

Psalm 8 How majestic is Your name

Readings: Psalm 8 & Hebrews 2: 5-18

One commentator (Derek Kidner) introduces this psalm in these words:

“This psalm 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 and our world to Him; all with a masterly economy of words, and in a spirit of mingled joy and awe.” So I believe we are in for a feast of good things as we explore this psalm together this morning. I would like us to look at this Psalm under three questions – firstly what do we learn about God, secondly what do we learn about mankind and thirdly what do we learn about Jesus as the true and perfect man, as this psalm was certainly interpreted as pointing to the Messiah by the New Testament writers.

Psalm 8 begins with these words: “O YAHWEH, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1) What’s in a name? In the Bible everything, - because the name of God is far more than a mere title or label; it’s a description of who God is, it describes His character, His revelation of Himself. You may remember when Ian Smith was with us he majored on this. He frequently took us to Exodus 34:6-7 where the Lord appeared to Moses and proclaimed His name “YAHWEH, YAHWEH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin”. God’s name has His character embedded within it, a God who is merciful, gracious, loving, faithful and forgiving. This is why the Lord took issue with his people when they were not displaying His likeness to the nations around. The people of God were meant to be a demonstration to the neighbouring nations of the very character of their God, Yahweh. They were to be the image bearing representatives of God, they were to be a holy nation.

But here in this Psalm, as one commentator said “the majestic name of God permeates the earth and transcends the heavens”. God is joyfully acknowledged to be the Creator of all there is. In poetic language the psalmist glories in the fact that, although the universe is so large, God is so much larger, it’s as if His fingers have crafted it. And at the same time we humans are dwarfed by the universe. Who cannot have been moved by standing out on a star lit night in the country where there no light pollution, and been amazed at the starry skies? Unfortunately with so many people living now in cities they are deprived of this awe inspiring sight because of light pollution. And yet paradoxically, one of the features of living in our current day is that we are able to see far more of the universe than those who lived before us; we have placed telescopes and satellites in earth’s orbit or far beyond, and seen what no other human ages saw. Let me give you some examples of what God has created in this universe from the Hubble Telescope. And yet although God is so mighty, He doesn’t always chose to exercise that power but uses the small and the weak to shame the wise and powerful. When the children were crying out “Hosanna to the Son of David” in the Temple in Matt. 22, the chief priests and the scribes asked Jesus to shut them up. Jesus, however, pointedly quotes to them verse 2 of Psalm 8 “Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings, you have brought forth perfect praise” (Matt. 22:16). The chief priests and scribes were the ones opposing the work of God but it is to the children that God has revealed his truth. Who has not been disarmed or put in their place by the truth that has come out of the mouths of children? Just as an aside, verse 2 is apparently very difficult to translate and you will find it is quite different in different translations. Interestingly, however, Matthew has Jesus using the Septuagint, the Greek version of the text.

So psalm 8 puts man firmly in his place, in the light of the cosmos, “what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps. 8:4). We can see ourselves as so tiny and insignificant beneath a starlit sky. Yet the Psalmist then picks up the place of honour that God has bestowed upon mankind. “Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet,” (Ps. 8:5-6). This of course goes back to the creation narrative in Genesis 1 “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 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.” (Gen. 1:27-28). How then do we understand the word dominion in this context, do we have the right to do what we want? We understand dominion in relation to the God in whose image we have been created – He is our model. We take our understanding of dominion from Him, not the so-called leaders who exploit, who are corrupt, who lie and manipulate to gain their own advantage. We can only understand dominion in relation to God himself, as the old question goes – “what would Jesus do?” God reigns, our position is always one of the subordinate ruler. So mankind has **not** gained supremacy in the natural world by some chance mechanistic process or from our own efforts or even as a right, but by a mandate from the Creator to establish a culture that expresses God’s character. And yet we know that the creation mandate given to mankind in Genesis 1 had to grapple with the fall of Genesis 3 and things began to fall apart as sin raised its ugly head, pitting man against man. As Blaise Pascal said about man “Oh, the grandeur and littleness, the excellence and the corruption, the majesty and the meanness of man!” And yet God has not withdrawn his mandate to mankind to have dominion. Personally I am amazed that God allows us to do so much with his creation. I am thinking particularly of the way in which plant breeders and geneticists breed and interbreed to produce new strains of plants, even new species. The result is that we have more productive fruits and vegetables, and a whole dazzling array of flowers and foliage for our market gardens and home gardens to delight the eyes and entrance our sense of smell. God allows us far more reign in his creation than I ever allowed my children with anything I made – I think that’s great grace on God’s part. We always need to remember that we exercise dominion as delegated authority, and we are always answerable to the One in ultimate authority.

It’s right to stand in awe at the wonders of creation. As Thomas Chalmers said in his perhaps quaint Victorian language, “the same heart may be occupied with all that is serious in the contemplation of religion, and be at the same time alive to the charms and the loveliness of nature”. I was reminding a group of horticultural scientists the other day not to lose their sense of wonder in the natural world. Lord Rutherford when he worked in Cambridge in the Physics Department at the Cavendish Laboratory would have entered through the ornate wooden gates inscribed in Latin with Psalm 111 v2 “Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them”.

Turning now to our reading from Hebrews, the New Testament writer takes verses 4-6 of Psalm 8 and sees in them a picture of Jesus the Messiah. The Old Testament writer of Psalm 8 was moved by the Spirit to pen these words and in all likelihood never foresaw how these words would be fulfilled in the work of the Messiah. That is not unusual in Scripture, but it emphasises the overriding influence of the Spirit of God in causing these words to be written for our learning. And so the writer to the Hebrews sees in these words a wonderful fulfilment of the original mandate to Adam being gloriously completed in the life of Jesus – His incarnation, His emptying of Himself, His obedience unto death and his glorious exultation where He reigns at the right hand of the Father. The writer to the Hebrews is not alone in this, as this greater fulfilment of these verses is seen in Paul’s writings in 1 Cor. 15, Eph. 1. Phil. 2 and by Peter in 1 Peter 1. Adam was given a mandate but failed to deliver and brought death. Jesus on the other hand gloriously fulfilled his and brought life to all, and at the close of the age will bring all things completely under His sovereign reign, not just the things of earth but all the spiritual powers will bow before Him. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18) is the great victory declaration of Jesus. Therefore it is not surprising that this Psalm is often sung on the Feast of Ascension. As Tom Wright said “The exaltation of Jesus and the fact that we who follow Him can celebrate that and live in the light of it, is one of the major themes of the whole book (of Hebrews).”

The Psalm finishes with the same verse it began with, but this is not just vain repetition, the second time you say it, you say it with far more meaning because of all that you have learnt of God and been reminded of in the intervening verses. “O YAHWEH, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” Amen.

And now I want to finish with a song that hopefully encapsulates some of what I have been saying.