

Ecclesiastes 3: 17 and 18; "Do Men see that they are like Beasts?",
A Bible Study prepared for the Evening of April 29th, 2009,
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The last time that we were together we spoke about why and how good government is corrupted. We saw that it takes place when there is a lack of good spiritual discernment in the lives of the leaders and the people in any given nation. When there is poor spiritual discernment in the leaders, good laws are not made, or not upheld, and there is a great difficulty in the enforcement of those laws which were made by former generations which were good laws. Good laws are made for a discerning people who have discerning leaders. But corruption in government begins, and it continues, as people lose their discernment of the spiritual realities of the truth of the Bible as it is applied to everyday life. Indeed, as we have seen recently in our own state, men who are judges believe that they can say that it is unconstitutional to prohibit homosexual marriage. And what this kind of legislation from the bench allows; is that it allows laws to be changed according to what those judges think is right and wrong, rather than what the people themselves making the laws through the representatives of their legislature have already said is right and wrong. If the judges discerningly interpreting how good laws are to be enforced and upheld, then all is well with a society. But if they are undiscerning spiritually, and become corrupt, then their judgments become unrighteous and God cannot bless such a society for long. Many people in our day no longer see homosexuality or adultery as sinful and wrong. They do not see that marriage is defined by God and not by men. And it is this spiritual blindness that has brought about the crisis in government in our day. We saw last time that this poor discernment leads to a breakdown of real righteous government and everyone doing what is right in their own eyes. We saw further that the only way that corruption in government can be stayed is when righteous people will speak to others about the law and the gospel. You and I need to show others around us the connections in truth. We need to speak to them about God who is the judge of the righteous and the wicked. And to get to that place where we are willing to speak to others about the truth of right and wrong and the consequences of both, we need to be convinced of the God's righteous judgment in our own hearts and lives first. Verse 17 shows us this. Solomon says, "I said in my heart, 'God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.'" Many believe that God will judge the wicked. But many do not believe that God will judge the righteous. And not only this; but there are many people who are ignorant of the fact that God tests the hearts of people, as it says in verse 18, "in order that they may see that they themselves are like animals." (That "they are beasts", it says in the King James version.) I am quite sure that there are many people today who do not understand themselves, and how great their native depravity is. So this evening we want to do a study on this subject and handle it in

this way. We want to look first at the scriptural evidence for the fact that God tests the hearts and minds of men. And secondly we want to see God's purpose in testing them.

1st of all - The Scriptural evidence for the fact that God judges all men, and tests the hearts and minds of both believers and unbelievers.

(Verses 17 and 18)

Turn with me to Jeremiah 17: 9. Jeremiah, having spoke of the blessedness of the man who trusts in the Lord in verses 7 and 8, here speaks of the deceitfulness of the human heart, which is the reason that the Lord has purposed to test it in both believers as well as unbelievers. "The heart is deceitful above all thing, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings." God is saying through the prophet that men can easily be deceived by their own hearts. The heart is deceitful above all things. It is not that it is just somewhat tricky and can deceive us more than some things. It is so tricky that it, more than anything else in this life, can deceive us. In the margin, related to verse 9, it says that the heart is "incurably wicked". This means that we cannot cure it by our own wisdom and power. It cannot be done. We cannot take away our hearts trickiness by willing it to be so. We cannot know our heart that well. "Who can know it?" Who can know their own heart for sure; which way it will go in every temptation that comes to it? The implied answer is - no one. But the Lord knows it by searching and testing. And He does this searching and testing so that we, as believers in Jesus Christ, might know the result of His searching and come to the right conclusions. We cannot be self-sufficient. We cannot trust in our own heart or we will surely be deceived and sin against God in many ways, and fall under His judgment.

Your can see an example of this in Jeremiah 13: 18 and following. "Say to the king and to the queen mother, humble yourselves; sit down, for your rule shall collapse, the crown of your glory." "The cities of the South shall be shut up, and no one shall open them; Judah shall be carried away captive, all of it; it shall be wholly carried away captive." Lift up your eyes and see those who come from the north." "Where is the flock that was given to you, your beautiful sheep?" "What will you say when He punishes you?" "For you have taught them to be chieftains, to be head over you." "Will not pangs seize you, like a woman in labor?" "And if you say in your heart, 'why have these things come upon me?' "For the greatness of your iniquity your skirts have been uncovered, your heels made bare." "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?" "Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil." You can see here that God is rewarding them according to their works. Their government had become corrupt and their rule would collapse. He would punish them and bring them into captivity as a nation because their iniquity was so great. Then comes this amazing verse, verse 23. Man in his sin is compared to an Ethiopian; a black man. A black man cannot change his skin color. And a sinner is also compared to a animal; a leopard who

has spots he cannot change. You see, the temptation in times when the Lord is searching and testing our heart is to try and cover up our grave and fatal spiritual weakness with a show of self-confidence. I can do this. I can change and make myself better. But the Lord says that if you have been accustomed to do evil, if you have formed bad habits from your youth, of living to yourself and living for yourself, and living independently from God and His commandments; you will no doubt fail miserably in your resolutions to do good. Why is this? Well look at Proverbs 28: 26. "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but whoever walks wisely will be delivered." Delivered from what? Delivered from being a fool; one who says that there is no God. One who lives for himself and this world's riches and pleasures, not caring what God thinks of them.

Many times the people of this world are living their lives for their own glory. They seek out their own glory and not the glory of the one true and living God. But look at Proverbs 25: 27. "It is not good to eat much honey; so to seek one's own glory is not glory." Do you seek great things for yourself," it says in Jeremiah 45: 5; "seek them not...." And look at Psalm 44, verse 20. The people who wrote this Psalm, the sons of Korah had taken their stand for God and for righteousness and they were suffering for it. But in prayer they plead with their God that He would remember them for good because they had not forgotten God. "If we had forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a foreign god, would not God search this out?" "For He knows the secrets of the heart." These are the scriptural facts of the case. God is a God who sees and who tests the heart.

Now 2ndly - What is the purpose of God's testing and searching?

The text says, "that they may see that they themselves are like animals." (like beasts) Now Solomon is going to go on to assert that men are like beasts and have no advantage over them because both men and beasts die. They all eventually go to one place; the grave. But surely verse 18 means something more than this existential observation of truth. The indication that it does mean something more is found in the words, "God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like beasts." The purpose of God's searching and testing is so that men might know the truth about themselves spiritually; not just physically. Men very often think of themselves as much better than what they actually are in their hearts. Turn with me to 2 Kings 8: 7. Elisha is on an errand for God. "Then Elisha went to Damascus, and Ben-Hadad king of Syria was sick; and it was told him saying, 'The man of God has come here.'" "And the king said to Hazael, 'Take a present in your hand, and go to meet the man of God, and inquire of the Lord by him, saying, 'Shall I recover from this disease?'" "So Hazael went to meet him and took a present with him, of every good thing of Damascus, forty camel-loads; and he came and stood before him, and said, 'Your son Ben-Hadad king of Syria has sent me to you, saying, 'Shall I recover from this disease?'" "and Elisha said to him, 'Go say to him, 'You shall certainly recover.'" "However the Lord has shown me that he will really die." "Then he set his countenance in a stare until he was ashamed; and the man of God wept." "And Hazael said Why is my lord weeping?" "He

answered, 'Because I know the evil that you will do to the children of Israel: Their strongholds you will set on fire, and their young men you will kill with the sword; and you will dash their children, and rip open their women with child.' "So Hazeel said, "But what is your servant--a dog, that he should do this thing?" "And Elisha answered, "The Lord has shown me that you will become king over Syria." You can see here that Hazeel thought that he would never do such gross things but he was wrong. He did not know his own heart's wickedness and what he was capable of. He would find himself a beast before God and men at a future time.

Now turn over with me to with me to Psalm 73 and I think that we will find out that this self-realization also happens in the lives of believers as well, that sometimes they are as beasts before God. In a believer, however, the self-realization that they are beasts leads them to repentance and to turning away from being beasts. We do not have the time to develop thoughts on every verse of this wonderful Psalm. But there is a predicament in the mind of Asaph as to why the wicked prosper. Why does God bless them so mightily? He knew that God was good to His people. Asaph starts out the Psalm by saying so. "Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart." "But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped." "For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." Notice how he equates boastfulness with wickedness. He knows that the boastful can not stand in God's sight. His predicament is; then why does God bless them? He goes on to explain his perplexity. Verse 5 - "They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men." "Therefore pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment." "Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish." Verse 12 says, "These are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches." Verse 21 says, "Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind." "I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You." He was like a beast in that he believed that God was wrong to permit the wicked to prosper. It just did not seem right and just. And because it seemed that God was wrong to permit this, Asaph did not honor God in the way that he should have. He thought at one point that being a godly man was not profitable. Look at verse 13. "Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence." He, as a righteous man, was being chastened and plagued. And these wicked rich were prospering on every side. He says in verse 16 - "When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me--until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end." Verse 18 says, "Surely you set them in slippery places; you cast them down to destruction." "Oh how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment!" "They are utterly consumed with terrors." "As in a dream when one awakes, so, Lord when You awake, You shall despise their image." This is speaking about when the Lord awakes to judgment. The Lord can awake to judgment at any time when he thinks best in this life, and most certainly will at the end of the age.

But the righteous person who is living his life to the glory of God and not to himself should have nothing to fear in the judgment. He patiently waits his time.

Even though the wicked prosper for a time, it shall not be forever. Verse 23 says, "Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand." "You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." "Whom have I in heaven but You?" "And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You." "My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." How can the Christian say this? He says it because he knows it is true by the grace of Christ. Christ suffered at the hands of bestial men. Christ died for bestial men; men lacking intelligence and reason in the sight of the holy God. Psalm 22: 12 says so. "Many bulls have surrounded Me; strong bulls of Bashan have encircled Me." "They gape at Me with their mouths, like a raging and roaring lion." And verse 16 says, "For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me." They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all My bones." Verse 19 says, "But You, O Lord, do not be far from Me; O My strength, hasten to help Me!" "Deliver Me from the sword, My precious life from the power of the dog." "Save me from the lion's mouth and from the horns of the wild oxen!" "You have answered Me." God did answer our Lord Jesus Christ. He was heard because of His piety. But God did permit Him to suffer and to die on behalf of men who are beasts in their unbelief and sin. The One who was placed in a manger for cattle when He was born, came into the world to die for sinners, of whom I am chief. It is good that God tests us in order to show us that we are beasts without Christ. And sometimes even as Christians we are beasts before Him. But that is why we pray, "Search me, O God, and know my heart, and try me and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me; and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139: 24)