

Introduction

The psalm we are studying today is considered one of the outstanding psalms of the Psalter. Commentator Derek Kidner says of Psalm 8 that it is an unsurpassed example of what a hymn should be, celebrating as it does the glory and grace of God, rehearsing who he is and what he has done, and relating us our world to him; all with a masterly economy of words, and in a spirit of mingled joy and awe.”

Let’s look at this great psalm.

Text

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

You have set your glory above the heavens.

It is easy to follow along with David, as we have had the same experience. He is thinking of his nights looking up to the stars and the moon, and he feels the majesty and grandeur of God. We have experienced the same thing. We gaze into the night sky, it leaves us not only with a sense of beauty but also a sense of reverence. We watch the sun rising, or setting, watching the rays color the clouds, and we are compelled to believe there is something greater, someone greater, some other place of glory. In Psalm 19 David expresses with enthusiasm what takes place when looking up at the heavens: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.”

Isaiah calls on his readers to look up into the night sky:

Lift up your eyes on high and see:
who created these?
He who brings out their host by number,
calling them all by name;
by the greatness of his might
and because he is strong in power,
not one is missing. (40:26)

The heavens make us feel small and make God feel great to us. And that is the way it should be. The majesty of God is surely displayed by the glory of the heavens. And yet, that is not the theme of our psalm. David’s contemplation turns elsewhere. Indeed, the next verse delivers a sudden jolt.

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

How did we get from the heavens to babies? This verse puts the displaying of God's majesty along the full spectrum of creation. From the glorious mighty heavens to the smallest, most helpless creature, God's majesty is displayed. David looks up and David looks down. Wherever he looks he sees the handiwork of God. Who does not marvel at the miracle of a new baby?

So far, so good, but how does God establish strength through infants, and what do God's foes have to do with any of this? The 1984 edition of the NIV has "prepared praise" in place of "established strength." The reason for the difference lies in basing their translations on different manuscripts. The more recent NIV Bible does a nice job of merging the two. It reads, "Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies." The bottom line is that David opens his psalm praising how God displays his majesty from the highest to the lowest, from the mightiest to the least mighty, and his enemies—his detractors and deniers—cannot withstand such a display.

Let's turn back to the heavens, where it appears David puts the focus back on the glory displayed above him.

*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.*

You can see the turn of thought. Looking at the heavens naturally makes us feel small, and David feels it. But instead of contrasting how small man must be, David is led to contemplate the surprise of how great man is under this great big sky. What is man? He is but "a little lower than the heavenly beings." He is crowned with glory and honor. He has dominion over the rest of creation. Indeed, all other creatures—in the skies, on the earth, and even under the seas—are under him. David is amazed that seemingly small man is so magnificent.

But why is man so high on the scale of creation? Because the God who alone is Creator and who has sovereign power over all that exists, over all the heavens—that God cares about him. It is God who has made him what he is, God who does the crowning with glory and honor. It is God who gives to man dominion. David looks up at the far distances of the heavens and is struck with the God who nevertheless is not far away and whose thoughts for him and his fellow human beings are not distant.

As David looks at the glory and honor God has granted to man through giving him dominion over his fellow creatures, so he concludes with the same utterance that opened the psalm.

*⁹ O LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

How is God's majesty displayed? By the glorious heavens? Yes. But also through glorious man as he exercises his rule.

Lessons

Let us consider lessons from this psalm.

1. Glory of Man's Rule

Perhaps David wrote this psalm while still a shepherd. He is looking up into the starry sky and then down upon the sheep under his care, the first creature he mentions as having dominion over. Perhaps looking at the sheep leads to his reflection of man as ruler. Even so, he is articulating the original mandate given to man at the time of creation.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."
(Genesis 1:26–)

And man has exercised such rule. Even if one is quick to point out the harm of man's rule, they are nevertheless acknowledging that man does rule nature's creatures. For that matter, he has ruled much of nature itself. He has engineered canals and lakes. He has removed hills and planted hills. He has cut through mountains and blocked up waters. He has built bridges to cross rivers and invented planes to pass over mountains and seas. The list can go on of discoveries and inventions that have allowed man to exercise dominion over the earth.

That was in God's mandate for man. Has man abused that mandate? Yes. But the point of the psalm is that it is legitimate to praise the accomplishment of man—of men and women. David, as a shepherd, thinks naturally of the ways that man has been able to domesticate animals. Perhaps if he was writing in our day, he would point to man's engineering mastery. The point is that it is fine and good to look at magnificent man-built structures and then be awed by the majesty of God displayed by the ability given to man.

Likewise, one can look at achievements in all sciences and in the arts, indeed in the sheer ability of the human mind and hands. The civilizations that have arisen, the systems of justice, the beauty of word and of painting, the incredible technology displayed in the art world—such things may and ought to lead us to the majesty of God, glorifying him for the marvelous ability given to mankind.

There are two ways of glorying in the achievements of man. One gives the glory solely to man in opposition against God. This is exemplified in Ayn Rand's book *The Fountainhead*. Picture the romantic setting of a rich man courting a woman on his yacht under the night sky.

“You've never felt how small you were when looking at the ocean.”

He laughed. "Never. Nor looking at the planets. Nor at mountain peaks. Nor at the Grand Canyon. Why should I? When I look at the ocean, I feel the greatness of man. I think of man's magnificent capacity that created this ship to conquer all that senseless space. When I look at mountain peaks, I think of tunnels and dynamite. When I look at the planets, I think of airplanes.

Romantic, to be sure. Even more so, it displays the arrogance of man.

But then, the other way of glorying in the achievements of man gives all the glory to God. Listen to John Calvin.

Shall we deny the possession of intellect to those who drew up rules for discourse, and taught us to speak in accordance with reason? Shall we say that those who, by the cultivation of the medical art, expended their industry in our behalf were only raving? What shall we say of the mathematical sciences? Shall we deem them to be the dreams of madmen?

Nay, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without the highest admiration; an admiration which their excellence will not allow us to withhold. But shall we deem anything to be noble and praiseworthy, without tracing it to the hand of God?

And he adds, “In despising the gifts, we insult the Giver.”

Marvel at the accomplishments of man. But see in those accomplishments the majesty of God who gave man the mandate and the ability to exercise dominion.

2. Glory of Children

There is a lesson in verse 2. It is a lesson that Jesus brings out.

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, 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 21:15–16

Jesus’ point is that praise of God has to happen, in this case praise to himself. If the religious leaders, who are Jesus’ enemies, will not give it, then the children will. If the powerful will not give it, then the small will.

And we do see this as natural in children. No infant, as she grows in consciousness, has to be convinced that there is a God. Nor does she have to be persuaded that God is worthy to be praised. We might come into this world as sinners, but we nevertheless come in stamped with the image of God and with the natural disposition to believe we have a Creator. And even in this age of skepticism—an age that has been going on three or more centuries—even with the best efforts of aggressive atheist promoters, no real progress has been made in ridding man of the belief in the divine. There simply is too much wonder in the world, including the wonder of the achievements of man, that is displaying the majesty of God.

And this wonder, this praising of God is led by the children of the world.

3. Glory of the Son of Man

There is the glory of man’s rule that displays the majesty of God. There is glory in the praise of children for God. The writer of Hebrews takes us to another level in his handling of verses 4–6. The context is that the writer is impressing upon his readers the greatness of Jesus.

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere,

“What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?

You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned him with glory and honor,
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. 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. Heb. 2:5–9

The writer, then, applies the psalm to Jesus. As Jesus used the term of himself, he is the Son of Man who has come. What the writer is doing is not out of place. It is common in the New Testament to apply psalms specifically to Jesus. He is saying that Jesus, during the time of his incarnation on earth, was, in a sense, made lower than the angels. However, he was crowned with glory and honor because of his obedience to his Father through suffering even unto death. The result is that now all things in creation have been placed under his dominion. Everything is in subjection under his feet.

The problem for us is that we don't see that subjection. The world seems to be doing a good job at rebelling. Satan seems to be quite active. That is true, and it is not a mere matter of appearance. Though Jesus reigns as king over his dominion, there are many rebels. But 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 speaks of how, at Jesus' return, he will subject all individuals and elements to his rule and then place it all at the feet of his Father. The world that man messed up with his rule will then be restored to its full glory. And so, the glory of Jesus, the Son of Man, the Son of God displays the majesty of God through his dominion.

4. The Glory of Christ's Redemption

There is one more consideration, which I will make by linking Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2. What is man that the Son of God would taste death for him? What is the son of man that God shows how much he cares by sending his Son to suffer death on man's behalf?

In Psalm 8, David meditates upon God's common grace—how God gives to all mankind the role and gifts of ruler. The writer of Hebrews moves us to special grace, to saving grace—how God by grace saved us through the death of his Son. Truly we are led to ask, who are we that the God of majesty would show such love?

Who were we when God sent his Son? We were sinners who had marred the image of God that was to be displayed in us. We were enemies—God's foes who had rebelled against him and refused to be subjected to him. Creation displays the marks of our failure and rebellion—the wars, the scars of the earth, the enmity between men, the fear of our fellow creatures when faced by us. Blaise Pascal sums up the contradictions of man:

What kind of freak is man! What a novelty he is, how absurd he is, how chaotic and what a mass of contradictions, and yet what a prodigy! He is judge of all things, yet a feeble worm. He is repository of truth, and yet sinks into such doubt and error. He is the glory and the scum of the universe!

For such the true Son of Man, Son of God made himself lower than his created angels. Indeed, he made himself lower than ourselves, for he became our servant, serving us at the cross itself. Such is the majesty of God.

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” In the glorious display of the heavens, his majesty is seen. In the praise of children his majesty is proclaimed. In the rule and giftedness of man his majesty is displayed. In the saving work of his beloved Son Jesus Christ, the majesty of his love is manifested to us.