] As John Gray pointed out in his book, it's that scientific progress that is wreaking havoc all the time in our world. We can hardly look to the likes of Richard Dawkins to save us, can we, with that track record?

John Gray says this, which is the greater leap of faith? This is a highly intelligent professor who's not a Christian teaching at the London School of Economics.

Which is the greater leap of faith? To accept that humanity has eaten from the tree of knowledge and must somehow live with the consequences? Or to believe that science can somehow deliver humanity from itself?

Astonishing candor, don't you think, from a man like that who doesn't claim at all to be a Christian? But it is rather despairing, isn't it? And we might despair, and many do despair.

But the Bible does give us an answer. It declares it to us in the hope that there is in the Christian gospel. Because you see, the God who is the creator in this psalm is also revealed all the way through the Bible to be the God who is the redeemer.

[28 : 41] He's not just the God who made man, but he's the God who in the fullness of time became man in order to redeem man and with him the whole cosmos itself. The answer lies in the name of this God.

The name of the Lord. The Lord Yahweh, Jehovah, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible. He is the only God. And he has revealed himself most wonderfully and uniquely in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the true man.

He himself became man in order to remake humanity in the world and to remake the world for humanity so that at last it will be as God created it to be.

Yes, it's true. Of course, we do not yet see the world as Psalm 8 describes it. But that Psalm speaks the truth about what this world was made for and what this world is being redeemed for and what this world will be.

And the New Testament tells us yes, we must wait for that final consummation of all things. We must wait to see man restored to his true glory and the world restored to his true glory.

[29 : 59] But it also tells us, friends, and this is the wonderful thing, that we do see a foretaste of that that tells us that it's true and tells us that it will be certain.

We do see Jesus Christ. And in him we do see a glorious picture of man in glory as the crown of creation, man as he was created to be and shall be.

Listen to what the writer of the Hebrews says in Hebrews 2 where he quotes this psalm. It's been testified somewhere, he says, What is man that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him?

You made him for a little while lower than the angels. You have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet. Now in putting everything in subjection to him, that is man, he left nothing outside his control.

At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to man. But, he says, we do see him for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus.

[31 : 10] Jesus. And we see him crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

You see, the world has seen this true manifestation of humanity as it's meant to be. It's seen it once and once only in a man who walked the earth as the Lord, who showed his lordship over the wind and the waves and over sickness and disease, over even death itself, who was truly the Lord of all cosmos.

And in his real bodily resurrection, he declares that that promise of Psalm 8 is no dream, it's no illusion. It's begun the redemption of the world to be like that.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ declares to the world that the world that we all long for is coming. And it's coming soon. with his coming to us.

So you see, ultimately, the answer to that question, what is man? What is humanity all about? What is life all about? It's found in one place alone, isn't it?

[32 : 21] In the Lord Jesus Christ. Where the God with a name, who is the creator and the redeemer of all things, made himself known uniquely and wonderfully and forever on earth for us.

Jesus Christ is the answer to every great question. The question, where is God? What's God really like? He's the answer. Look at Jesus Christ. Listen to Jesus Christ.

In his words and in his deeds and in his face, is everything that you need to know, everything you need to see and hear about the unseen God.

and the question, what is man? What is human life really all about? Where is it going? What's it for? He's the answer. Look at Jesus Christ. Look at ourselves and our lost world.

Well, we see humanity only as it is now, marred by sin and by rebellion, by disaster. There's no hope there. We're adrift in a world without moorings.

[33 : 24] We have nothing to anchor us above in authority that we belong to. Nothing to give us the responsibility that we were made for to this world. But look at Jesus Christ and we see the true humanity, the true man, the destiny that every one of us was created for and that every one of us who believes in Jesus Christ is being redeemed for.

Hebrews 2 goes on to say, he is the founder of our salvation. He for whom all things exist, he by whom all things were made and for whom all things consist will not be ashamed, says the writer, to call us brothers and sisters.

Through his suffering and death, he has destroyed the power of death, reversed the effect of our rebellion and delivered us into our destiny so that we shall be like him.

What is man? not just a beast whose life is cheap and meaningless, nor his own God who has power to transform and to save ourselves and to save this world.

No, the reality about man is that he is a glorious ruin, both glorious because created and crowned with glory and honor and that explains the glory of man and our human world, but also ruined, ruined because of our rebellion and sin.

[35 : 02] And that is the explanation of our world, isn't it? Glory and ruin side by side. But in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the glory that was departed has returned.

And it's returned with a superabundant glory and a glory never, ever to depart again. And that's why we rejoice as Christian believers and sing with the psalmist, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

Because it is the name that explains the world. The name of the one who made us, the name of the one who came to redeem us. Aren't you glad that you know the name that explains our world?

Lord, maybe if you haven't known him, don't you think you better make it an urgent priority for yourself? You want to begin to find the answers that any thinking person knows they need to find in this world of ours.

What is man? The answer is in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, I hope all of us here know that name or we'll soon know that name.

[36 : 20] And we can praise him with the psalmist. Let's pray. Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the word that explains earth's story. glory. And you are the one who will end it when you open the heavens and you come to us as the hope of glory.

We long for that day when you will recreate us body and soul in your image and you will make us holy and make us whole. And we shall forever fulfill our destiny of proclaiming your glory to the universe.

may that day come quickly, oh gracious God, and may every one of us here this morning rejoice in that name, both today and on that great day.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're going to end by singing a hymn that speaks of hymn that prays to the Grow for little hymn, not your little happy to hearvos quite worthy Frog to go to diabetic woman-