

# A Search For The Meaning Of Life (7) - Humans And Beasts, Any Difference?

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[ 0 : 00 ] of man, that God is testing them, that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. But what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.

Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upwards, and the spirit of a beast goes down into the earth. So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his Lord, who can bring him to see what will be after him.

Well, at first sight, that passage really looks pretty grim, doesn't it? It looks really as if it's just filled with very dark and depressing and pessimistic thoughts.

And it did in one sense it is. But then you notice in it the phrase, under the sun. That again is the clue to the point of view that the writer is taking, and that he is actually looking at things as they are in the world, but without taking God into his calculation, or his reckoning. Because when you see the world without thinking about God, or taking God into your calculation, that's exactly what you end up doing. You see everything in a very dark and pessimistic mode, and therefore you think, well, what can we do? We're just the same, really, as the animals. It's just death at the end of it all for everyone.

But it's important to see that what he's doing in this exercise is just seeking an answer to his questions as to the purpose of human life. And he cannot get to where he wants to be. He knows that God exists. He knows that life is meaningless without God. But for the exercise that he's engaged in, he's looking at it without God, so that the uselessness and meaninglessness of life without God can actually come across to us powerfully. And that's really what he's doing in this passage as well. Life without God, life keeping God out of the picture, life denying God, denies existence, his right over our lives, his government, his sovereignty over everything that he has created.

[ 2 : 28 ] Where does that get us? It gets us to the same conclusion as this. Man is no different to the beasts that perish. So let's look at the passage, looking at it with that caveat, with remembering that that's where he's coming from. The first thing he's looking at is justice and judgment, verses 16 to 17.

And secondly, he's looking at what we can call humans and beasts. Is he really saying that there isn't any difference between humans and beasts? Why is he speaking in the way that he is there about them? Justice and judgment. Moreover, he says, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. And it could mean that where you would expect to find justice, there wasn't justice to be found, or little justice to be found. Instead of justice, there was wickedness. Obviously, that is often the case, sadly, in the world. As you look at it, as it is, as it is in reality, in all this darkness, in all the hues of human behavior you have to see there, even justice itself is sometimes denied to people, and injustice very often, sadly, tragically reigns instead of it.

So where you would expect to find justice, even in the courts of justice, in the administration of justice, even there he says, I saw wickedness, I found wickedness. Let's just think about this for a moment, because justice is seriously important to you and to me and to every human being. Justice is something that the Bible so often speaks about, so often that you hear about, even reports of what happens in our society. Often people deny justice or claiming that justice hasn't been administered or fulfilled. Justice is seriously important to any society of human beings.

[ 4 : 34 ] But justice, certainly justice in the way we understand it from the Bible, and let's face it, what undergirds justice in our own society is still Christian principles. Much of our laws and precepts and the administration of things like justice are based upon Christian ideals and Christian principles. And justice, to be justice, in order to understand justice, in order to administer justice properly as justice, it requires a standard on which to base it, because you're not going to have justice if what it stands upon changes from one generation to the next. That's why we keep trying to present to the world around us the need for an absolute standard, the need for the standard that you find in the law of God, in the word of God, in the precepts of God, the testimonies of God, the things that you find in the Bible, but in the law of God especially. That's where justice is grounded.

That's the value. That's the principle. That's the thing upon which justice has to be set. Because today, if you're looking for justice, and you're looking for something that undergirds, underpins justice, something that is foundational to justice, and then next week you change your mind about what's going to undergird justice, well, you don't have justice. You cannot define justice.

You cannot administer justice unless what it stands upon is unchangeably the same, an absolute standard, in other words, truth itself, the truth of God. And in fact, you can argue very cogently from justice to the existence of God. When you're dealing with people who don't believe that God exists, who believe that human beings should make up their own standard, their own laws, their own ideas as to what's right and wrong, and how to live our lives, and how to govern ourselves, well, you come to the idea of justice. And you ask them, well, define justice for me.

What is it that lies behind justice? What do you place justice upon? What does it need to have its roots in if it's going to be truly and properly justice?

And it's very difficult to argue against the existence of God if you believe in justice. Because many people never face a court of law for crimes they have committed in this life, and they leave this world, some people think, without ever facing justice. And in human terms, that is correct.

[ 7 : 19 ] Where would that leave us if we did not believe in a final tribunal, in a final court of law, in a final judgment carried out by the God of the Bible on the standard of his own truth?

You see, you can argue from the very idea, from the very concept of justice, to the existence of God, to the righteousness of God, to the truth of God. If you really want to understand justice, and to maintain justice, it is impossible to do it without taking God into your reckoning. And that is what Ecclesiastes is teaching us. And that's what you have to keep before yourself and before the world. Justice is grounded in God's truth, grounded in God's righteousness, in that absolute standard, word, or else justice loses its meaning. You cannot define it in any way that's permanent, or unchangeably consistent. And so he's saying, I saw, in the place of justice, even there was wickedness. In other words, he's talking about corruption affecting justice, or corruption, so that instead of justice, you've got injustice. You've got something which really, tragically, is far from where it should be. Remember, some time ago, we, I think it was when we were looking at some aspects of morality. From the Bible, we came across a passage in Isaiah, chapter 59. Let me just remind you of that, if I read it through just now. Isaiah 59, and from verse 12.

And this is God, through Isaiah, speaking to the people, addressing the people of Isaiah's day as to their behavior, about which he has much to say. For he says, our transgressions, in a way of a prayer to God, really, our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us. For our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities, transgressing and denying the Lord, and turning back from following our God. Speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words. Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off. For truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey, an object of attack. How familiar are you with that, in the society that we now belong to? But you see the logical progression, the way that it goes from saying, this is what is the case. We have denied the

Lord. We go on denying the Lord. We are turning back from following our God. So, the result of that, the consequence of that is that truth has stumbled in the public squares. Uprightness cannot enter. Justice has been replaced by injustice, by corruption, by untruth.

That's what Ecclesiastes is saying. Moreover, I saw under the sun. I saw if you leave human beings to themselves, if you leave God out of it, if you don't take any influence from God into your account, if you don't let God guide people's thinking, this is what you end up with. You end up with even the likes of justice being corrupted. And in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. It is always the mark of a degenerate society that justice is replaced by injustice. That righteousness

comes to be replaced by elements of wickedness. And you don't have to go very far in today's world to see that. You don't have to go abroad to other countries. You can see it in our own nation as well. I need not go through examples of that. They're very well known to you.

[11:26] And it's been the same throughout history. Oppression, injustice, corruption, racial prejudice, slavery, human trafficking, pornography. All the things that are degenerate practices multiply when you put God's word aside, when you depart from God's standard, when you think that human wisdom is a substitute for divine, absolute standards. This is what you get, he says, under the sun, without God, without any reference to God, even in the place of righteousness, there is wickedness. So what's his answer to that? How does he respond to that? How does his thinking proceed? Well, you see, he's saying now, this is what he's seeing under the sun, but verse 17, I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked.

For there is a time for every matter and for every work. The answer is in God's judgment. He's beginning now to introduce God more into what he's saying in order to actually let us see that you cannot really define how human life should be lived without bringing God and God's standards into it.

Well, he's saying God will judge the righteous and the wicked. You see, that's important. God is not just going to judge the wicked. He's going to judge the righteous. He's going to judge every person that's lived by faith in Christ just as surely as he's going to judge the people who have rejected Christ and die like that. But you see, the difference is in the outcome. The judgment of the righteous by God will establish them as righteous, will show them as righteous, will display them in righteousness, Christ's righteousness, to the glory of God, to the glory of Christ, redeemed righteousness. That's the declaration that awaits the people of God in the judgment of God. And everybody will know that, and everybody will see that. Whereas on the other hand, the judgment of the wicked, of those who've rejected God, have lived without God, it's very opposite, isn't it? As we read in Psalm 49, though we all die, we don't all go to the same eternity, to the same place. There is a place where

God judges wickedness eternally, and that's in hell. People don't like the word. It's difficult to preach it. It's difficult to appreciate the enormity of it. But it's God who's telling us. And God will judge the righteous and the wicked, as the writer here says. Now, this is not a cop-out. This is not, as people might accuse us of saying, well, okay, well, you're not dealing with injustice in this world the way you should, and you Christians, you just keep referring to the return of Jesus and the judgment of the last day and so on. That's just of closing your eyes to reality, isn't it? No, this is reality. Because the writer here is saying, if righteous people are persecuted, and they never get justice in this life, they will one day. And if the wicked, and if people who live without God, and exploit others, and live a debauched life, and commend that to others, and ridicule the idea of biblical righteousness, if they die like that, they too will be judged. The righteous and the wicked alike. That final judgment of God. Friends, it's not a cop-out. It's not really something that's been invented in order to try and frighten people into a certain way of life. God is saying, this is what will happen when the judge returns, when Jesus comes back. But you notice in verse 17, he's saying, there is a time for every matter, and for every work. And that fits in with what we saw at the beginning of the chapter, a time to this, and a time to that, a time to be born, a time to die. In other words, all of these cycles that characterize human life, all the way through the course of history, you mustn't see them as if it was just a closed system. As if it was something that cannot actually be broken into, or interrupted in any way. Because it's God's timetable that's being presented to us.

And judgment isn't God's timetable as much as everything else is. And the last judgment of God will be when God himself has timed it. It's in his diary already.

[16:17] And the pages of that diary are being turned over as we think about time and our place in time. The pages of God's diary are being flipped over every day.

One of these days, God is going to look into his diary, if I can put it this way, and it's just one page left. And when he flips that page over, that's it.

Christ will appear as the judge of all the earth. We will have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 10, that we may all receive the things done in this body, whether good or evil.

That's the reality. That's what he's saying to us. It's not a cop-out. It's something that really addresses our need, and brings to us the reality of God, and what God is, and who he's like, and what he's like, and what is yet facing us as we come to meet with him.

It's in God's own time. You see, that's why, as we said earlier, you know, you hear people saying about mass killers, or somebody who's done something awful, and perhaps then taken their own life, and that's the end of their course in this world, and people will say, well, that's just an escape from justice.

[ 17 : 36 ] But of course it's not. It is from human justice. It is from justice in this life, but not according to this, and not according to the Bible all the way through. The person, like anybody else, has to come and meet with God, to have justice administered.

That's the great thing about being in Christ, but having Jesus as your Savior, about having him as your best friend, about having him as your life's companion, as your Savior, as your righteousness, because the judgment of God is going to be very opposite to the judgment, his judgment of the wicked, because in Christ you're going to be judged, and God himself is going to triumph over you, and rejoice over you, and you're going to rejoice in that judgment, in that judgment of righteousness, and holiness, as God will declare you righteous.

What a great prospect. You think of how awesome it is that Jesus is coming back as the judge of all the earth, the righteous judge, as Paul calls him.

What an awesome thought that is. Whereas Jesus himself says, every idle word, every thought that we have thought will be brought before us, and before him in his judgment.

But you see, for the Christian, for the person who's in Christ, for those who know God in Christ, for whom he is a friend, that's what's going to be the case for them. God is going to say about them, I see you as if you had never sinned.

[ 19 : 06 ] I see you in the righteousness of my son. I see you in such a way that I cannot possibly condemn you. Come, enter into that place that belongs to the righteous.

Of course, it's the opposite for those on the other side. Make sure, dear friend, make sure that Jesus is your Savior. Make sure before you come to face God, that you have the righteousness of Christ.

And all you need to do to have the righteousness of Christ, is to accept him as he's offered in the gospel, is to believe in him, is to trust him, to put your life at his disposal in his hands.

And then when you come to face the judgment, all will be well. And you will be announced by God as fully righteous. Well, this is what he's saying.

This is what he saw under the sun. This is how it is with injustice, with corruption. But he says everybody has to come and meet God for themselves. So why does God not intervene?

[ 20 : 11 ] You might ask the question, why does God now not intervene to make things better? Why doesn't the judgment come already? Well, the answer to that for us too, in a way, because in verse 18, you see he's saying here, but he's saying, I said in my heart with regard to the children of man, that God is testing them, that they may see that they themselves are but beasts.

For what happens to the children of man, what happens to the beasts is the same, as one dies, so dies the other. In other words, God is giving us time to think.

To think about ourselves. To think about whether or not we are beasts. Whether we want to live like beasts. Whether we just want to be treated like beasts. Whether we really have any distinction between ourselves and the beasts.

Are we just going to be like those who die? That those beasts who die. They don't have souls. They don't have an eternity to think about. God is giving us this time, this interval, this interim between now and the judgment, and between now and whenever you die and I die, to think about things. Let me just give you an idea of people who don't think. I had some interaction last week with a secularist atheist through Twitter online.

[ 21 : 28 ] I'd said something with regard to salvation and so on. And he responded, he's done this a few times, he says, hell, God with a small g of course, your Lord, that's just a figment of your imagination.

And I responded by saying, if you're right, and I die tonight, it'll make no difference. I will lose only my existence.

Of course, because he doesn't believe there's anything after death. But I said, if I am right, and you die tonight, you will lose everything in the hell you don't believe exists.

Would you not better carry out a serious and urgent risk assessment, trying to get people to think about whether or not they might be wrong? And his response was immediate.

He says, no, nothing to assess. That's just so much nonsense. You see, that's somebody who's not really thinking.

[ 22 : 34 ] Not thinking properly. Not thinking of eternity. Not thinking, could I possibly be wrong? Could this Christian that I interact with on Twitter, could he be right? Could he be saying the truth?

No. Mind is closed. No God. No judgment. No hell. No judgment. No judgment. No judgment. Just figments of human imagination. That's not what Ecclesiastes is saying. That's what you think if you just look at things under the sun.

But lift your head above the sun. Lift your head above the limits of this world. Above human ideology. About human conclusions as they are in themselves. And what do you face? You face God.

A God who is wonderfully rich in salvation. Yes, he's the judge of all the earth. But while you and I are in this world, you see God offering this salvation to us.

Bringing to us Jesus as a Savior. So that you can embrace him. So that you can welcome him. So that you can have him in place in your life. And he's giving us time today to think.

[ 23 : 35 ] But to think biblically. To think with the light of God's word in your mind. To think not like that atheist, secularist. But to think like the words of Ecclesiastes.

That God must feature. In our outlook. And in our present. So there's justice and judgment.

Secondly, He moves on to humans and beasts.

Now we could misunderstand this very easily. And some people indeed do. What happens to the children of man. And what happens to the beasts is the same. As one dies, so dies the other.

They all have the same breath. Man has no advantage over the beasts. For all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust. And all to dust return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upwards.

And the spirit of a beast goes down to the earth. What is he doing? Is he saying that there is actually no difference at all. Between us human beings. Things and beasts, animals.

[ 24 : 36 ] That are different to humans. Well of course he's not saying that. That would be completely contradictory to the rest of the Bible. And as you see reading through Ecclesiastes.

That's not what he thinks either.

What he's doing again is saying. If we actually look at things just under the sun. If we don't take the teaching of God into a reckoning. If we don't take what God is telling us into a reckoning.

Then there's no way of knowing whether there's a difference between a man and a beast. Or whether human beings and their souls when they die go upwards. Or the spirit of the beast.

Like the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth. But when you take the word of God. The teaching of God. The guidance of God.

The counsel of God. When you take all that into your reckoning. Of course you know. That man is not. Like the beasts. He is in this respect.

[ 25 : 32 ] That as they die. So we die. As their body returns to dust. So does ours. But then there's a lot else. There's a lot more than that in the Bible.

About how God created us. Isn't it? And indeed he's saying here. In verse 18. God is testing us. God is actually even now.

Carrying out an assessment. Of our lives. That they may see. That they themselves are but beasts. In other words he's saying. God is testing us here and now. As to what our thoughts are.

About ourselves. And about the beasts that are around us. He's giving us. A time to think about. Whether there is a difference or not. Whether we're making a difference or not.

Or whether we're just saying. Well it just comes to the same thing anyway. And if we think without God. Well that's all we're left with.

[ 26 : 31 ] If we think God doesn't exist. And there's nothing other than under the sun. Then I'm no different today. To a cow.

Or a pig. Or any other animal. Except that I rationalize more than they do. That's why he's saying this.

God is sifting us. Testing us. Psalm 139. We sang it a short time ago. Wonderful words. Where God. The psalmist David there is. As it were.

Surrounded by God's knowledge. He has hemmed me in. He says. By this knowledge. That he has of me. Before I speak. He knows the words that I say. He knows my thoughts. He knows my motives.

He knows everything in my mind. He knows everything in my soul. And you see the word that the psalmist used there is. Sifting. What do you do with grain. When you're taking away the husks. [ 27 : 27 ] And when you're examining it. Sifting. God is sifting through your mind just now. And my mind just now. God in his infinite knowledge. As your life goes on.

And as you hear appear in a service of worship today. And as I appear in this pulpit today. God is sifting my mind. God is assessing what he sees in my mind. God is weighing my mind. My thoughts. My lifestyle. You know what it's like when you go to. Look at some of these. Programs with. Old radios. Or ancient things that are being repaired.

They've never been opened. Since they were put together. And the expert comes. And he takes the screws off the back. And he takes off the back panel. And you wonder what's going to be inside. And usually if it's a really ancient thing. You've got all these diodes. And all of these old type. Old style things inside the radio. And lots of dust. And lots of dirt. That needs to be cleaned out. God is taking the back panel off your mind right now.

[ 28 : 27 ] What's he seeing? What's he looking at? What's he examining? What are his conclusions?

Is he saying about you and about me? That person doesn't see beyond this world. He's not taking account of life above the sun. What is he seeing?

What is he seeing? As he takes the back of your mind. There's a person who loves my son. Who appreciates my salvation. Who has embraced the salvation that I've prepared in Jesus Christ my son for them.

There's a person who's safe forever. There's a person who's righteous. Who's accepted by me. What's he seeing? As he sifts. Your mind.

Your life. And mine. There is of course a crucial difference. Between man and beasts. We know that from elsewhere in the Bible.

[ 29 : 26 ] And the cycle that you see. In the opening verses of the chapter. Not to see them as a prison. Into which. Nothing can actually enter.

And out of which nothing can be brought. A time. To be born. And a time to die. That's fixed. But you see.

God has interrupted it. Hasn't he? He's come into this world. He's entered into the cycles of life. He's entered into the cycle of birth. And of death. He's entered into the cycle of a time to plant. And a time to pluck up. A time to break down. A time to weep. A time to laugh. A time to mourn. A time to dance. In the person of his son. Jesus Christ. God came into this world.

And as he came to interrupt that world of ours. And came to intervene in this world of ours. So you can see that he is intensely interested.

[ 30 : 25 ] And concerned for us human beings. He's not looking upon us as if we were all just like the other animals. As if we're just not in any way distinct from the animals around us.

Why would he have sent his son into this world? To die the death of the cross. If human life meant nothing to him. If we weren't any different. If we weren't created to live above the son.

In fellowship with God. In the life that friendship with God brings. And today. That's what he's commending to you and to me.

That in Jesus Christ. Through his incarnation and death and resurrection. God has shown to us. That humans are not like the beasts. That we mean something to God.

That's infinitely precious. Otherwise why. As we'll see tonight. Why would he love us to the extent. That he gave his own son to die.

[ 31 : 26 ] So here's his conclusion. So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work. For that is his Lord. Who can bring him to see what will be after him.

Well that's not just saying. Well let's just get on with it and make the best of it. We can't change things anyway. So just enjoy life while it exists. That's not what he's really saying. Although he is saying enjoy life.

But what he's saying is. Make the most of what God gives you. Live life the way God would want you to live it. Use all the advantages God gives you.

To enjoy life. And the good things of life. To live life. In communion and friendship with him. To fulfill your chief end. As the catechism puts it.

The purpose for human life is what we're looking for. And examining in the writings of Ecclesiastes. Well this is something the catechism long long ago anticipated. In these wonderful concise words of

the first question in the catechism.

[ 32 : 29 ] What is man's chief end? Why does man exist? What is the chief purpose of his life? Man's chief end is to glorify God.

And to enjoy him forever. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15. And verse 19.

We have an Ecclesiastes like verse. If I can put it that way. We are saying if in this life only. We have hoped in Christ.

We are of all people. Most to be pitied or most miserable. If in this life only. We have trusted in Christ. Or do trust in Christ. We are of all people most to be pitied.

Most miserable. If that's all there is to it. If we trust in Christ only for guidance throughout this life. And that's it. We are of all people most to be pitied.

[ 33 : 27 ] But then you see. The chapter has to do with resurrection. With resurrection life. In conjunction with Christ. In union with Christ. With life as God gives it to us in Christ.

And how does he end the chapter? Having gone through that wonderful passage. About the resurrection of Christ. And God's people's own resurrection. When Christ returns.

Well he says therefore. Again like Ecclesiastes. As we've been looking this morning. The final verse in that passage. Therefore my beloved brothers. Be steadfast.

Immovable. Always abounding in the work of the Lord. Knowing that in the Lord. Your labor. Is not in vain. It's not vanity.

Of vanities. It has purpose. And meaning. And effect. God bless his word to us. Let's pray. Lord bless to us we pray your word.

[ 34 : 27 ] Help us that. We may see that this life. Or all his difficulties. And challenges. Is far from meaningless. And even Lord. When we cannot. Ourselves.

Assemble. The events of our lives. As they. Require to be. And as we could see them. Consistently. Help us Lord. To realize. That you know all things about us.

That you have planned. Our lives from the beginning. And that as we come to trust in you. We are trusting in that plan. And in your wisdom. So that we will come. To find our rest in you.

Receive our worship now. And cleanse us we pray. From all our sin. For Jesus sake. Amen. Well let's conclude now. In Psalm 139.

This time in the Sing Psalms. Version of Psalm 139. That's on page 181. And verses 15 to 18.

[ 35 : 25 ] Words that remind us of God's purpose. Even in our formation. Before our birth. Words that remind us of the preciousness. Of human life.

Even before birth. And on through. Into our lives. All things were in. God's book ordained for us. So Psalm 139a.

On page 181. From verse 15 to 18. When in the secret place. My frame. Was made before. My birth. When in the secret place.

My frame. Was made before. My birth. You saw my body.

Yet unformed. Within the depths of earth.

[ 36 : 30 ] And all the days. That I sure love. Which you are.

For me. Were written. Were written. In your book. Oh Lord.

Before they came to you. Oh God. How precious.

Are you. Thought. I scan them. From afar.

And as I seek. To grasp. Them all. How numb.

[ 37 : 27 ] Fearless. They are. Where I. To count. Them.

They would be. More than. The grain. Of sun. When I.

Are. Wake. I. Am. Wake. Wake.