

Thankful Through Tears: Psalms of Lament and Thanksgiving

What is Man?

Psalm 8

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To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David.

- ¹ *O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.*
- ² *Out of the mouth of babies and infants,
you have established strength because of your foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger.*
- ³ *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,*
- ⁴ *what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?*
- ⁵ *Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.*
- ⁶ *You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,*
- ⁷ *all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,*
- ⁸ *the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*
- ⁹ *O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Sometimes I forget how great God is and how incredibly blessed I am. It's so easy to lose perspective and to feel overwhelmed by the stresses of life or defeated by my own failures. Psalm 3-7 are all various forms of lament, as they all were written by David during times of trouble, probably when he was fleeing either King Saul or his son, Absalom. In his distress, David cried out to the Lord – but it can be easy in the midst of the distress to lose sight of how truly great and wonderful God is and how marvelous His love for us is.

So, after the series of laments in Psalms 3-7, Psalm 8 brings a joyful hymn of praise to God for His greatness and for His amazing goodness to people. This is one of the most positive and joyful hymns in the psalms, a praise song that begins and ends with one of the most joyful and familiar lines of praise in God's word – "*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!*"

Last week, when we were on Prince Edward Island in Canada, we got to see some amazing sunsets on the beach that was a short walk from our campground. On our first night, last Monday night, as we

watched the sun set, I thought, “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!” – and then it hit me, “That’s the next psalm I get to preach! How cool!”

Psalm 8, like psalms 3-7, is written by David. Most scholars believe David probably wrote this psalm early in his life, maybe even as a teenage boy, watching over his sheep at night in the fields around Bethlehem. I think that’s a really neat thought – that this psalm could have its origins with a shepherd of Bethlehem, out in the fields at night, keeping watch over his flock. Sound familiar?

Probably later in life, as king, David took this psalm and arranged it for the Choirmaster, for the worship leader. In 1 Chronicles 25, we’re told of how King David arranged the musical Levites into groups to lead the singing for the gathered worship of God’s people. I think it was probably at this time that David took many of his psalms and arranged them for corporate singing and gave them “To the Choirmaster.” This one is also entitled “According to the Gittith.” This same title is found on Psalms 81 & 84. This is probably the name of a popular tune, either one coming from Gath or sung at the time of pressing grapes. I like to think of it as a grape-pressing tune, whistled by the women who stomped out the grapes. It’s clearly a joyful tune, as Psalms 8, 81 & 84 are all joyful. So, this is a joyful song, set to a popular tune, and meant to be sung publicly by God’s gathered people.

A. Holy Praise, vv. 1-2

Psalm 8 begins with an outburst of Holy Praise –

*1 O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.*

O LORD – YaHWeH, God’s covenant name, depicting His unchanging self-sufficiency as the Great I AM.

Our Lord – Our Master, ruler, king, sovereign.

How Majestic – This is a word that literally means “*wide or (generally) large; figuratively, powerful:—excellent, famous, gallant, glorious, goodly, lordly, mighty(-ier one), noble, principal, worthy.*” (from Strong’s definitions)

The self-sufficient and unchanging One – the One who is who He is always and without fail – is our sovereign, our Lord, our Master and ruler. And His name – the revelation of His character – is powerful, excellent, majestic, worthy – throughout all the earth.

“*You have set your glory above the heavens.*” – God’s glory is so great that, while His name is seen as majestic and mighty throughout the whole earth, His glory - His renown, His fame, the weight of who He is – He has established as above the heavens, far above all Creation.

This opening verse is rich and enthusiastic, but also theologically precise, praise of God. It would be wrong to say that God is in His Creation or that His glory is in the sunset or the stars. His name – the revelation of His character – is shown to be majestic and mighty throughout all creation, but His glory is above the heavens. Evidence of God’s greatness can be seen throughout His Creation, but God Himself

is enthroned above the heavens, over all. He is transcendent in the highest degree, which is reflected in His divine name, YaHWeH, I AM.

Verse 2 might seem a bit confusing after the stirring language of verse 1 –

² *Out of the mouth of babies and infants,
you have established strength because of your foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger.*

David seems to be saying that God has revealed His character even in the most simple and humble aspects of His creation. Babies are born almost entirely helpless and weak, and yet they are so fearfully and wonderfully made, even from the very beginning. The very way a nursing infant is wired by God with reflexes to nurse displays the strong character of God.

Jesus took the meaning of this verse a step further, when He rode into Jerusalem and cleared out the Temple of money-changers and animal-sellers. The small children of Jerusalem praised Him. Of course, this angered the enemies of Jesus –

the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵ But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant, ¹⁶ and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

*“Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies
you have prepared praise?”*

- Matthew 21:14-16, ESV

So, here, Jesus tells us that the children were able to see and properly respond to the revelation of God’s majestic name in His healing power. They silenced the opposition by clearly seeing and praising God for what the enemies of Jesus refused to acknowledge.

B. Humble Pondering, vv. 3-4

In verse 3, David turns his attention from nursing infants and small children to the heavens –

³ *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?*

When was the last time you really looked at the heavens? The verb translated “look at” here is the ESV is translated “consider” in other versions and can mean “to closely inspect” and “carefully consider” or even “to joyfully behold in wonder.”

David spent many nights of his life in the wilderness of Judea at night, where the canopy of stars must have been simply amazing and overwhelming. Looking up into such splendor at night is very humbling, as it makes you feel very small and very insignificant, which is exactly how David responds.

We know even more about the vast splendor of the heavens and have even more reason to feel humbled and insignificant. When we drove to Prince Edward Island, it was a long drive – about 18 hours or more over two days of driving. It's just over 900 miles each way. Google maps tells me we drove over 2,200 miles during our week-long vacation. Our kids can tell you that amounts to many, many hours spent in the van. And yet, that's less than 1/10th of distance around the earth, which is about 25,000 miles.

25,000 miles sure seems like a long way. But when you start talking about the heavens, you leave numbers like that behind very quickly. The moon is 238,900 miles away. The sun is almost 93 million miles away. Light from the sun takes 8 minutes to travel those 93 million miles, as light travels at 671 million miles per hour.

These kinds of numbers make our heads swim, so here's a helpful illustration of the vastness of space from Charles Swindoll in his book, *The Finishing Touch* –

A scientist once suggested another interesting analogy. To grasp the scene, imagine a perfectly smooth glass pavement on which the finest speck can be seen. Then shrink our sun from 865,000 miles in diameter to only two feet...and place the ball on the pavement to represent the sun.

- Step off 82 paces (about two feet per pace), and to represent proportionately the first planet, Mercury, put down a tiny mustard seed.
- Take 60 more steps and for Venus put down an ordinary BB.
- Mark 78 more steps...put down a pea representing the earth.
- Step off 108 paces from there, and for Mars, put down a pinhead.
- Sprinkle around some fine dust for the asteroids, then take 7,888 steps more and place an orange on the glass for Jupiter.
- After 934 more steps, put down a golf ball for Saturn.
- Now it gets really involved.
- Mark 2,086 steps more, and for Uranus...a marble.
- Another 2,322 steps from there you arrive at Neptune. Let a cherry represent Neptune.

This will take 2.5 miles, and we haven't even discussed Pluto!

We have a smooth glass surface 5 miles in diameter, yet just a tiny fraction of the heavens, excluding Pluto.

Now, guess how far we'd have to go on the same scale before we could put down another basketball to represent the nearest star.

We'd have to go 6,720 miles before we could arrive at that star.

This five-mile diameter represents our solar system, and the Milky Way Galaxy – our galaxy - is more than 160 million times bigger than our solar system. That means our entire solar system could be

removed from the Milky Way Galaxy and it would be just like taking a couple of grains of sand off a beach on the earth.

That's how small we are in the scope of the heavens, just within our galaxy!

And so, what is man that God should be mindful of us, that He should care for us?

C. Honorable Position, vv. 5-8

Then come the most marvelous words in this psalm – “Yet You have made him . . .”

⁵ *Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.*

⁶ *You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,*

⁷ *all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,*

⁸ *the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

It is not what we are in and of ourselves that makes us powerful or significant. That was the mistake the builders of the Tower of Babel made; they thought they could build a tower to reach to the heavens, making a name for themselves. God had to come down to see – to condescend – just to see the petty insignificance they had made.

We cannot make ourselves great, but God has already made us very significant. He has made us “a little lower than the heavenly beings.” The word translated “heavenly beings” here is Elohim, which can mean God or the angels; it's a bit vague. I think it's intentionally vague, which is why I prefer the ESV translation “the heavenly beings” because we're not sure exactly what heavenly beings are intended. Similarly, the word “a little” can mean either “a little bit” or “for a little while,” another intentionally vague expression.

I don't like the NASB's decision to render this “a little bit lower than God,” because we are much lower than God. And yet, in the permanent arrangement of things – how things will be after the glorious resurrection – we are told we will be lower only than God. I prefer the way Hebrews 2 picks up the verse and interprets it as “for a little while lower than the angels.”

Human beings are uniquely made in God's image and are given dominion by God over the works of His hands, over His creation order. This is a privileged status higher than that which is given to angels – although, for now, while we remain in these fallen and mortal bodies, we are lower than the angels in power, glory, and life.

God's creation may be filled with all sorts of splendid, magnificent creatures – some more beautiful, some stronger, some faster than human beings, but still human beings are unique. As God's image-bearers, we are uniquely equipped to know Him – for we are spiritual beings – and to govern creation – gifted not just with raw intelligence but with creativity, resourcefulness, the ability to cooperate and

communicate with one another in societies. All of this has allowed us to discover, invent, build, and create wonderful things – from beautiful music, timeless literature, and great works of art to skyscrapers, supersonic jets, and spaceships.

And yet. Do we really rule over creation?

a. Lost in Adam

Hebrews 2 picks up on Psalm 8 and it admits something real that we all know and experience:

*⁶ It has been testified somewhere,
 “What is man, that you are mindful of him,
 or the son of man, that you care for him?
⁷ You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
 you have crowned him with glory and honor,
⁸ putting everything in subjection under his feet.”*

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.

- Hebrews 2:6-8, ESV

In God’s original creation design, He left nothing outside of man’s control. And yet Adam, in his sinful rebellion against God, lost his status as vice-regent over the creation. He placed himself willingly under Satan’s dominion, which is why Satan is now called “the god of this world” or “the god of this age.”

In this fallen state, when everything is not in subjection to humanity, we deal with stubborn sin, sickness and weakness, and death. We also deal with a natural world that is hostile to us in many ways. This is not how God created His world or His image-bearers in the beginning.

b. Redeemed in Christ

Thankfully, Hebrews 2 goes on to give us the good news in verse 9 –

⁹ But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

- Hebrews 2:9, ESV

This is where we see the brilliance of God’s word, even in a little detail like the use of the term “son of man” in Psalm 8. On one level, David’s song just uses good Hebrew parallelism -

*what is man that you are mindful of him,
 and the son of man that you care for him? – v. 4*

And yet the language is very clearly and intentionally singular from the term “son of man” onward. This is ultimately pointing us to the Son of Man, Jesus Himself, who has been given the dominion Adam lost, having not only passed the test Adam failed but having paid the penalty Adam’s failure incurred.

Jesus, by the grace of God, stepped down from His heavenly glory and was made, for a little while, lower than the angels. He who commanded angel armies in heavenly glory, was ministered to by angels, who renewed His failing strength in the desert wilderness and the in Garden of Gethsemane. He came to restore the glory and honor that Adam had so foolishly and destructively surrendered in the Garden of Eden, even though doing so means horrific suffering. He suffered when tempted, to overcome the devil’s tricks and earn a perfect righteousness for us, and He suffered even more when He submitted Himself to be made sin for us, to endure the agony our sins deserve on the cross in our place.

Because of the glorious victory of Jesus Christ and His ascension into heaven, to the highest throne, at the right hand of God the Father, all those who belong to Him have been given guaranteed victory over the fallen state of our world and a future hope that, one day, in the Resurrection, we, too, will take our God-given place as vice-regents over all of creation.

D. Holy Praise, v. 9

Having pondered the majesty of God over creation, the glorious graciousness of God toward people in creation, David returns to the opening theme of his song of praise –

*O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

It’s almost as if the opening line is a proposition, the body is an exploration of that opening proposition, and then the closing line is the triumphant conclusion, affirming that opening proposition so powerfully.

The unchanging, self-sufficient God is our Lord and Master – in creation as well as in redemption – and His majesty is indeed on display in all the earth – not only in how things are now, but also in the promise of how they will be in the resurrection redemption of all things!