

## *Introduction*

In 2021, I was asked to preach three sermons on man – his uniqueness, his ruin and his redemption. As I explained to the congregation, although it was a vital topic that I had been asked to deal with, I was not – to say the least – eager to do it. I like to think of myself as a gospel preacher, and I felt – and still feel – that the material in question would have been better presented as a series of lectures.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, despite my reservations, I went ahead and fulfilled the engagement.<sup>2</sup>

About halfway through the process, it crossed my mind that the material might do some good if I published it – slightly expanded – as a booklet. Hence the work in your hand. Only time will tell whether or not my hopes will be realised.

Let me say at once that in what follows you will find nothing scientifically profound. Indeed, I have nothing at all to say on the basis of science. My purpose is to set out the teaching of the Bible – the teaching of the Bible on man – doing so in very brief compass.<sup>3</sup> The fact is – and I want there to be no misunderstanding about this – I openly and unapologetically believe the Bible to be the word of God, and everything I say depends absolutely on that conviction.

*But before you dismiss this little work on that account, there are certain things you must bear in mind.*

We all have to face and answer some big questions: What is man? Where does he come from? Why is he here? Where is he going?

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the distinction, see my *Preaching*.

<sup>2</sup> All three discourses are available on my [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com) page – ‘Man’s Uniqueness’; ‘Man’s Ruin’; ‘Man’s Redemption’.

<sup>3</sup> I underline this. To set out a full explanation of all the points I raise would mean I would have to publish a tome and not a booklet.

## *Introduction*

Putting it personally: What am I? Where did I come from?<sup>4</sup>  
Why am I here? Where am I going?

The truth is – and we all need to admit it – in thinking about such questions, no expert in science, philosophy, psychiatry, cosmology, sociology or whatever – however learned, however highly qualified he<sup>5</sup> might be in his field, however many prestigious prizes he might have won – can do anything other than I am doing here: namely, set before you his conviction, his belief. What is more, you, too, are a believer: you believe Professor X, you believe theory Y, or whatever. I believe the Bible. As I say, in that conviction, I want to put before you the relevant teaching of the Bible on man – his uniqueness, his ruin and his redemption. Then it will be up to you: you have to decide. But whatever you decide, you will still be a believer, only a believer, and nothing but a believer. I am not for a moment despising academic prowess; I am simply stating an obvious – but often neglected – fact: in this area, we are all believers.

In asserting what the Bible says about God and man – not trying to ‘prove’ it scientifically – I am following the example set by Paul – and he was no mean academic! Facing the pagan, superstitious, religious intellectuals at Athens, he unapologetically declared:

What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us... Being then God’s offspring,

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<sup>4</sup> I am not, of course, thinking of reproduction.

<sup>5</sup> I am using ‘he’ in the generic sense; that is, both men and women. Indeed, this is a booklet about man; that is, human beings.

## *Introduction*

we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:23-31).

Assertion, assertion, assertion, confident and dogmatic!<sup>6</sup>

In order to drive home this vital point, I need to poleaxe a common myth; namely, that Christians, being believers, are gullible, while those who rely on one of the sciences are hard-headed, clear-sighted, no-nonsense people who accept only what can be proved. ‘Science has proved...’.

This, of course, is nonsense. Real scientists know that proof is only possible in the realm of mathematics, and that in a very specific and clearly-defined sense: starting with certain axioms, certain fundamental principles, mathematicians build an entire edifice, layer by layer, each succeeding layer resting on what has been established; hence, proof. But physicists, chemists, geologists, cosmologists and the like, can only work on hypotheses<sup>7</sup> and explanations which, though tested by known evidence, and though seeming to explain all known facts, will always be open to correction as more evidence is unearthed. For example, the phlogiston theory, once held to explain the process of burning, was later shown to be false; and Einstein’s work on relativity has been updated and tweaked; and so on. The truth is, there is no absolute in science; there can be no absolute in science – it is always a work in progress; today’s scientific ‘law’ is simply the best explanation thus far.<sup>8</sup> Real scientists know and admit this.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See my *Confront*.

<sup>7</sup> A hypothesis is ‘a supposition or proposed explanation made on the basis of limited evidence as a starting point for further investigation’.

<sup>8</sup> The man in the street uses the word ‘law’ far too freely – in ‘the law of averages’, for instance.

## Introduction

Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle – fundamental to quantum mechanics – embraces all science: 'uncertainty' is the key word.<sup>10</sup>

The point is, the questions I am concerned with here are not susceptible of proof. The existence of God, the origin of life, the meaning of life, and so on, are all matters of belief. The existence of God – or his non-existence – is not a matter of proof; it is a question of belief. Every atheist is a believer every bit as much as any Christian – he believes there is no God. Indeed, in my opinion, it requires a greater faith to believe there is no God than to believe there is.

With that in mind, therefore, let us go on to think about man – his uniqueness, his ruin and his redemption.

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<sup>9</sup> Alister McGrath: 'All of us, whether atheists or... believers, have to learn to live with uncertainty about those beliefs that we think *really* matter – such as the existence of God, the nature of the good, or the meaning of life. I had to learn to live in a world in which we cannot prove our core convictions' (Alister McGrath: *Through a Glass Darkly: Journeys through Science, Faith & Doubt – a Memoir*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2020, viii, emphasis original).

<sup>10</sup> Werner Karl Heisenberg (1901-1976) was a German physicist. Here is one explanation of his Principle: 'Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that there is inherent uncertainty in the act of measuring a variable of a particle... This is contrary to classical Newtonian physics... The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle is a fundamental theory in quantum mechanics that defines why a scientist cannot measure multiple quantum variables simultaneously. Until the dawn of quantum mechanics, it was held as a fact that all variables of an object could be known to exact precision simultaneously for a given moment. Newtonian physics placed no limits on how better procedures and techniques could reduce measurement uncertainty so that it was conceivable that with proper care and accuracy all information could be defined. Heisenberg made the bold proposition that there is a lower limit to this precision making our knowledge of a particle inherently uncertain'. Today, this principle is widely accepted and used in many areas of study.

## Introduction

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As for my three discourses, when I started to mull over how I should begin, my mind went to David's words in Psalm 8:

When I look at your heavens [O LORD], the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? (Ps. 8:3-4).

This is it: What is man? David was clearly lost in wonder about it all. What is man? That was David's burning question – and it had to be mine as I opened this little series. Indeed, I had to do what I could to make it the burning issue for my hearers. And the same applies to you as you read on.

David spoke of two things.

*First*, the immensity of the universe – as he saw it in the clear night sky – made him think of the smallness of man when compared to that immensity. *What* is man? *What is* man? What is *man*? How much more powerfully should the sheer magnitude of the universe stir us! David, remember, was speaking three thousand years ago. With the passage of those three millennia, how much clearer is our understanding! Take one issue: light years. We know – David did not – that the stars we see tonight are not actually there. That is where each one of them was so many, many years ago (all different). The light from each star has been travelling at 186,000 miles a second to reach us! Numbers here beyond comprehension! With this knowledge, therefore, how much greater than David's should be our sense of wonder at the immensity of the universe, and how much greater our sense of the smallness of man, our smallness.

So much for the first point.

*Secondly*, and even more amazing, even more wonderful, despite the immensity of the universe – and, therefore, the immensity of God – God cares for man: the infinite cares for the speck.

## Introduction

So said David.

All this is highly relevant today.

Take the first point. We live in a time of the culture of man – man-centred-ness, gross self-centeredness, man’s greatness. It is the age of man – the star, the superstar, the big name. And not only on the silver screen or TV, sports field, or in politics, whatever. This culture of man, alas, has permeated the church, fostered by the tyranny of modern means of communication, especially social media.<sup>11</sup> As the world of entertainment has its galaxy of superstars, so the church. In saying this, I do not mean to argue that the culture of the elevation of man is only a recent phenomenon. Certainly not! It was there in apostolic days. Paul had to fight it at Corinth, as both his letters to that *ekklēsia* prove:

Each one of you says: ‘I follow Paul’, or ‘I follow Apollos’, or ‘I follow Cephas’, or ‘I follow Christ’ (1 Cor. 1:12).

Consequently, he bluntly observed:

You are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says: ‘I follow Paul’, and another: ‘I follow Apollos’, are you not being merely human? (1 Cor. 3:3-4).

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<sup>11</sup> Think of the revolution in the means of communication: it used to be oral, then by writing, then hand-worked print (what an explosion that was – the Reformation, for instance), then machine-worked print, then radio, then TV (think of how transmission westwards by East German TV, immediately followed by westward transmission by West German TV, led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9th Nov. 1989), then digital print, then e-mail, then the internet, and now social media. Think how the latter is responsible for the frequent outbreaks of mass hysteria caused by fake news. Christendom – for ill as well as good – has not remained immune. Believers have yet to reap the full harvest of their widespread use of contemporary, instant mass-communication. The firstfruits look far from promising. Have we reached the stage where, for many evangelicals, Zech. 4:6 has to be rewritten to read: ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by social media’?

## *Introduction*

Paul knew he had to prick the bubble. And how!:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labour. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building (1 Cor. 3:5-9).

So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's (1 Cor. 3:21-23).

So much for Paul's first salvo across the bows of the *ekklēsia* at Corinth, in reference to the cult of man. In much of his second letter, Paul dealt at length with the Corinthian cult of the so-called 'super apostle'.

With the advent of Christendom,<sup>12</sup> things rapidly spiralled to giddy heights, and they have never looked back. Within the evangelical world, the cult of man has never been more vigorous. It has always been a danger; never more so than today. As I hinted, the digital revolution is pouring petrol on the flames. Consequently, we all need constantly to be reminded of God – his greatness, his care for men – and how much we depend upon him, and our smallness in his presence. We need to recover – or discover – a sense of the wonder of God.

God, in his word, reminds us how brief our life is, how small, how insignificant, we humans are. Alas, we too often forget this, and get inflated ideas of ourselves and other men.

In addition to Psalm 8, here are some more salutary words drawn from the Bible, words which should stop us in our tracks:

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<sup>12</sup> Although I have written about this in numerous books, one source must suffice: see 'Christendom' in my *Relationship*.

## *Introduction*

My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and come to their end without hope. Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good. The eye of him who sees me will behold me no more; while your eyes are on me, I shall be gone. As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up; he returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him anymore (Job 7:6-10).

Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not (Job 14:1-2).

[God] return[s] man to dust and say[s]: 'Return, O children of man!' For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers (Ps. 90:3-6).

As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more (Ps. 103:15-16).

O LORD, what is man that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow (Ps. 144:3-4).

Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he? (Isa. 2:22).

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever (Isa. 40:6-8; see 1 Pet. 1:24).

Like a flower of the grass [the rich man] will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits (Jas. 1:10-11).

What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes (Jas. 4:14).



## *Introduction*

And yet, as I say, men so often ignore such truths, and run away with inflated ideas of themselves and others; not least, in the evangelical world. How tragic!

The Dorset poet, William Barnes (1801-1886), superbly captured the proper sense in a poem he penned about himself and his thoughts, under the title ‘How Great Do I Become!’:

*How great do I become! How great!  
With all my children now full-grown,  
And settled, each a wedded mate,  
And all with children of their own.  
I first was one, and then one more  
Well-wived; and children made me ten;  
And they with all their wives or men,  
And children, now make me two score,  
With children's children, far or nigh,  
How great I am become! Am I?*

*I own a share of Weston folk,  
On Norton work I have some hands,  
At Beechley I send up a smoke,  
My surname sounds on Ashridge lands.  
In Meldon church my voices sing,  
Yes, there I have young tongues to pray,  
And I have boys and girls at play  
Below the rocks, at Clevewell spring.  
With all the souls that I may claim  
How great I am! How great my name!*

*But oh! how little can I track  
The longsome team of father men,  
That runs, from me to elders, back  
A chain of links beyond my ken.  
O'er what dear heads, by one and one,  
My name at length came down on me  
I know not now, nor may I see  
Below me one child's child's sweet son.  
No. I am only one of all  
Those links of life. But one. How small!*

Yes, man is small. But that is not the end of the story – no, not by a long way! Read on!