

GOD’S MAJESTY ON DISPLAY

SERIES: THE HEART OF THE PSALMS

By Scott Grant

Do you sometimes feel like little more than a speck in the cosmos, a vapor that appears briefly before vanishing, a mere face in the crowd? On the other hand do you sometimes think of yourself as someone so special that you feel no need to worship anything beyond yourself? How should we, then, think of humanity and of ourselves in particular?

After Michelangelo’s sculpture of David was unveiled and placed in front of the Palazzo Signoria, citizens of Florence affixed notes to it. The artist awoke the next day to see the fluttering pieces of paper, as depicted in Irving Stone’s historical novel, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. Michelangelo read the following messages:

“You have given us back our self-respect.”

“We are proud to be Florentines.”

“Never can they tell me man is vile; he is the proudest creature on earth.”

“How magnificent is man.”(1)

Michelangelo’s masterpiece, perhaps better than any other work of art, depicts the dignity of humanity. Indeed, how magnificent is man.

You are not a speck in the cosmos. You’re magnificent. Neither are you deserving of worship. You are magnificent because God has made you thus and the Lord displays his majesty in humans that we might worship him.

Psalm 8 is a poetic reflection on the creation account of Genesis 1. As a psalm of praise, it stands out among the cries of anguish in the first compositions in the collection. David, the author, begins and ends with an identical refrain that extols the majesty of the Lord. In between, he alternates between reflections concerning the heavens and humanity.

**O LORD, our Lord,
How majestic is Your name in all the earth,
Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!
From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength
Because of Your adversaries,
To make the enemy and the revengeful cease.
When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained;
What is man that You take thought of him,
And the son of man that You care for him?
Yet You have made him a little lower than God,
And You crown him with glory and majesty!**

**You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,
All sheep and oxen,
And also the beasts of the field,
The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas.
O LORD, our Lord,
How majestic is Your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8)**

Nearness and strength

The first word that is translated “Lord” is YHWH, the name that evokes his covenant relationship with Israel. The second word (*adonai*) speaks of strength, and elsewhere in the psalms it is associated with kingship of the Lord (Psalm 97:5, 135:5-12). Taken as a whole, the phrase “O Lord, our Lord,” invokes the nearness, strength and reign of God. This God, says David, is “our” God: He has entered into relationship with Israel.

The word “majestic” is a royal term that is often used in connection with the public display of awesome power. Yahweh revealed his awesome power to Israel, but David says it is also on display in all the earth. In other words, he is not like the pagan gods, whose power was thought to be geographically limited. The word “splendor” is another royal term that is somewhat synonymous with “majesty.” Yahweh’s splendor is on display, not in this case on earth but “above the heavens.” David employs two opposites—earth and heaven—to indicate a whole. He is also alluding to Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

This is the Creator God and universal king, who conquered chaos in creation and who reveals himself through creation (Genesis 1:2). The Lord is revealing himself to anyone who lives anywhere on earth, to anyone who looks to the sky. He wants to be known. Such thoughts lead David to marvel and to address the Lord personally in the language of worship.

Connecting with something larger

When you address God with these words, “O Lord, our Lord,” you’ve said a mouthful. You are valuing both his nearness and his strength. He is both relational and powerful. If we do not value both his nearness and strength, and hold them in tension, our worship will be diminished. This God, the intimate and powerful one, has entered into relationship with us. We are compelled to rejoice, and to tremble.

Who hasn’t looked up into the night sky and, at least for a moment, felt a twinge of awe? What’s happening to you in that moment? You know there is something much bigger than you, beyond your comprehension. You feel small, but you want to connect with something big. That something big, according to Psalm 8, is God himself, the Creator-King. Let us join David and address our God personally in the language of worship: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.”

Out of the mouth of babes

David returns to earth in verse 2, and it's quite a trip—from the glory of the heavens to a tiny part of the smallest humans on earth. Babies nurse and cry with their mouths, demonstrating their vulnerability.

Just how has the Lord “established strength” through babies? David doesn't say, although he's specific about the reason for doing so. The Lord works through babies in this manner because of his adversaries and, more specifically, to “make the enemy and the revengeful cease.” David is saying that the Lord brings his enemies to an end through babies and particularly through their trusting dependence and their inarticulate babbling.

Babies demonstrate the eternal way of God in which his power is displayed in human weakness. Adult humans are more able to care for themselves, but they're still dependent on God for their next breath. In God's design, vulnerable babies grow up to be dependent on him and reign over his creation (verses 6 through 8).

The birth of another child is a harbinger that the Lord will establish his strength—his royal rule—through humanity. The Lord defeated chaos in the first creation, and he will defeat his enemies in the new creation. Every suck and sound from every baby is an expression of God's strength and sends a message to his enemies that their time is up. Sometimes, they get the message and turn to him. Sometimes, the vulnerability of a child stops them in their tracks.

The enemies of the Lord are led by Satan, who was intent on snuffing out the “seed of the woman,” the eventual descendant of Eve who would save humanity (Genesis 3:15). But the line of descent, which went through David, survived because of the Lord's protection. When the child was finally born, Herod sought to kill him by murdering all the male children in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16). That baby in particular has been—and will be—the undoing of many. His coming means the eventual doom of Satan (Revelation 20:10).

The deal is still on

What do you see when you're looking at a baby? We see weakness and vulnerability. You're looking at someone who is totally dependent. In other words, you're looking at the power of God. You're looking at someone who wouldn't survive for another minute if God were not providing for him or her.

We're just bigger versions of that. We're big babies! If God didn't provide for us, we wouldn't survive any longer than a baby without caregivers and when we look upon a baby, we should be reminded of that. If you want to see something of the power of God, take an infant into your arms and look into her eyes, and know that God's eternal way is to display his power in human weakness.

The world may be crumbling around us. It may seem that creation itself is on the verge of collapse, but then word comes to us: Another baby has been born into the world. The deal is still

on! God is still committed to bringing about his reign in creation through weak human beings who are empowered by him.

In Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, an angry mob of men is on the verge of breaking into a jail cell to kill a black man who is falsely accused of raping a white woman. The accused man is guarded by his lawyer, Atticus Finch, whose two children race to the scene in the middle of the night. The little girl, whose nickname is Scout, notices a familiar face in the crowd:

“Hey Mr. Cunningham,” she says innocently.

At first, the man pays her no attention. Atticus had been doing essentially free legal work for Mr. Cunningham, who was embarrassed that he couldn't pay for it. He dropped by some hickory nuts one time as his “entailment,” or payment, and Scout had noticed him.

“Hey Mr. Cunningham. How's your entailment getting' along? Don't you remember me, Mr. Cunningham? I'm Jean Louise Finch. You brought us some hickory nuts one time, remember? I go to school with Walter. He's your boy, ain't he? Ain't he, sir? He's in my grade, and he does right well. He's a good boy, a real nice boy. Entailments are bad.”

At this point Scout recognizes that everyone is staring at her, and she feels she's done something wrong. What she's done, in her vulnerable innocence, is stop Mr. Cunningham and the mob their tracks.

“I'll tell him you said hey, little lady,” Mr. Cunningham says regarding his son. In the film version, he speaks with a catch in his voice and wetness in his eyes.

Then he calls out to the mob, “Let's clear out. Let's get going, boys.”(2)

Because of a child, the enemy and the revengeful ceased.

What is man?

The contrast between the heavens and earth continues in verses 3 through 5. Having noted that the Lord has displayed his glory above the heavens, David now writes of his experience with the heavens. As a young shepherd, David would have had many occasions to lift his eyes to the night sky. He speaks of considering the heavens—lingering over the thoughts that they inspire. He says to the Lord that these are “your” heavens—his creation. The heavens, in all their vastness, are the work of the Lord's fingers. He didn't even need his hands or arms for such an awesome task. It's as if the Lord dwarfs even the heavens. For David, considering the heavens gives him insight into the one who created them.

David turns his attention to the lights that adorn the heavens—the moon and the stars. Some pagans worshiped the moon and stars. The celestial bodies are not to be worshiped. In fact,

pondering the heavens prompts David to worship the one who created them—and to wax poetic about humanity’s place in creation.

The word translated “what” in verse 4 is the same word that is translated “how” in verse 1. In verse 1 David used the word to declare the majesty of the Lord. Now the same word leads into treatment of the majesty of humanity.

First, in light of the majesty of the heavens, David marvels that humanity is even on the Lord’s radar screen. The first word used for “man” (*’enosh*) in verse 4 invokes the weakness of humanity. David’s reaction is one of shock that the Lord would even “take thought of” frail human beings.

The term “son of man” is a lowly idiom, invoking humanity’s earthly derivation. The word used for “man” here is *’adam*. Note the wordplay in Genesis 2:7: “Then the Lord God formed man (*’adam*) of dust from the ground (*’adamah*).” The Lord’s taking thought of humans prompts him to care for them. If it is marvelous that the Lord even takes thought of humans, it is mind-boggling that that he “cares for” them.

Not only that, the Lord has made humanity to be only “a little lower than God.” The word for “God” (*’elohim*) can also be translated “gods.” The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, uses the word that means “angels,” which the writer of Hebrews prefers when quoting this passage (Hebrews 2:7). Perhaps David means “angels,” employing an unusual word to illustrate the dignity of angels and therefore the dignity of humanity. The writer of Hebrews implies that humanity became lower than the angels for just a little while because of sin (Hebrews 2:7, 9, 17).

The words “crown,” “glory,” and “majesty” evoke images of royalty and even the Lord in his sovereign glory. The word “majesty” is the same word that is used of the Lord in verse 1, although it is there translated “splendor.” David is surely contemplating Genesis 1:26-28, which says that humans were created in the image of God to rule over creation as his representatives. What is man? He’s a king, the lord of creation.

The pagans bowed down before idols, the images of their gods. The Lord commands the Israelites to make no idols (Exodus 20:4-5). Why? Because the Israelites are to worship him alone, and because he has already given to earth his image: humanity.

King of the beasts

David writes of the comprehensive nature of humanity’s reign in verses 6 through 8. The heavens in verse 3 were called the work of the Lord’s fingers. Now David sees humanity as being made by the Lord to rule of the works of his hands, which evidently comprise all creation, including the heavens. The Lord is seen as employing his hands, as opposed to his fingers, in the more general work of creation.

Idols, which appear in the image of what the Lord has made, are elsewhere called the work of humanity’s hands (Deuteronomy 4:28). The pagans saw themselves as being at the mercy of the

forces of nature and in bondage to them. Humanity, however, is not to worship the work of the Lord's hands but to rule over it.

The Lord has put all things—everything that he has created—under the feet of humanity. The metaphor speaks of superiority and subjection (1 Kings 5:17, Psalm 47:4). Victors placed their feet on the neck of the vanquished (Joshua 10:24). Those in subjection to a king were seen as the footstools of his throne (Psalm 110:1).

Once again, David employs poetic opposites, this time to communicate the comprehensiveness of humanity's reign. Sheep and oxen are domestic animals, while beasts of the field are wild animals. Humanity also rules over both the creatures of the sky and the sea. Humans reign over both sets of opposites, and everything in between. The animal kingdom has a king: humanity.

The Creator's design for us

The next time you look up into the night sky and feel a twinge of awe, if you can afford a few minutes, consider the heavens. Linger over the thoughts they inspire. Seek insight into the Creator. And while you're at it, consider this insight from David: What you're looking at is child's play for the Lord. He was finger painting when he created the heavens.

In light of the vastness of the heavens, in light of the power and artistry of the Lord, isn't it surprising that he takes notice of us? Isn't it shocking that he cares for us?

Now think about this: The Lord's design and destiny for humans is to rule over the heavens and the earth. That's his design for you, and, if you put your trust in him, his destiny for you. If you put your trust in him, he will trust you with his creation.

Do you see what this psalm is doing to us? It's taking us from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth. By the end of the psalm, we've made the round trip twice. When we're in the heavens, we feel insignificant. You'd think the trip to earth would only make us feel worse. Many of those who have traveled into space have had difficulty readjusting to earth because they have felt insignificant. They've entered into the vastness, and they've looked back upon that little blue ball.

Because we feel insignificant, and creation is so awesome, we may be inclined to worship creation, as some do. But what does Psalm 8's return trip do for us? It dignifies us. It shows us our worth. It shows us that though we are rightly humbled by the majesty of creation, our purpose is to worship the Creator and take care of creation.

What greater sense of significance could you want than the one you get from the realization that the Creator-King is entrusting to you the heavens and the earth? If we could somehow get everyone to believe Psalm 8, we could probably do away with much of what passes today for self-esteem curricula. Psalm 8 values and holds in eloquent balance both the humility and dignity of humanity.

Same refrain, new meaning

David closes where he began—with his opening refrain. But now, nine verses later, it pulsates with fresh meaning. In this psalm, the majesty of the Lord is seen not so much in creation, although it is certainly visible there. As readers, we begin by expecting the majesty of the Lord to be extolled by virtue of the splendor of creation. No sooner does David finish writing a line about the splendor of the heavens in verse 1 than he speaks of infants and nursing babes in verse 2. He returns in verse 3 to the heavens, apparently the appropriate setting for peering into the majesty of the Lord, but he does so only to illustrate the majesty of humanity.

At the end of the psalm David once again extols the majesty of the Lord in “all” the earth, but with the new understanding that the Lord has placed “all” things under the feet of humanity. The Lord’s majesty is on display in the majesty with which he has crowned humanity. The Lord has lifted weak and frail humanity to the throne of creation, and David marvels at the grace of the God of Israel.

God’s crowning achievement

If you want to know something of the glory of God, gaze at the heavens, yes. Survey the earth, yes. But also look at a man. Look at a woman. Look at a child. For when you look into the eyes of a human being, you will see something you can see nowhere else: the image of God. The creation of humanity is God’s crowning achievement, and he thinks so much of us that he trusts the rest of creation to us.

It’s no wonder that some humans worship other humans. The best thing we can lay eyes on is another human. It’s no wonder that some humans worship themselves. They think there is something glorious about them, and they’re right. David, however, marvels not at the majesty of humanity but at the majesty of God. He knows that a human is but “man” and the “son of man”—frail and earthly, the created and not the Creator. For David, it is unthinkable to worship such creatures, either himself or someone else.

Today many of us worship celebrities, devouring every morsel from their lives that emerges in the media. Some even pay astronomical sums to buy some scrap of something that some luminary once wore or used. The impulse to idolize celebrities is understandable, because the impulse to worship is thoroughly human.

David, however, marvels that the Lord even takes thought of humanity. Yet the Lord has made humanity only a little lower than the angels. Therefore, it is equally unthinkable for David to belittle such creatures, either himself or someone else.

For us, it is unthinkable that we should either belittle or worship others or ourselves. But it is utterly appropriate to ponder the place of humanity, and the Lord’s exaltation of us from the dust of the earth to the throne of creation, and worship him.

I confess a certain fascination with so-called human greatness: great leaders, artists, writers, athletes and theologians, for example. Lately I’ve been checking out documentaries that feature

such individuals. I've been both inspired and depressed—inspired to improve, but depressed because I know that no matter how much I improve, I'll never reach the level of such extraordinarily gifted men and women. But Psalm 8 gives me a different vantage point from which to view human greatness. Fascination with human greatness becomes an avenue for worshipping God. I can appreciate the genius of, say, Michelangelo and marvel at the majesty of God.

Creation groans and suffers

As a poetic reflection on Genesis 1, Psalm 8 doesn't take into account what has happened since. If we were to take into account such developments, and the current state of humanity, what kind of psalm would we write? We'd write a lament, not a psalm of praise. Humanity has failed as a ruler over creation. We've turned dominion into domination and destruction. Creation itself groans and suffers (Romans 8:22).

The writer of Hebrews, reflecting on Psalm 8 and noting that humanity has not yet fully assumed its proper place, says this: "But we do see him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one" (Hebrews 2:9). On the cross, Jesus defeated the enemy of humanity and of creation, Satan, and died in the place of humanity, which had rebelled against God and abused its power as lord of creation. God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to his heavenly throne, where he reigns as both man and God and is putting "all his enemies under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25).

When he who conquered death finally abolishes death, the last enemy, his followers will be raised from the dead, whereupon they will rule wisely over creation. No wonder the apostle Paul says that creation "waits eagerly" for that day (Romans 8:19). We who follow Jesus wait even more eagerly for that day, for the apostle John tells us that we shall reign with Jesus "forever and ever" (Revelation 22:5). What a psalm of praise we could write on that day!

In the meantime, Genesis 1, Psalm 8 and the New Testament compel us to consider, behold and worship Jesus, who is restoring us to our proper place as the lords of creation, and to represent God by the power of his Holy Spirit. Paul says that believers in Jesus have "put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him" (Colossians 3:10). In other words, the ongoing spiritual renewal of men and women who follow Jesus gives the world what it desperately needs: a picture of true humanity in which it can see the Creator.

The human project

So what do we make of the human project? We make much of it, but not too much. We should think highly of ourselves and other men and women, but not too highly. Whatever we observe in human greatness compels us to worship the Creator.

When Michelangelo sculpted the David, he was depicting the author of Psalm 8. Although David may be shocked if he could see Michelangelo's image of him (and may wish that the artist had

covered up a few parts!), he would resonate with the response of the Florentines: “How magnificent is man!” But he would also tell them, and us, to worship the Lord.

NOTES

(1) Irving Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*; © 1961 Doubleday and Co., New York, N.Y. P. 419.

(2) Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*; © 1960 by Harper Lee, Warner Books, New York, N.Y. Pp. 153-54.

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Catalog No. 4928
Psalm 8
Second Message
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July 10, 2005

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