

HIS MAJESTY AND OUR DIGNITY

Psalm 8

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Psalm 8:1-9 (NIV)

“O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

I’ve titled this psalm as a psalm of “His Majesty and Our Dignity.” Those are the twin themes of the psalm.

This is a psalm, which I would call a psalm of praise with content. Paul tells us that we should worship the Lord with our spirit. There is a place in worship where we can simply “park our mind” and simply be in a reflective and open and meditative stance toward God. What greatly concerns me in the contemporary church what people are doing to the hymnal and psalms—they’re abandoning them. In church after church people never crack the hymns any more. It’s as if we’re saying that hundreds and hundreds of years of the Holy Spirit’s work is meaningless to us. We divorce ourselves from the past and quit singing the great theology, which tells us who God is and who we are.

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Learn to love the hymns. The hymns are built on the pattern we have in the psalms are songs that require us to stretch. Psalm 8 is not a simple two or three words or a phrase. It is loaded with depth and brings us into an understanding of the majesty of God and our dignity as people. What a hymn is supposed to do and what a psalm of praise is supposed to do is rehearse who God is and what He has done. And relate that to us and to our world. All with a masterful economy of words and in a spirit of mingled joy and awe. I like that definition of a hymn. To tell us who God is and who we are in Him.

The subscription on the title of the psalm is for the director of music meaning that this psalm again was such perhaps and most likely in corporate worship. It has as its basic idea a psalm sung with a guitar-like instrument accompaniment.

The subscription also identifies it as a psalm of David. All the psalms so far with the exception of Psalm 1 have been ascribed to David. We are not told when David wrote this psalm. But perhaps he wrote it when he was young. My guess would be that anyone who had years of experience of being a shepherd and being alone under the Palestinian night sky has looked up into the heavens and had moments of absolute adoration and contemplation of God.

One of the things we need to do in our personal worship is from time to time get in the great outdoors and contemplate the majesty and the glory of God from the creation which is apparent from this psalm.

The psalm has been called “the gospel of the stars” or “the psalm of the astronomer.” The psalm itself divides into five stanzas and the NIV has it that way. The stanzas being of uneven length.

I. The first stanza is an opening statement of praise, the first half of verse 1.

Then there is response to God’s majesty the second half of verse 1 and all of verse 2. Then verses 3 and 4 are wonder over our own worth. Then verses 5–8 our place in God and His universe.

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Then in verse 9 a closing refrain of praise: “O LORD our LORD how majestic is Your name in all the earth.” Notice that this is a statement to God. It is addressed to God because none but God can fully know His own glory. Therefore the psalmist speaking directly to Him. The psalmist says “O LORD” all capitalized which means he is using the covenant name Yahweh or Jehovah. It’s not just the “God up there” but then is identified our Lord. This great God who created all those stars and the heavens and the earth is uniquely and personally related to us so that when we look at the night sky or look at creation we do not do so feeling that there is an unknown force in the universe which is out there but we don’t know what it is. Unfortunately there are so many people in this world that are lost without God may reckon there’s a God out there but have no ability to say “our God.” The unique delight of knowing a God as He is revealed to us in the Scriptures and in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ is that we can say our Lord. He is not a private God either. He is not a tribal god. He is not a family God. He is the God of all the earth. “How majestic is Your name in all the earth” (8:1).

“Majestic” or “excellent” carries the idea of surpassing. How surpassing, how absolutely beyond description or value or magnificence is Your name. So we come many times in places in Scripture where God is described in terms of this excellence as dwelling in such a condition that human words can never adequately describe all the glory that is related to Him. It’d be like trying to describe the sunset to someone who had been totally blind from the day they were born. How can you describe the glory of God?

Isaiah puts it this way, that He dwells in a high lofty place inhabiting eternity. James 1:17 describes him as “The Father of lights with whom there is no variableness or shadow of turning.” Different kinds of ways both in Scripture and hymns of responding to the God whose excellence surpasses our imagination and our linguistic ability.

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II. The second stanza of this psalm is our response to God's majesty.

“You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger” (8:1–2, NIV).

This first phrase “You have set your glory above the heavens” is a somewhat difficult phrase in the Hebrew to translate. There is more than one possibility. The older translations may have it more correct when they say “Thou whose glory is chanted above the heavens.” That is, as the psalmist David looks at the night sky he is aware that there is praise that is happening to God. His glory is either above the heavens or is being sung or chanted above the heavens. In fact the majesty of God is bringing forth a response on three levels. In the last half of verse 1 and all of 2, the three levels of the response to the majesty of God. First in the heavens. Second, in the nursery. Third, among His enemies. These are they who in various ways relate to the majesty of God.

The heavens chant His glory. The nursery, that is the children and the infants, are also praising Him. This is a very important phrase that seems so mystical and non-understandable when we first encounter it in the psalm. But the New Testament fleshes it out. Jesus really fleshes out the meaning of that phrase. God is being praised in the heavens and He's being praised in the nursery. But His enemies have their teeth set against Him and they're not praising Him. Those are the three responses to the awe and the wonder of God.

In order to understand what the psalmist means by “from the lips of children and infants You have ordained praise” we need to look at how the New Testament treats this. This is a very important theme in the life of Jesus.

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Jesus says, “Unless you become as a child you cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:15).

He’s not saying you must become childish. He’s saying you must become childlike. There’s a simple aspect of faith and adoration and trust that is involved.

When a child, a normal 5 or 6 year old, is taken to a tremendous site like the Grand Canyon, their attitude of seeing it for the first time is hopefully going to be one of being stunned. Just in awe of how great that place is. You know how curious and awestruck children can be even looking at the beauty of a flower petal or something wonderful. Their eyes will light up. Another person may have lost their sense of awe.

There are those who look at God with a fresh childlike simplicity and see things as they really are. If you look at the universe as it really is you stand back in awe and say what an incredible power has brought this into being. You also look at the universe and say God brought this into being. This couldn’t have just resulted from an explosion. What the psalmist is saying is that people who really have their head in the right place stand in awe and acknowledge a Creator and the greatness of a Creator. The people who don’t do that have lost their childlike wonder and simplicity and therefore have become God’s enemies, set against Him and denying His wonder. Paul picks up this theme in Romans 1 where he talks about the world alien from God that doesn’t know God any longer are the people who have suppressed the knowledge of God that is available in the creation. Therefore Paul says God abandoned them.

At issue here in the psalmist point of view is if you want to look where the glory of God is being celebrated on earth you’ll find it in the lives of those who adopt a childlike response to the universe God has created. They can look up in the night sky, see the stars as shining like diamonds, drop their mouth open and say, “What a great God has brought this into being!” and

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people who don't do that, who invent ways around God are God's enemies. God's glory is being chanted in the heavens and sung in the nursery.

Jesus picks this theme up in the Gospels on several occasions. Once, "Unless you become as a child you cannot have the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:15). He's talking about this childlike response. Not childish but childlike. Our relationship with Him begins with simple trust and adoration and acceptance.

Jesus was saying you must come to Me as a child. Don't wait until you know all about Me because you'll never know all about Me. You must begin with a relationship with Me. That's the dynamic of being a Christian. We don't become a Christian by degrees. We become a Christian all at once. It's like being born. That's why Jesus said, "You must be born again." Because it's all at once. You either are or you are not. There's no such thing as being slightly pregnant.

You're either pregnant or you're not. There's no such thing as being slightly a Christian. You're either a child of God or you're not. It all begins with this relational dimension. Then our knowledge of God begins to grow and we learn more about God. But that's built on the core of knowing God. People teach university courses in religion who have never established a personal relationship with God who are unlike those who are chanting the glory of God who are in the nursery.

There are two times in the Gospels Jesus utters a prayer and says, "Father, I thank You have revealed this to babes but You have kept this from the wise and the learned" (Matthew 11:25; Luke 10:21). The prayer has almost offended me because I didn't understand it. What He is reflecting is the theology of Psalm 8 that God's glory is known by those who come to Him with a childlike response who can look with awe at His miracles. Whereas the Pharisees look at His

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miracles, even the resurrection of Lazarus, and invent all kinds of excuses as to why He should not be believed in.

This whole matter of the children singing His praises comes to a head in Matthew 21 where Jesus in the last week of His life is in the temple and He's healed people in the temple and the children are coming singing Hosanna, Hosanna! And the enemies of Jesus come and hush the children. And Jesus says, "Have you never read the Scripture that says out of the mouths of babes or children I have perfected or ordained praise?" What Jesus is doing is throwing Psalm 8 at them saying, "Do you understand this psalm?"

The issue in Psalm 8 is creation. The issue with Jesus in His last week is redemption. In creation God's enemies did not know Him for they were not bowing in submission. They were debating God rather than worshipping God. Now in the last week of Christ's life the same phenomena was going on. This time not in regard to creation but in regard to redemption. Instead of worshipping the Lord who had manifested Himself as Savior and Messiah and Redeemer and King they were debating Him. And Jesus says there it is all over again.

Little children utterly and completely surrender to the impression produced by things which are great and glorious. And do so in an unaffected manner. Palm Sunday therefore shows us the free confession of love and trust that becomes a devastating answer to the accuser and his arsenal of doubt and slander.

There's a difference I said of being childlike and childish. But I think in that case He was being childlike, looking in wonder. As opposed to being childish simply believing anything anybody tells you.

That's the problem again in Jesus' ministry. You ask how can people have seen the miracles and walk away and not believe it. Not had their mouth opened in astonishment at what He had done.

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Just the way people can ignore God's great acts today. We forget the underlying childlike joy and wonder that's a part of being a Christian. "Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have ordained praise" (8:2). It is those who take this response in simple wonderment to what Christ has done that become the rebuke to God's enemies; that is, those who are sitting on the sidelines wishing God would prove Himself.

That helps me understand too why God uses some ministries we might identify as childish or childlike. Maybe God is pleased to use the weak things of the world to confound the wise.

David is saying in Psalm 8 that unbiased and uncorrupted minds recognize God without difficulty from the creation. Do I worship God with childlike wonder? Or am I too sophisticated to be rhapsodic over God and His creation? Our response to God's majesty. From the lips of children and infants. That is not meant to be chronological. It's an attitude of heart. We become a child and an infant when we respond to God with that wonder and praise from our heart.

III. We come to the third stanza.

First is the opening statement of praise. Then our response to God's majesty. Then verses 3–4 our wonder over our own worth. "When I see the heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You've set in place, what is man that You are mindful of him and the son of man that You care for him?"

Just a comment. Hebrew poetry is filled with what is called parallelisms. A parallelism is where you say something twice but rephrase it. So the later part of verse 4 is simply the rephrasing of the first phrase. The first phrase "What is man that you are mindful of him?" The parallelism says "the son of man that you care for him." Same thing but just use different words. That's repetition for emphatic emphasis. David looks at the creation and does not see the creation *as*

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God, like pantheists. Nor does he see the creation independent of God but he sees the creation as a glass or mirror reflecting the glory of God.

What is man? We might expect a negative answer. Man is nothing. The creation is so big, man is nothing. There is no note of pessimism as David asks this question in verse 4. There is only the astonishment. “You are mindful of him. And You care for him.” The two themes. God knows and God loves. “You are mindful and You care.” That’s even more staggering than simply what is man?

If God created the universe by the work of His fingers what is that saying about the greatness of the God who stands behind it? In contrast to the heavens, which seem so vast by human perception it is mankind who is tiny. Yet the heavens, the moon and the stars, are not meant to promote an idea that God is remote. Rather that God has an eye for detail and He has planned no meaningless or empty universe. For He created us alone in the universe to ask the question, what are we? An animal is incapable of asking, What am I. Who am I? Man alone can ask it. We are of worth in asking the question. Immediately the psalmist David is saying “God, You’re mindful of us and You care for us.” Our wonder over our own worth to God.

David didn’t know Jesus’ language. That Jesus would add such dimension to this by saying God not only knows us but knows when a sparrow falls to the ground. Knows the hairs on our head. He is aware of us. He knows every intimate detail about us.

We have worth to God even if we don’t feel we have worth to ourselves or even if other people don’t communicate to us that we’re worthwhile to them. We are of worth to God. If we can find our roots in that we’ll always be secure no matter what happens to us. Our identity is in God more than anybody else.

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IV. Then the fourth stanza of this psalm talks about our place in God and His universe.

That's verses 5–8.

The two key words that describe our place in God's universe are the words "lower" and "ruler."

A. We are a little lower than the heavenly beings. If you compare translation to translation you'll find that this gets translated different ways. Some translations have it "You made him a little lower than the angels." Others, "You made him a little lower than heavenly beings." Some "You made him a little lower than God." The reason for the difference is the Hebrew word is the word *Elohim*. Which is a common generic name for God in the Old Testament. Not the covenant name but the generic name. *Elohim* is interesting. It's like "In the beginning *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth." Hebrew is a very precise language. When a singular noun is used it takes a singular verb. But *Elohim* is a plural noun but in Genesis 1:1 it takes a verb in the singular. Which says to us that Moses in writing Genesis 1:1 wanted us to understand that *Elohim* is a plural noun referring to the name of God which indicates room for the development of the doctrine of the trinity. There is a dimension to God more than the simple singularity. There is a dimension in God's being which allows for a plural noun of intensification. Yet Moses shows God is one because he picks a singular verb and you don't find plural nouns with singular verbs. Sometimes *Elohim* could be used in lowercase and it stand for rulers or judges. It's used a couple times that way in the Psalms; even on an occasion or two it's used to refer to the angels. That's why the ambiguity in translations.

It can mean that man is created lower than angels. If he's created lower than angels then it simply means not that man is less than angels but that he is here rather than up there. Because man in a theological sense is higher than angels because man has opportunity to voluntarily respond to God. Angels were not ever created in the image or likeness of God. Man—male and

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female—is created in the image and likeness of God. So theologically speaking man is not lower than angels. Only in time and space.

If however the passage can also be read, “You have made him lower than God.” Meaning only God stands above man and all creation. Either way from both the Old and New Testament is an acceptable way of looking at Psalm 8:5.

Man only appears insignificant. When you’re looking at the stars, at yourself you say I’m so small! The psalmist after reflecting on that wonder says not at all. “For You’re really giving him high place in the creation. He’s lower than You and lower than angels but he’s ruler over all living creatures” (8:6–8). God made man in His image and gave him power to rule and have dominion.

B. All has been placed under him. The New Testament does a fascinating thing with this statement. “You have made him ruler over the works of your hands and put everything under his feet” (8:6) because in the New Testament that is more than a reference to man’s place in creation. That becomes a reference to Christ’s place in the new creation as the second Adam where because of Christ’s work on earth everything has been put under Christ. There are three key New Testament passages. 1 Corinthians 15:24–28. Paul is saying that God has appointed Jesus Christ to be the fulfillment of Psalm 8:6. Everything is going to be under Him. He will never be over God. He will always be subject to God. There is one thing that is not yet under Him in the sense of final exercise and dominion. That’s death. He ruled over death in His resurrection but He has not yet ruled over death on behalf of all of us, for the last thing to be destroyed is death. But He will be shown to have dominion over all. All is put under His feet. Paul says in Ephesians 1:22–23, “God placed everything under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church which is his body.” And Hebrews 2:5–9 says, “It is not to

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angels that He has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified: ‘What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet.’ In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (NIV).

He’s the one to fulfill this although we do not yet see it all having come to pass. Our ecological problems and environmental problems tell us we’ve lost absolute control over created order because with Adam death began to rule but in Christ we have a last Adam who is going to put everything under His feet and the creation will be totally subject to Him.

V. So there comes a closing refrain of praise in the psalm.

“O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!” (8:9, NIV). David does not close the psalm by contemplating man’s dominion over the earth. But his thoughts once more turn to God. Or as Paul says, “Let him who boasts boast of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31).

We’ve taken Psalm 8 so many times as a quotation to refer to our insignificance. We have not emphasized the word “mindful” and the fact that God cares. Nor have we gone on to verses 5, 6, 7, 8 which tell us that we are very strategic and vital to God. This psalm will keep us in dignity and we’ll celebrate God’s majesty.