

Summer in the Psalms: What Is Man?

Psalm 8

6/6/21

There's a scene in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* in which Alice is staring silently at a hookah-smoking caterpillar. The grub finally breaks the standoff asking, *Who are you?* Alice hems & haws until the caterpillar asks again, this time more pointedly: *You! ... Who are you?* That's an excellent question, one which we've probably all asked ourselves. David does the same this morning by asking, **what is man?** Open your Bibles to Ps 8. This summer we won't be going through every psalm; the summer isn't that long. But we'll be looking at some of the favorites. Ps 8 is one of a few psalms in Book One (3-41) that doesn't express distress on the part of God's people. Instead, it celebrates the great work of God.¹ The psalmist uses this celebration of the glory & power of God as a way to build confidence in God Himself. John Piper writes,

People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure. There are far more popular prescriptions on the market, but the benefit of any other remedy is brief & shallow... it will not touch the hidden cry of the soul...²

Ps 8

1. Theme This psalm begins & ends with the same phrase: **O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth** (1, 9). That's the theme of the psalm & everything in-between is focused on that. **O LORD**, in all caps is the Hebrew, *Yahweh*. It's God's covenant name as the eternal **I Am** (Ex 3:14). It points to His eternal self-existence. The name after it, **our Lord** (lower case), is the word *Adonai*, emphasizing God's sovereign majesty & mastery over us. Although God is eternal & totally separate from His creation, He has graciously entered into a covenant relationship with His people as their sovereign Lord. A couple more definitions: The word **majestic** emphasizes royalty, nobility, highness, loftiness, & power. **Your name** means all that God is, the perfections of His attributes & the mightiness of His deeds. In other words, it refers to who He is & what He's done. David also says God's majesty is seen **in all the earth & above the heavens**. It's similar to what Paul says when he accuses the mankind for suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. He explains, **For since the**

¹ W. Robert Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms*, p 58

² John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, p 13

creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power & divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse (Rom 1:20).

When we consider God's majesty as seen **in all the earth**, we're amazed. There's enough evidence for the Creator in the human body alone to convince anyone with an open mind that we aren't the product of random chance. The human brain has 86 billion³ neurons interacting in coordination to allow us to function as we do. Your eyes have about 125 million receptor cells in each retina, which also contains 4 other layers of nerve cells.⁴ The system makes billions of calculations per second, traveling through your optic nerve to the brain, which has more than a dozen separate vision centers to process it. Are you getting the idea the human body is very complicated? Your heart beats an average of 75x/minute, 35 million times per year, or 2.5 billion times in 70 years. It pumps about 2,000 gallons of blood per day.⁵ Get the idea? There's no way this all just happened; it was designed by God.

David also considers God's splendor **above the heavens**. He had no telescope, just his own eyes, & that was enough. What would he have thought if he knew what we know? The vastness of the universe & the coordination of it all is astounding. If you could travel at the speed of light, 186,000 miles/second, it would take you 8 minutes to get to the sun. To travel across the Milky Way would take 200,000 years.⁶ The Milky Way belongs to a group of some 20 galaxies known as the Local Group. The Local Group belongs to the Virgo Supercluster which would take 100 million years to cross. To cross the entire universe as we know it would take you 46.5 billion light years.⁷ David's praise of his Lord recognizes a glory that transcends the heavens & the earth. But His glory isn't confined to only that arena of creation. He is the eternal God & His glory is infinite.

2. God's Rule 2

David knows that in spite of all of the evidence of God's glory in His creation, there are still adversaries who oppose Him. How does God deal with such enemies? It may surprise us that vs 2

³ www.nature.com/scitable/blog/brain-metrics/are_there_really_as_many/

⁴ nba.uth.tmc.edu/neuroscience/m/s2/chapter14.html

⁵ www.hoag.org/specialties-services/heart-vascular/conditions/heart-basics/

⁶ www.space.com/41047-milky-way-galaxy-size-bigger-than-thought.html

⁷ Wikipedia.org

talks about such a small thing as an infant's mouth. Of all the things David could have chosen to highlight how God establishes strength & proves His majestic name, why a baby? After all, Ps 76:4 says God is **resplendent, more majestic than the mountains...** Ps 29 says, **the voice of the LORD is upon the waters; The God of glory thunders... The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars... hews out flames... shakes the wilderness... strips the forests bare; & in His temple everything says, "Glory!"** (3, 5, 7-9). That's majesty: tree-splitting, flame-throwing, earth-shaking strength. It doesn't seem like lips of a newborn quite match the language of vs 1. So what's up with the mouths of **infants & nursing babes**? John Calvin said the process of conception & birth displays God's splendor so clearly that even a nursing infant brings down the fury of God's enemies.⁸ While this is true, it doesn't seem to be David's point. The message of Ps 8 has an intentional contrast, the bigness of the heavens versus the smallness of humans. The infinite universe **in all the earth & above the heavens** in vs 1 is a contrast to infants in vs 2. So what does it mean? The LXX translates the word **strength** as **praise**. So it could be that God's **strength** as seen in creating children leads to His praise. The Lord overcomes His enemies by the marvel of children & the praise they sing in their simple faith. Maybe David thinks back to God's enemies in Egypt & Pharaoh's planned murder of all the male babies. Out of the mouth of a babe named Moses, as a nursing infant floating in the Nile, came cries that got the attention of the daughter of Pharaoh. God ordained through the lips of Moses to establish His strength in the Exodus. Or in NT days, Paul says God's power is perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Maybe David was thinking back to when he faced Goliath & was mocked as a boy. But out of that mouth came strength when he said: **I come to you in the name of the Lord... I will strike you down & remove your head...** (1 Sam 17:45-46). One scholar sums up:

What comes out of the mouths of children... could be expressions of a child's faith... praise... or even cries for help... words by a child who appears to be insignificant will be attended to by God in His plan to establish strength to silence the wicked... He does not need to use powerful people or eloquent speakers.⁹

⁸ Calvin's Commentaries on Psalms, p 98

⁹ Ross, p 293

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise & God chose what is weak to disgrace the strong (1 Cor 1:27-29). God chose what is low & despised in the world to save us, His Son, who came as a baby to live & die for us. David continues in **vs 3**.

This moves from the Lord's majesty on earth to His majesty **above the heavens**. David looked up into the vastness of the night sky & saw the moon & the stars, the work of God's fingers. John Piper writes:

*Even within our Milky Way there are stars so great as to defy description, like Eta Carinae, which is five million times brighter than our sun. Sometimes people stumble over this vastness in relation to the apparent insignificance of man. It does seem to make us infinitesimally small. But the meaning of this magnitude is not mainly about us. It's about God. **The heavens declare the glory of God,** (Ps 19) ... untracked, unimaginable stretches of the created universe are a parable about the **inexhaustible riches of His glory** (Rom 9:23)....*

*The healing of the soul begins by restoring the glory of God to its flaming, all-attracting place at the center. We are all starved for the glory of God, not self. No one goes to the Grand Canyon to increase self-esteem. Why do we go? Because there is greater healing for the soul in beholding splendor than there is in beholding self. Indeed, what could be more ludicrous in a vast & glorious universe like this than a human being, on the speck called earth, standing in front of a mirror trying to find significance in his own self-image?... Into the darkness of petty self-preoccupation has shone **the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God** (2 Cor 4:4). *The Christian gospel is about the glory of Christ, not about me. & when it is—in some measure—about me, it is not about my being made much of by God, but about God mercifully enabling me to enjoy making much of Him forever.*¹⁰*

As we contemplate the night sky, the only think you can say is, **What is man?** It all seems huge to us but to God it's no big deal. It's the work of His finger. It's like finger-paint, sprinkling stars across the endless tapestry of majesty. *I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers.* That's what Isaiah 40 commands of us. **Lift up your eyes on high & see who has created these stars, The One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; Because of the greatness of His might & the strength of His power, Not one of them is missing** (26). David says the heavens are the works of God's fingers. Isaiah says they're like the measure of the span of His fingers. **Who has measured off the heavens with his fingers?** (12 NIV). Ps 8 talks about how the little ones show God's strength, then talks about His finger-work in the heavens. Isaiah 40 says **the LORD God will come with might** (strength)... **Like a shepherd He will tend His flock...** He's **measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, & marked off the heavens by the span** (10-12). It's the same dynamic: His strength is seen

¹⁰ John Piper, *Seeing & Savoring Jesus Christ*, pp 13-16

in little infants & in the huge universe. Think of how massive the universe is & yet it's smaller than God's hand! God is bigger than & beyond the universe, but His strength starts with little ones. Ps 8:2 starts with little infants & then vs 3 zooms out & expands the picture to remind us how small human life is compared to His Majesty. I like how one writer paints the picture of what God painted for us to see:

Look up & see the vast sky spread above you like diamonds on black velvet. The Milky Way glows like a wide ribbon across the heavens. Our galaxy looks like a cloud, but this glow is actually the light of 200-400 billion stars turning like a giant some 100 light years across...best estimate is there are roughly 2 trillion¹¹ galaxies gathered in clusters & strung like filaments across space. Now the Hubble Space Telescope gives us a front row seat to see the wonders of the Tarantula Nebula, the Magellanic Clouds or the collision of a comet with Jupiter. All this is the work of His fingers!¹²

Years ago, there was an explorer, William Beebe, who was a good friend of President Theodore Roosevelt. Often when he visited the President, the 2 would go out at night to see who could 1st locate the Andromeda galaxy. Then, as they gazed at the tiny smudge of distant starlight, one of them would recite, *That is the spiral galaxy of Andromeda. It's as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It's 750,000 light years away. It consists of 100 billion suns, each larger than our sun.* Then Roosevelt would grin & say, *Now I think we are small enough! Let's go to bed.*¹³

It's a humbling & healthy thing to think about our smallness. This celebration of the surpassing power & greatness of God leads naturally to the question, if the moon & stars are small things in His fingers, what is man in God's sight? Why would God even give man any thought?

3. Man's Unworthiness 4

The Hebrew word for **man** in vs 4 emphasizes our mortality, frailty, & weakness in keeping with the context of vs 2. The 2nd phrase, **son of man** is *adam*, which reminds us of Adam, his earthly nature & origin. Other translations have, *of what importance is the human race, that you should notice or pay attention to? Or, What are mere mortals that you should think about them?*¹⁴

Compared to the vastness of the universe, what is man that God thinks of us, much less that He cares for us? But man is the crown of creation. God gave man **glory & majesty** (5). Gen 1 shows that man is the culmination of God's creative work & that man alone has the amazing title of the image bearer of God. As man is at the center of this psalm (4-5), so he is the center of God's

¹¹ www.skyandtelescope.org/astronomy-resources/how-many-galaxies/

¹² James Johnston, *Psalms: Rejoice the Lord is King*, Vol 1, p 99

¹³ Paul Tan, *7,700 Illustrations*, #2213

¹⁴ NET, NLT

creation. The importance of man to God in creation sets the stage for God's remarkable work to redeem man after the fall. He cares for us. How small we are in this vast universe? How astonishing that the God of all this, the God who made it & orders it, should think of us & care for us!¹⁵

4. Man's Worth 5

Not only does God think of us & care for us (4), He's also crowned us with **glory & majesty** (5). He's given humans, mere specks in this vast universe, a significance & honor above everything else He's created. David makes this point in 2 ways. 1st, he uses the word **glory**, which he 1st used of God & now uses of man. Vs 1 says, *You have displayed Your splendor above the heavens*. This is a glory that surpasses even the great & overwhelming glory of the heavens themselves. Now here he says, speaking of mankind, **You** crowned **him with glory & majesty**. This is a way of identifying man with God & of saying man has been made in God's image, reflecting God's glory in a way other parts of the creation do not. The 2nd way David emphasizes man's significance is by speaking of his role as *ruler* over creation. **Rule** is something normally ascribed to God. He is the **who is the blessed & only Sovereign, the King of kings & Lord of lords**, according to Paul (1 Tim 6:15). Ps 8 says that God shares this rule with man, making him ruler over creation. After God created the heavens & earth, moon, & stars, God created Adam, man, in His own image & told him to have children & exercise dominion over the beasts of the earth, the birds of the heaven, & the fish of the sea (Gen 1). Evolution says we're made a bit higher than animals, but David says God made us a little lower than God, to reflect the wonder that we're created in His image.

David probably intended the Hebrew *Elohim* to refer to God, not to the angels (although on occasion it can mean *angels* or *gods*). David is referring to where God created man in His image & likeness. In the same context, God assigned man the task of ruling over the rest of creation. But the LXX translators took the rarer meaning & translated that we were created a little lower than the angels. The author of Hebrews followed that translation (Heb 2:7) because he wanted to make the point that Jesus, for a short while, had been made lower than the angels, so that through His

¹⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1–41: An Expository Commentary*, p 69

death He could accomplish our salvation. While these differences in translation are interesting, they don't really affect the message, which is that man is the crown of God's creation, & that, as God's image bearer, man has been given dominion on earth.

5. Man's Rule 6-8

Sin entered this domain (Gen 3). Since then, man has accomplished some remarkable things in gaining dominion over creation. & yet, all of these accomplishments are tainted by sin. Do we rule over the creation as God intended? Not even close. A man may ride a bull for 8 seconds in a rodeo, but that's not exactly dominion over it. The news headlines of a bear killing a guide in Yellowstone¹⁶ or more than 500 people a year being killed by hippos¹⁷ reminds us this world & mankind aren't all we were created to be, at least not yet. We can't help but think of how far man has fallen in sin & rebellion against God. The sinfulness of man leads us on to reflect on the salvation of man through Christ, the true Man & true image of God. This psalm, like all psalms, draws our minds to Christ. Christ is the image of God since He is God come in the flesh. But He's also the image of God as the Man who truly fulfilled what mankind was created to be. The holy rule that man should have exercised is given to Jesus **to unite all things in Him, things in heaven & things on earth** (Eph 1:10; ESV). In this sense, Jesus is the firstborn of creation (Col 1:15). Turn to Heb 2. We need to understand Ps 8 isn't just a picture of the glory of creation & the rule of man. No, it's a picture of the glory of Christ who restores what was lost in man's sin. It's a prophecy of Jesus & His dominion to come. As Heb 2:5-9 says:

God did not subject to angels the world to come, concerning which we are speaking. But one has testified somewhere, saying, *What is man, that You remember him? Or the son of man, that You are concerned about him? You have made him for a little while lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory & honor, & have appointed him over the works of Your hands; You have put all things in subjection under his feet.* For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory & honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.

This is the gospel from Ps 8. Jesus fulfilled Ps 8 for us so everyone who believes & submits to Him as Lord, is saved & longer needs to die for their own sins. We still see in creation His majestic name

¹⁶ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/04/20/grizzly-bear-attack-near-yellowstone-kills-montana-backcountry-guide/7298312002/>

¹⁷ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/hippos-flooding-fishing-covid-collide-kenya>

on earth & in the heavens but Ps 8 isn't a complete picture if we don't see that Jesus came to fulfill it. We don't see everything in subjection to Him yet, but because He became a little **lower than the angels** in His humanity. But because of His death He's now **crowned with glory & honor**. What Adam ruined, Jesus restores for everyone who repents & relinquishes control to His mastery & majesty. 1 Cor 15:22, 24–27 says, **For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ, all believers, will be made alive...** Paul says the end comes when Christ destroys **all rule & all authority & power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For God has put all things in subjection under His feet**, quoting Ps 8. If you haven't yet, come under His subjection today. All authority in heaven & earth is given to Him as the risen Lord & nothing is outside His control & His name is majestic in all the earth. Phil 2 says it's **at the name of Jesus every knee will bow** in all the earth & under the earth, & **every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God** (9-11).

The triumph of God in silencing His enemies comes through children, the very weakest of His agents. The cause of God succeeds even when children & infants are His champions. & their weapons of victory aren't human power & strength, but praise to God. The NT shows us how Ps 8 was fulfilled in the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. As Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the children sang His praises, recognizing Him as the Son of David, their King. But the chief priests & teachers were angry & complained to Jesus, saying He should silence them. He responded by citing part of Ps 8:2: **Out of the mouth of infants & nursing babies You have prepared praise for Yourself** (Mt 21:16). But both He & they knew the rest of that verse: **because of your adversaries, to make the enemy & the revengeful cease**. Those religious leaders knew that Jesus was criticizing them. They were the enemies of God's King & His work. Jesus says, *Haven't you read the Psalms? It's right for the children to praise Me, because Ps 8 is about Me. I'm the 'you' David's speaking of.* Jesus is **the Lord, our Lord**. Kids are to praise Him & so are we. On a side note, do we view children as Jesus did? Do we see them as a God-ordained way to establish the Majesty of the One who loves the little children who praise Him? The disciples thought kids shouldn't be around while Jesus taught, but He said, **Permit the children to come to Me, & do not hinder them, for the kingdom of**

God belongs to such as these (Lk 18:16). Kids belong in the kingdom, according to King Jesus, who taught that the littlest are the greatest in the kingdom spiritually. More than once He held up a small child to men who thought they were important to say they needed a humble, simple, childlike faith. Every time we hear the noise of children in church we should be reminded of this & give glory to God. What comes out of the mouths of babes is to remind us miracles still happen. God ordains & establishes His strength through weakness & dependency. A kid making a joyful noise to the Lord pleases Him more than a stodgy, legalistic, stuck-in-the-mud adult. One says Ps 8 ...

*should be a huge encouragement to young mothers who spend their days wiping noses, cleaning up spills, folding little hands before meals, & singing songs while changing diapers. Step back & see the big picture: God is making His name majestic in this world through you. God is establishing His strength in the world through your children as they learn to praise Him.*¹⁸

This should be an encouragement to all of us to work with, teach, & serve our children. Out of the mouths of children can come great strength & praise. God's power is perfected in weakness. Jesus took on the weakness of humanity to prove that God is mindful of us. David asks, **what is... the son of man that you care for him or visit him?** Jesus answers by taking on not just our nature, but the name, **the Son of man**, for how He referred to Himself most often. As **Son of man** He identifies with us, illustrates His care for us, & illumines it by visiting us. Lk 1 says, **Blessed be the Lord... for He has visited...** (68). In light of His miracles, the crowds said, **God has visited His people** (7:16). David asks, **what is man?** But of Jesus they asked, **What kind of a man is this, that even the winds & the sea obey Him?** (Mt 8:27). All things are under Jesus' control. Therefore, we must say, *O Lord, our Lord Jesus, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!* The universe is the work of the God's fingers & Jesus is the One who created it by His hand (Jn 1:2-3, Heb 1:2-8, Col 1:16). As a Man He said His miracles were **by the finger of God** (Lk 11:20). The universe is like the span of the Lord's hand & Jesus says to His people that same hand is holding them & no one & nothing can us snatch out of that hand (Jn 10:28). The same Lord who makes sure not one of the stars is missing & has named them all & also keeps track of all the pathetic humans on a pittance of a planet in a small solar system. He knows us by name & knows us better than we know ourselves. **O Lord, our Lord Jesus,**

¹⁸ Johnston, *Psalms*, p 97

how majestic is Your name in all the earth! From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea, creation's revealing His majesty. *Indescribable, uncontainable, You placed the stars in the sky & You know them by name Incomparable, unchangeable, You see the depths of my heart & You love me the same!*¹⁹ Moon & stars make us feel small but also show how big His love for us is.

How can we apply this psalm? 1) Bow in awe before our majestic Creator. This psalm, & the universe itself, should humble us & cause us to marvel at God's grace & love in caring for us by sending His Son as our Savior.

2) Treat every person with value & respect as someone created in God's image. *You cannot worship & glorify the majesty of God while treating His supreme creation, your fellow man, with contempt.*²⁰

There is no room for prejudice in God's people.

3) Raise our children to love, fear, & serve God as the only way to make life count. He'll use their mouths to subdue His enemies.

4) Be good stewards of God's creation. Don't worship creation, worship the Creator & take care of His creation.

This psalm calls us as God's people to remember & rejoice in God's magnificent & beautiful work of creation. It calls us to remember our intended role in that creation. It leads us to ponder the way in which Christ became the true image for us & that our response to Him is praise (Heb 13:15). We may be as weak as infants in our praise, but we can say with Paul, **therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong** (2 Cor 12:9–10). We must say, **O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth.** PRAY/Communion

God sent His own Son, the Son of Man, to provide the sacrifice for our sins & to fulfill Ps 8 in a way that we cannot. God sent His own Son to save us from our willful ignorance & rebellion & to fulfill Ps 8 as we have not & cannot. That's why the author of Hebrews uses the psalm as he does,

¹⁹ Chris Tomlin, *Indescribable*

²⁰ John Piper, desiringgod.org/resourelibrary/sermons/byscripture/1/860_What_Is_Man/

applying it to Jesus, saying He was made a little **lower than the angels** (in order to die for us) & that, as a result, the Father has **crowned Him with glory & honor** & put everything under His feet, (Heb 2:7–8). It's a parallel statement to that great hymn of the church recorded for us by Paul in Phil 2:

Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (8–11).

The fullness of that great destiny is still future, as Hebrews notes, **But now we do not yet see all things subjected to Him (2:8)**. Although we don't see everything subject to Jesus yet, there's one thing we do see. We see Jesus crowned with glory & honor because He suffered death, **so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.... Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus (Heb 2:9; 3:1).**²¹ We do that once again today as we remember Him through communion.

The writer of Hebrews tells us, **We do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, *namely*, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone... (Heb 2:9).**

We eat of the bread remembering that Jesus, our majestic Lord, died in our place, tasting death for us.

Hebrews continues, **that through death He, Jesus, might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, & might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives (Heb 2:14-15)**. By the shedding of His blood, His death, Jesus freed us from our slavery to sin so that we might live for & bring glory to His majestic name.

²¹ Boice, pp 72–73