

What is mankind?

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[0 : 00] Okay, am I on? Yes, good. What is mankind?

That's the question that David asks in this psalm. And that's what I want to think about today. Now, I know I'm famous for overcomplicated introductions, but do bear with me.

We will get to the text, but I think it is worth making a few remarks before that. Because our society is absolutely...

Sorry, my wife. I'm looking at my wife here. She keeps an eye on whether I'm loud enough. Identity. Don't we live in a society that's obsessed with that?

How can I be my authentic self? Our society is obsessed with identity politics. Who are you?

[1 : 17] What are you? That kind of question always seems to need a context. Yeah, I need to be a bit closer, I think.

Thanks. I did wonder, as this is supposed to be an all-age service, I did wonder whether to ask some of the children to answer that question, but then on second thoughts I thought I won't, actually.

Because how you answer that question very much depends on the context in which you ask it. If you were a TV interviewer and you had a place on the Lionesses' victory bus in their parade a couple of weeks ago, and you asked one of the team that question, there's various answers they might give.

They might say, well, I'm a striker, or I'm a goalkeeper. Or they might say, I'm a champion, and I scored the winning goal. On the other hand, of course, if you were entering your details into LinkedIn, you're not going to answer it like that.

On LinkedIn, you answer, I'm a plumber, or I'm a software engineer. That's the appropriate answer in that context. I can tell you from experience that if you go to ski school in the Alps and they ask you what you are, they're expecting you to pick from a list of four.

[2 : 59] You're either beginner or intermediate, advanced, or you're an expert. It all depends on the context. If you're in a science lesson, you might reply something like this.

Well, I'm Homo sapiens. I'm a primate. A bit like a chimpanzee, but I'm cleverer and less hairy. I would suggest to you there's actually nothing wrong with that answer in this context.

We certainly do share a lot of our DNA with chimpanzees, our genome with chimpanzees. But you're all looking a bit worried now.

Because the question is, of course, does that truth trump every other truth? That's what Dawkins and the New Atheist would say.

Only the scientific answer is the answer that makes any sense. I suggest to you that actually if you read what he writes, even Dawkins doesn't believe that because he doesn't talk about truth.

[4 : 14] So he does talk about truth, not survival of the fittest is what he ought to be saying. If life is about survival of the fittest, then our attitude of religion shouldn't be, is it true?

It should be, does it help us to survive? But that's not what he says. But of course I can't pull on that thread more this morning.

It is an important question, and I think one that we need to spend more time on. So what I intend to do this evening, so if it's an issue for you, and I think in some ways it should be an issue for everybody, do try and come back.

See if I can persuade you that even the fact that we share our genome with chimpanzees is actually shows the majesty of God. It may seem a bit of an uphill task, but I'll try this evening.

We're going to look at the book of Job, which is about not giving simplistic answers to things. But anyway, let's move on. There are other answers you might give to a question like that.

[5 : 26] If you're filling in your password application or a census or something like that, you might say, well, I'm a male, or I'm a female.

Nowadays you might answer something else. If it asks for your race, you could say, I'm black, I'm white, I'm Asian, or I'm mixed race.

They're all sensible answers in that context. Or if it was a political meeting, you might want to say, I'm working class, or I'm middle class, or even I'm an aristocrat, I'm upper class, perhaps.

I don't know if anybody here claims to be an aristocrat, but maybe there are those who do. These are all sensible answers in the right context.

And yet, we feel that's not quite what David is asking in this psalm, is it? We don't quite catch the essence of David's question.

[6 : 38] Our sort of reaction is, yeah, yes, but what are you really? It's kind of a philosophical question, isn't it? In fact, philosophers have been pondering the question ever since there have been philosophers.

You've probably heard of Descartes' famous dictum, I think, therefore I am. That was supposed to make it clearer, but it didn't. It just led to more questions.

What is thinking, then? Is it reasoning? Or is it feeling? In fact, if you trace what happened after the so-called enlightenment, you find that thought actually split down those two streams.

The rationalists who thought that thinking was reasoning, and the poets who thought that thinking was feeling. What is thinking?

Do animals think in the same way as we do? They seem to think in some way. They can solve certain problems.

[7 : 50] A cat can work out a way to get through a door, a closed door, things like that sometimes. But do they think the same way as we do? It would seem probably not, because they don't use language in the same way that we do.

And of course, there's one variant to this question that's become particularly important in the last few years, and that is, do AIs think? And if so, does that mean they're conscious?

It all gets very complicated very quickly. So what can we make of it? What does this psalm have to tell us? Verse 4 says, What is mankind that you are mindful of them?

Human beings that you care for them? David puts the question in a religious context, obviously. Yet it still comes with a certain puzzlement.

What is this creature? Clearly mankind is part of the earth's ecosystem. One with the beasts of the field and the rest. And yet there's also a touch of the divine.

[9 : 01] Somebody put it once, What is man? Half ape and half angel. So let's, first of all, examine the psalm itself to see what it has to say.

And then we'll look at the way that the New Testament picks up the thought. So let's just look at the structure of the psalm. It's worth just noting this.

The anchor at either end is the name of the Lord. And particularly the majesty of the name of the Lord. That's singular, as it were.

But the rest of it is all contrast and flux. So in verse 1 we get a contrast between earth and heaven. In verse 2 we get a contrast between weakness and strength.

I'll come back to that in a minute. In verses 3 and 4 we get a contrast, as it were, between the stars and mankind. Or the heavenly beings and mankind.

[10 : 05] That's exactly how you translate it. Verses 5 to 8 we get a contrast between mankind and the animals. David's asking, how do we fit into the majesty of this creation?

And then in comparing verse 3 to 7 and 8, we get this contrast between the sky, as it were, the moon and stars and things. And the world which we live in, the planet, as we now call it today.

So let's look at these points in a bit more detail. So the anchor at either end is, as I say, the name of the Lord.

The anchor at either end is the name of the Lord. You can easily miss the fact that two different Hebrew words are used here. The clue is that the first word Lord in your Bible is in capital letters. That refers to the covenant name of God, Yahweh, I am. But what David is saying here, that he is Lord not just of Israel, but of the whole world.

[11 : 30] The second Lord is Adon, master or owner. For David, this whole world is God's world. And that's the only question in which, the only context in which his question can make sense.

As he sees it. But as I said, if the foundation of the psalm is unity, everything else is contrast and flux. So verse 1 seems to be about separation, doesn't it?

God's majesty is seen on earth, but his glory is above the heavens. Notice how this contrast sets the context for verses 5 and 6, where David talks about man sitting between the angels and the beasts.

Verse 2 contrasts weakness and strength. This verse is actually a bit of a challenge for the translators. The ESV, the English Standard Version, renders it, Out of the mouths of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes to still the enemy and the avenger. But the Greek Septuagint translation, which is actually quoted by Jesus in the New Testament, actually says praise rather than strength.

[12:54] And some of the English translations adopt that as well. It's not an easy voice to translate. But in fact, perhaps both are implied here, if we think what the verse is trying to say.

David, remember, is a renowned warrior. Saul has slain his thousand, David has slain his ten thousand. He understands military stuff. But he says, ultimately, my trust is not in military skill. It's in the words, as it were, of the simple and the helpless, as they call on God, that true strength and safety are to be found. A fortress built by hands can be stormed and destroyed.

But those who trust in the Lord for their defence will frustrate the avenger. Jesus actually quotes this verse, as I say, in Matthew 26, 16, when he's in the temple.

He's written into Jerusalem, not on a war horse with an army behind him, but on a donkey with a rather motley crowd of followers.

[14:07] And at the temple, when he gets there, he avoids the powerful and influential and receives the blind and the lame. Who are the supporters that cry out to welcome him?

Not the priests and the teachers of the law. His supporters, if you read it, are a bunch of noisy children. He's saying that they are delivering the true praise.

They are where the true strength is found. So perhaps that explains why it's a bit difficult to translate, but I think the point is that it's in the praise of the weak and the helpless, the children.

As they sing praise to the Lord, that's where the true strength of God's people is to be found, not in their military prowess. And verse 3 invites us to look at the glory of the night sky.

How can man have meaning in a context like that? So how can man have meaning in contrast to that?

[15:18] And nowadays, of course, we know far more than David did about out there. And this observation is a much greater force. Here we are, sitting on this third rock from the sun, a rather average star, on the fringes of a typical galaxy, among billions of others.

Does it make sense to say that God really cares for us? How can we answer that question? Then in verse 4 we get the big question itself, of course.

What is mankind? So we'll leave that for a bit and come back to it in a minute. Let's just look at the other contrasts. In verses 5 and 6, we get to the heart of the dilemma, as it were.

Mankind seems to sit uncomfortably between the heavenly beings. The literal word there is actually gods. But mankind seems to sit uncomfortably between those heavenly beings and the physical creation.

Yet humanity does have a certain glory and honour. We're not just chimpanzees. Then verses 7 and 8 are the counterpoint to verse 3.

[16:39] Just as there is beauty in the heavenly panoply, so there is beauty in all the vast diversity of creatures in the sky and the earth and the sea.

Finally, in verse 9, David goes back to where he started. Although notice that only the earth is actually mentioned here this time.

It doesn't mention the heaven this time. So the big question. What are verse 4? Well, one sensible answer you could give to that, in fact, is that this is very much a human question.

What is mankind? Well, mankind is the species that asks that sort of question. The heavenly beings don't do it.

Not in the same way, anyway. An interesting example of that is in Luke chapter 1, where Gabriel comes to Mary to announce the birth of, well, the conception, actually, of the Lord Jesus.

[17:51] Luke chapter 1, verse 28 says, The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you.

He doesn't check that he's got the right address. He doesn't check that it's the right Mary, because Mary was a very common name in those days, of course. He knows exactly what he's doing and where he's going.

He doesn't have any questions at all. Greetings, you who are highly favoured. The Lord is with you. But what's Mary's reaction? She's immediately full of questions, isn't she?

Verse 29 says, Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. Is this a scam or a delusion?

Or is this really a message from God? And if it really is a message from God, what does it mean for me? It's certainly going to put the kibosh on my plans for a peaceful marriage with Joseph in the carpenter's shop.

[18 : 58] And as far as we can tell, the physical world or the living creatures don't think to ask such a question.

The animals live in the moment. But we humans, we're the ones who are obsessed with the who and the what and the why and where. It's not just the philosophers and scientists who do it for a job. We all do it. This is why Google has taken over the world, isn't it? We all live in a permanent state and wanting to know stuff.

We are bombarded by information, but we doom-scroll for more. What's for dinner? Is the train late? What's gone wrong here? We all feel that if only I knew the answer to this or that question, my life would be so much easier.

Mankind, somehow poised as we are between heaven and earth, lives in a permanent state of puzzlement. The teacher in Ecclesiastes puts it this way.

[20 : 12] What do the workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time.

He has also set eternity in the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Let me read that last sentence again.

He has also set eternity in the human heart. We can't help wondering what he's really saying there, and yet we can't fathom really what God has done from beginning to end.

Anyway, what's David's answer here? David, I think, knows part of the answer. When he says, you made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour.

The key phrase there is, you made them. God created us, is the Bible's, what the Bible has to say on the subject.

[21 : 19] We like this because God made us this way. And in particular, he goes on to say, you made us rulers over the works of your hands. You put everything under their feet.

We're here because God put us here to look after the world. Certainly this is something to praise God for, and David does. Yet interestingly, we don't actually get the usual praise, words for praise, that you get in most of the Psalms.

When it's anchored, most of the Psalms, if they're anchored at the beginning or the end like this, David says, or the writer says, hallelujah, praise the Lord. What we've got here is something slightly different.

Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. It's a bit of open-ended, isn't it? It's a bit of wonder in it. No, the fact that we can't understand it all is the aspect of God's majesty that's being put forward here.

Even this answer seems to have a touch of mystery about it. David's answers, David's answers, in fact, seem to raise more questions, don't they? Why don't I feel God-like then?

[22 : 39] Why is the world in such a mess? Well, you may think I'm overselling this point a bit, but please bear with me.

This isn't outside the scope of the Old Testament literature. We've already quoted a verse from Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is pervaded with this slight sort of angst, the feeling that, you know, maybe it is all meaningless after all.

In Job particularly, we find the message that simple explanations never quite work. That's the third I'm going to continue to pull on this evening.

Why do birds have wings? Well, dummies, so they can fly. Job 39.13 says, The wings of the ostrich flap joyfully, but they cannot compare with the pinions and feathers of the hawk.

Ostriches can't fly. There was an advert a few years back, actually on TV advert, which showed an ostrich flying. But I thought, it's a fake.

[24 : 01] Ostriches definitely can't fly. Later on in that passage, Job, the author talks about the horses.

Do you give the horses strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Do you make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud snorting? He paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength and charges into the fray.

He laughs at fear, afraid of nothing. He doesn't shy away from the sword. Is that very sensible behaviour on the part of the horse? I don't know.

Certainly what they do. Horses don't ask awkward questions. People ask awkward questions. So this evening, I intend to relate this passage to some of the scientific issues regarding the origins of life.

So if this is a problem you think you need to think through, and in some ways I think it's a problem for all of us, then you might find it helpful to come back this evening. But before I leave this, I think it's worth mentioning a philosophical term that's relevant here.

[25 : 16] If you've got one of those sheets with, I can't actually see any, but if you've got one of those sheets with sermon notes and things on for kids, one of the boxes on it is words I don't understand.

Well here's a word you may well not understand. It's a philosophical term. It's called existential angst. Some of the older children might like to go home and Google it.

It's a real challenge for some of the parents to go home and Google it and then try and explain it to their children. It does have a formal definition.

It's a properly defined philosophical term. But essentially it refers to that vague sense of unease that something is not quite right. that the world is maybe not working as it should.

Perhaps something is broken. The slight feeling, the nagging feeling that maybe there's more to be said. That perhaps we're still missing something.

[26 : 29] Our 21st century Western society is absolutely played by existential angst. And this is the thread that's pulled on in the New Testament.

Particularly in the book of Hebrews. In that passage we read before the talk. Let me read it again.

It is not to angels that he subjected the world to come about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified what is mankind that you are mindful of him?

The son of man that you care for him. You made him a little lower than the angels. You crowned them with glory and honour. Put everything under their feet.

In putting everything under them God left nothing that is not subject to them. And then the key words. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them.

[27 : 37] What God said, what David said in the psalm and the way we see the world around don't seem to just quite match. What are we to make of that? Then the writer goes on to say but we do see Jesus who was made a little lower than the angels sorry who was made lower than the angels for a little while.

Again the translations differ over that whether it means a little lower or made lower for a little while but either would make sense. We see Jesus who was made lower than made lower than the angels for a little while now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Well if I did ask the children what's the answer they'd all know they'd all shout out Jesus because every Sunday school kid knows that if you've got a question you don't know the answer or the two the answer's probably Jesus.

Yes but how is Jesus the answer? notice how the writer to the Hebrews carefully developed his argument through verse 10 he says it was necessary for Jesus to share in humanity to be lower than the angels for a while to achieve glory and honour through death I mean one way we know that humans are slightly different from the rest of creation is that it's humans that God sent Jesus to help and to do that Jesus shared in our humanity as it says made lower than the angels for a while and what sort of glory and honour is it that Jesus achieved not being crowned as an emperor overthrowing the Romans but he achieved glory and honour through death sorry people are scrabbling

I should have said it's Hebrews 2 verses 5 to 9 sorry that's a remarkable claim isn't it death the destroyer of all glory and honour even the most powerful emperor the greatest dictator dies but that's the work through death it was through death that glory achieved that Jesus achieved the glory

and honour that was the way he achieved it but of course that just raises a whole host of new questions doesn't it how does this work for one thing and is it relevant to us humans anyway but the writers on the case first we are told that

[30 : 53] Jesus is a pioneer and I really think that is the best translation here older translations say the author it's a Greek word that's actually rather hard to translate but I think pioneer is the best translation pioneer is not the same as an explorer explorer goes to visit a place because it's there comes back and says I've been there come and look at the photos well they just post them on the social media now I suppose but he never intended to stay in fact his whole point as an explorer is he's going to come back and tell the rest of us what he's found but a pioneer is different a pioneer is the one who opens the way who maps the route leaves sign posts and supply dumps and if necessary leaves ladders and ropes for the difficult bits a pioneer is not planning to come back but he is expecting others to follow him otherwise his work is wasted that's the whole point of him going to make it possible for others to follow and who are those who are going to follow we find the answer to that in verses 11 to 8 of Hebrews 2 and his family who else the writer absolutely belabours the point isn't it that

Jesus declares his followers to be his family and because we are family we can trust him we can enter into that place of glory and honour where he has already entered doesn't mean that the route is not scary of course death is scary but Jesus has tested out the way through he sends back the words of encouragement trust me you can make it so Jesus is the answer to the big question of Psalm 8 if you're prepared to trust and follow him there'll still be more questions of course that's part of being human as we've said the worst place one of the worst pieces of spiritual advice that you can give

I think and you do hear evangelicals giving it sometimes is something along the lines of don't ask questions just believe it's asking questions how we find out what God is really doing by asking questions we study the scriptures to get answers as I say we will try and address some of the questions this evening but let me leave you this morning with this thought Jesus is the pioneer he's already been there he's already mapped out the route he's left us with the ladders and ropes that we need to get over the difficult bits they're found in his words and his teaching and in the words and teaching of his apostles and their testimony need we have questions but let me answer one it's safe to follow

Jesus and I commend that to you this morning in his name amen amen Amen.