

## Excerpt from Lecture VI

on

**Ecclesiastes 3:18-21:  
"All Return to Dust"**

by

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*"I said in my heart, 'Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals.' For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?" (Ecclesiastes 3:18-21)*

I am disposed to consider these verses as still the language of Solomon himself; for the opinion of some, that they should be interpreted as if spoken by a materialist or atheistical objector is incapable, I think, of being maintained in any consistency with the plain construction of the passage.

Considering them as the language of Solomon, there appears to be only one thing necessary to be admitted in order to render their meaning intelligible and clear; namely, that by "the sons of men" we are to understand the general mass of mankind who live for this world and have their portion in it. And this is surely not an unreasonable postulate.

On the principle that the vast majority of mankind live for themselves and for time, and that those who live for God and eternity are the exceptions to the general character, the same designation is used in other places in this restricted sense: "How long, O you *sons of men*, will you turn my glory to shame? How long will you love worthlessness and seek falsehood?" (Ps. 4:2). "To you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the *sons of men*. O you simple ones, understand prudence, and you fools, be of an understanding heart" (Prov. 8:4,5). And even in this book of Ecclesiastes we find the following: "Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the *sons of men* is fully set in them to do evil" (8:11). "Truly the hearts of the *sons of men* are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead" (9:3). Besides, it will appear still more clearly by-and-by that in this passage itself Solomon affirms the certainty of the immortality of the soul and a future judgment, and that when he reasons of the *vanity of life*, he has in his view this life considered *by itself*--as, alas! it is so generally considered by thoughtless and ungodly men.

After Solomon had learned--by much bitter experience--the proper estimate of all the sources of worldly enjoyment, he expresses the desire that God would reveal to the sons of men what was

their real state and character as long as they were devoting themselves in affection and pursuit to these alone, as long as they continued men of the world who have their portion in this life: "I said in my heart, concerning the condition of the sons of men, O that God might manifest them," (that is, to themselves, according to what follows), "and that they might see that they themselves are beasts:"--that while they grovel among worldly pleasures alone, while "earth confines their low desires," they degrade their immortal nature, they sink themselves to a level with the beasts that perish. For insofar as mere animal life, animal gratifications, and the termination of earthly existence are concerned, where lies the mighty difference? "For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust."

Many of the inferior animals have senses capable of imparting much more exquisite sensations of pleasure than men. Men are subject to a much greater variety of diseases, accidents, and modes of suffering than the generality of beasts. Men and beasts breathe together the same air and are sustained by the same general process of nourishment. And when they die, they reveal the same latent principle of corruption, both alike putrifying and moldering into dust--the same in *origin* and the same in *end*. In such views as these, a man has no preeminence above a beast, and the life of man considered simply in relation to this world is most emphatically vanity--all vanity.

LORD [Yahweh], make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am. Indeed, You have made my days as handbreadths, and my age is as nothing before You; Certainly every man at his best state is but vapor. Surely every man walks about like a shadow; surely they busy themselves in vain; he heaps up riches, and does not know who will gather them (Ps. 39:4-6).

Between the latter end, however, of the man and the beast, there is one essential and most important difference; and it is this difference which manifests the extreme and pitiable folly of "the sons of men" when, like the beasts, they live as if the present were their only existence. This difference is expressed in the 21st verse: "Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?"

For the illustration of this verse, let it be remarked that the expression "who knows" does not convey the idea of ignorance or uncertainty with regard to the future destination of the spirit of man in distinction from that of the beast, for in this same verse a difference is expressly asserted to subsist between them. Of the one it is affirmed that it "goes upward" and of the other that it "goes downward to the earth." The *death* of man and beast having been mentioned in the preceding verse--"all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again"--makes it sufficiently clear that it is of this period that Solomon continues to speak, and that the phraseology he employs is not intended merely to express the *aspiring nature* of the spirit of man on the one hand and the *grovelling nature* of the spirit of the beasts on the other, but the destiny of each at the close of their present life--the spirit of man *surviving* his mortal frame, while that of the beasts, instead of outliving their bodies, is destined to perish with them. The separate existence of the human spirit is still more directly affirmed in a subsequent part of this book: "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (12:7).

It would be out of place to enter here into abstruse metaphysical speculations. My own opinion

(and it seems, among other grounds, to have some support from the passage before us, in which the same term is used for the spirit of the beast and for the spirit of man) is that the immaterial thinking substance in man and beast is in its essential properties the same . . . .

To draw with precision the boundaries between the operation of instinct and the exercise of reason has many a time been attempted but never with any success. And often have men deluded themselves by words and names, ascribing to "instinct" in beasts actions that evidently possess all the distinctive attributes of rationality and which, unhesitatingly, they impute to "reason" in men. Now, as all created existence of every possible description must be dependent--entirely and unceasingly dependent--on the life-giving God, I can perceive no heresy in the belief that the same kind of spiritual essence should in beasts be destined to cessation and in man to continuance of existence any more than in the belief that the corporeal part of the man and of the beast, though alike doomed to the dust, is in the former destined to restoration and in the latter to permanent corruption.

If the separate existence of the human soul after death be, as I conceive it is, directly affirmed in the expression "the spirit of man that goes upward," then the question, "*Who knows* the spirit of man that goes upward and the spirit of the beast that goes downward to the earth?" must not be understood to imply ignorance or uncertainty on this all-important point. And to suppose no more to be meant than that the difference between the one and the other in death is not *discernible* would be egregious trifling; the soul of man being, of course, from its immaterial nature incapable of being so discerned.

Whatever may be the case with other orders of being (and especially with spiritual essences that exist in separation from material bodies), and whatever may be among them the means of perception and intercourse, we ourselves belong to a species possessing no senses for the discernment of spirits. That we cannot *see* the human spirit leaving the body and going upward to God is a proposition too trifling for the solemnity of the question. And nothing would be more unphilosophical than to found upon this consideration any skeptical doubt as to its distinct existence or the existence of spirit in general. It has been justly remarked that a creature endowed with only four of the senses which we possess might with equal reason question the existence of all that we discover by the fifth.

The question, then, appears to be expressive of a very lamentable fact; namely, that few--a very few--properly think of and consider this essential and important difference between the human and the brute creation, and that the great majority of mankind live and act as if they knew nothing of it or attached no degree of credit to it. A similar style of question is used in other places to express the same idea of rarity associated with the sentiments of wonder and regret: "Who can find a virtuous woman? For her worth is far above rubies" (Prov. 31:10). "Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD [Yahweh] been revealed?" (Isa. 53:1). And the word which is translated "knows" is one which not infrequently signifies to *take notice of* or to *regard*.

Solomon affirms, then, the difference between man and beast; affirms that the spirit of the former at death "ascends on high" and that the spirit of the latter, like the body, "goes down to the earth" and perishes with it. And he laments the fact that by the great majority of the children of men the difference is not attended to and is entirely without influence. And this deep

and melancholy regret accords with the desire which he had just before expressed, that God would show the sons of men how foolish they were and how they degraded their immortal nature by living as if the present life were their only existence, and thus equalizing themselves with the beasts of the field. It was indeed matter of just lamentation that such creatures should not lay to heart their lofty destination and rise superior to the perishing vanities and grovelling pursuits of a mere earthly and sensual existence.

Excerpt from "Lecture VI" in *Lectures on the Book of Ecclesiastes* by Ralph Wardlaw (Philadelphia: W. W. Woodward, 1822). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except for some condensation and light editing for clarity. Also, punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized, long paragraphs have been divided, and the NKJV has been used for most quotations.