Brief Sermons Preached
at the 1967 PAR Institute
held at Holland, Michigan

WHAT IS MAN?

JOHN H. MAASSEN

Scripture: Psalm 8

Text: "What is man that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him a little lower than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor" (Ps. 8:4, 5).

Was Psalm eight written at night? Here is an inspired panorama of night sky with myriad, sparkling stars above and rich natural resources on the earth beneath.

But nature only serves as a backdrop against which the psalmist projects the portrait of 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?" What is man?

I remember the first time I picked up a pair of binoculars. How delighted I was! When I looked through the larger end the view was shrunk; when I reversed them and looked through the smaller end the view was miraculously expanded.

What is man? How ought we to view him? Which end of our "sociological binoculars" ought we to use? Our generation is much given to distorting him. Only God's Word gives us a picture in the proper dimension. The Bible reminds us that man is a paradox of good and evil redeemed and made responsible beings in Jesus Christ.

Some philosophers look at him as through the large end of the binoculars. To them man is a spiritual and moral pygmy. The psalmist shares this as his first impression. So moved is he by the revelation of God's majesty in nature that he cries, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?"

Today's voices echo him. Some consider man to be only a tool. He is a creature to be used and exploited. George Orwell reflects this philosophy hideously in his novels, Animal Farm, and Nineteen-Eighty-Four. Communism, Fascism, and various forms of undemocratic nationalism have practiced this philosophy to the anguish of all men in this century.
William Faulkner, Somerset Maugham, John Steinbeck, and others have pictured man as depressed, depraved, victimized. All of his foibles and frailties have been enlarged upon. Above all, he is pictured as without hope.

The arts look through the large end of the binoculars, too. Man as portrayed in the arts is not so much dwarfed as grotesque. His statues are ugly, gross, misshapen. His canvases are meaningless to the uninitiated. His music is dissonant, non-rhythmic, reminiscent of the primordial jungle. It is played and sung by the "Rolling Stones," the "Monkees," and the "Living Dead."

Modern political structures also take a shrunken view. Not only Fascism and Communism but modern democracies with increasingly centralized governments and technologies take no account of the fact that man is a "living soul." Once only animals bore identifying numbers. Now I have twelve such personal numbers in my wallet alone!

Most important, what is your view of man? Your attitude is reflected in your treatment of your neighbor and in the way you feel about yourself. Do you respect yourself as a child of God? Your dress, your state of cleanliness, your habits of manner and courtesy will reflect this. Are you defeated? Disillusioned? These attitudes will express themselves in bitterness and apathy. Here, especially, we ministers are vulnerable.

Others look at man as through the smaller end of the binoculars and magnify him beyond recognition.

This is not difficult to do!

A friend wrote once about a night fire on a summer beach. She spoke of the stars and of the satellite Echo passing overhead at precisely 8:20 and 10:40 p.m. She added, "It gives one a queer feeling to think about the heavens declaring 'the glory of God' and then see a man-made object there too!"

Some speak of postponing death through scientific freezing of the body with a return to consciousness during better world conditions (Will there ever be such?). Others dream of scientifically abolishing death itself. Is it any wonder that we may rightly be accused of thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think?

This inflated attitude is likewise reflected in man's behavior. The very idea of God is subjected to a microscope. Some are even holding post-mortems over him. The concept of a supernatural God is considered incompatible with man's intellectual and scientific genius.

In turn, this leads to a refusal to accept divine authority which traditionally has been expressed in civilization's laws. These are now subjected to re-evaluation. This prideful attitude toward God's Law is given voice through our generation's "New Morality" with its ethical codes largely governed by individual situations. It is expressed in unconventional patterns of living and in a widespread desertion of the practice of the Christian faith and life. The result is a spirit of escapism, of personal irresponsibility, of mounting lawlessness, and rioting in the streets.
Again the question becomes a personal one. Do you look at man through the small end of the binoculars? How many of us trust in our skills, our academic training, our ability to get along with other people (and therefore manipulate them) rather than our confidence in God. Again we ministers are vulnerable. Perhaps we neglect the personal use of the means of grace because we somehow believe we are above them. Secretly science and intellectualism may be our gods!

Let us look at man as the Scriptures do, not through either end of our “binoculars” but as through perfectly fitted spectacles. The Bible clearly sees man as a paradox. He reaches toward the skies but at the same time he grovels in the muck. He is capable of sublime poetic expression and yet he immerses himself in pornography. His lips praise God but also spit out profanity and venomous hate. But the Bible also sees redemption for man. In Hebrews two the writer quotes this psalm. He finds the original, unsullied nature of man represented in the son of man, Jesus Christ. He, as our representative, also becomes our Savior through the atoning act on Calvary. Through his death and resurrection we are saved from sin and eternal death.

Finally, God’s Word senses the burden of God-given responsibility placed on man.

Vacationers everywhere are confronted with the sign, "This is your park. Keep it clean!"

The Scriptures say in effect, "This is your world. Make the very best use of it. Explore its heavens. Dig deep into its earth. Be its steward and care for it. Here is your body, your mind, your soul. In Christ I have redeemed them, made them clean and whole. Be good stewards! Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to think, but remember who you are!" "What is man?" asks the psalmist. He concludes that God has made him "a little lower than God, and has crowned him with glory and honor." He has redeemed him through Jesus Christ. May we never lose that perspective!

GOD’S LAST WORD!

JAY R. WEEVER

Scripture: I Peter 1:1-9
Text: Jeremiah 31:15-17

Who gets the last word at your house? A man married to a domineering wife claimed he always got the last word in any argument. It was, "Yes, dear." Admittedly some last words are more important than others. Focus for a moment on the subject, "God’s Last Word!"

I. MOTHERS OF THE EXILES

Jeremiah was known as the “weeping prophet” because of his pessimism about Israel’s future. The ten northern tribes had already been carried into captivity, and now the two southern tribes seemed doomed. Religious apostasy, coupled
with political weakness, made the fall of Judah and consequent exile inevitable.

Jeremiah prophesied, "Thus says the Lord: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not'" (Jer. 31:15).

Ramah, located a few miles north of Jerusalem, seems to have been a deportation place from which captives were marched off into Babylonian exile. The tomb of Rachel was located near Ramah. As Jeremiah witnessed weeping mothers being separated from their children, by the eye of prophetic imagination and in true oriental color Jeremiah imagines Rachel, the ancestral mother, raised from her tomb, sobbing, sighing, and lamenting bitterly for her children being carried into captivity.

But exile was not the final word! Jeremiah has a message of hope. "Thus says the Lord; Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, says the Lord, and your children shall come back to their own country" (Jer. 31:16, 17).

After seventy years a remnant of Israelites returned to their homeland. Jeremiah is saying to the weeping mothers of the exiled children of Israel that in the midst of all their sorrow God is still working out His redemptive program. We may not understand all that is happening to us at any given moment, but back of the picture is God. In His rich mercy God will have the last word!

II. MOTHERS OF THE BETHLEHEM CHILDREN

Matthew, in relating the nativity story, tells of the anger of Herod in being tricked by the wise men and the cruel order to kill all the babies of Bethlehem under two years of age. Matthew quotes Jeremiah, "Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more'" (Matt. 2:17, 18).

Why did Matthew quote Jeremiah? Not to comfort the Bethlehem mothers, for by the time Matthew wrote his gospel these mothers would have been great grandmothers. His purpose is far different. In recounting the slaughter of the innocents, Matthew sees a similarity between the weeping mothers whose children were carried into captivity and the weeping mothers whose children perished by Herod's sword.

In both cases the earthly power structure is arrayed against God's people. In both cases Rachel weeps for her children. In both cases God is working through tragedy to bring about His redemptive purposes. In Jeremiah's day a godly remnant of Israelites returned to Judah, and from their descendants came the Messiah. In Matthew's day Herod's evil designs and beastly cruelty failed to snuff out the life of the Christ child. In both cases the instrument of God's salvation was preserved. Once again, tragedy is not the bitter end. In His mercy God will have the last word!
III. MODERN MOTHERS

Often we are confronted with inexplicable tragedy. As pastors we are called to give comfort in a variety of situations. What comfort do you give to children who are orphaned by an automobile accident? Exactly what do you say to a thirteen year old girl dying of brain cancer who takes eleven months to wither away? What do you tell mothers whose sons are dying on Viet Nam battlefields? Rachel is crying all over again for her children.

What do you explain to a youth so embittered against life that he shouts, "Stop the universe; I want to get off!" and tries to commit suicide? Many times as a pastor I feel hopelessly inadequate. It's not enough to mumble some verses from Psalm 23 or Romans 8. That may be giving a spiritual aspirin, when what that person needs is to talk in depth about how a Christian faces suffering.

Perhaps the best beginning we can make is not to try to explain every tragedy. We don't have to play God! From my limited vantage point the plan of God with His people is not one unbroken success story. In all honesty there is much tragedy I do not understand and would never attempt to explain. The radical evil that appears in the form of cancer, or the fierce wrongs which men inflict on each other cannot be explained away as illusions, or "good" things in disguise.

Ultimately we must be content to have God run his universe as he pleases. The fixed symbol of Christianity is the cross. Christ warns that those who follow him be prepared to take up a cross if necessary.

The common question of American culture is, "Did you succeed?" The final question of Christianity is, "Were you faithful?" It is our integrity, not our success, that is the Christian mark of worth. "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit..." (Rom. 5:3-5).

This viewpoint enables us to stand with the mothers watching their children go into exile and with the mothers of Bethlehem and say, "In spite of tragedy, God will have the last word!" We can stand with the mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross (surely, at that moment a sword pierced her soul) and look up to heaven and say, "O God, we don't understand... we don't know why this terrible thing is happening... but give us strength to bear it because we know You will have the last word!"

Only then do Peter's words make sense, "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials... as the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls" (I Pet. 1:6,9). GOD WILL HAVE THE LAST WORD!