

Psalm 8

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO THE GITTITH. A PSALM OF DAVID.

The superscription to this Psalm starts out with a special note to the choirmaster or the chief musician in charge of the singing and music at the temple. The choirmaster is informed that this Psalm is to be sung “according to the Gittith.” (cf. Ps. 81, 84) So, “Gittith” may have been a specific musical instrument, or it may have been the name of a certain melody or a musical rhythm or meter. In any case, this helped the choir director or the chief musician to know how the Psalm was to be played or sung in the temple worship. And so we see, again, that these Psalms are more than just the private prayer language of individuals. They’re also—and especially—meant to be the language of all God’s people when they’re gathered together to worship. As a Psalm of the *individual*, David, we read in verse 3: “When **I** look at your heavens, the work of your fingers...” And yet, David begins *and* ends the Psalm with these words: “O LORD, **our** Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

In all of his individual and personal devotion to the Lord, the Psalmist still loved to identify himself with all the congregation of God’s saints. In all of our individual, personal devotion to God, do we ultimately find our place—our meaning and belonging—as a privileged member of the church, which is the body of Christ?

- Psalm 106:4–5 — Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people; help me when you save them, that I may look upon the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation, that I may glory with your inheritance.

So, the Psalmist begins in verse 1:

I. Psalm 8:1a — O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

In the Hebrew, how the psalmist begins this Psalm is actually like this: “O Yahweh, our Adonai.” (Notice how the first “LORD” is spelled with all capital letters while the second “Lord” is not.)

“Yahweh” is God’s personal, covenant name. But we have to be careful not to think that this “Yahweh” is a sentimental, lovey-dovey version of God or in any way a toned down, diminished version of God. “Yahweh” seems to have the “simple” meaning, “He **is**,” and it reflects what God said to Moses at the burning bush: “I am... I am who I am.” (cf. Exod. 3:13-15) So this is an amazing thing – that the name by which God enters into relationship with His people is also the name that sums up the whole essence and being of God. In other words, God didn’t hold anything back when He came to His people to make Himself known to them and to be their God. “Yahweh” isn’t a toned down, diminished God fit for His people! “Yahweh” is **all the fullness of deity** giving Himself to be trusted, and worshipped, and loved by His people. This will be extremely important for us to understand as we read the rest of the chapter.

If “Yahweh” is God’s personal name, then we might say that “Adonai” is one of God’s many “titles.” It means “Sovereign Lord,” “Master,” “Ruler,” “King.” Notice that David says “**our**

Adonai,” “**our** king,” “**our** master.” He can say this only because all of God’s people have come to know this sovereign, exalted lord and king by His personal **name**!

So now maybe we can put it all together and read with a much fuller understanding. David begins this Psalm: “O Yahweh, **our** sovereign Lord and Master—O YAHWEH, our Adonai—how majestic is your name in all the earth!” And *what* “**name**” is David talking about? “How majestic is Your name—your name, **Yahweh**—in all the earth!” Yahweh is the name that expresses all that God is. To say, “how majestic is your name in all the earth” is really just to say, “how majestic **you are**, our covenant Lord, in all the earth.” There’s a wonderful, lovely *tension*, here. This is *our* covenant Lord, near to us and close to us, who is at the same time **majestic in all the earth**.

The meaning of the Hebrew word for majestic is hard to capture in one English word. Here are various other suggestions that I’ve seen in commentaries and translations: How mighty, how great, how lofty, how high, how splendid, how glorious, how magnificent is your name in all the earth. Notice that David says, “**How** majestic is your name...” The Hebrew for “how” is the little word “*mah*” and it marks a question. Only, here the question mark has been overtaken by the exclamation mark. How majestic is your name in all the earth!?! On the one hand, David knows! It’s more majestic that he can ever comprehend or understand. Therefore, on the other hand, David doesn’t know and so he can only **wonder**.

This is all very “heady,” intoxicating language. But that’s only because it’s reflecting the one thing that’s awesome beyond our ability to know or comprehend. “O YAHWEH, our Adonai [our sovereign Lord], how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

So where did this ecstatic outburst of praise come from? When we come to the last verse of this Psalm, verse 9, we’ll read again the very same words that we have here in verse one. David is full to overflowing with the greatness of God. So, before he can say why, he must simply get it out. After that, he’ll explain. And after *that*, he’ll have to cry out again with all the **more** wonder, and awe, and joy: “O YAHWEH, our Adonai, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” So now David continues in awe-filled prayer to the Lord.

II. Psalm 8:1b–2 — You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of infant children and nursing babies,¹ you have established strength because of your foes, to bring to an end² the enemy and the avenger.

Here is a most amazing contrast! First, we see that God has set His glory above the heavens. The heavens above, containing all the heavenly bodies (the sun, the moon, and the stars) are an overwhelming, awe-inspiring display of God’s glory in creation. But the glory of God the Creator is “**above**” the heavens. The glory of God so far transcends even the farthest reaches of

¹ The second Hebrew word (*yoneq*) refers to one who suckles/sucks. The first Hebrew word (*olel*) refers to young/little children and can also refer to a newborn infant. (cf. Job 3:16)

² The Hebrew word “*shabath*” is the verbal form of the noun that we translate “sabbath” (a period of rest and cessation from labor). So here *shabath* (hifil) means “to cause to cease.” Hence, in this context the stronger translation “to do away with” or “bring to an end” seems preferable. (cf. NASB; NET; contrast “to *still* the enemy and the avenger” in the ESV)

the universe, because even though they are limitless to us and vast beyond our imagination, they are still just the creation, and Yahweh, our Adonai, is their Creator.

We see the **glory** of God set **above** the heavens, and then the very next thing we see is **infant children and nursing babies**. Just imagine! It almost makes me want to laugh. Against the backdrop of the glory of God set above the heavens, we see now the ultimate picture of human weakness and powerlessness and frailty. Where could we possibly find two greater opposites? And yet the even more shocking thing is not how opposite these things are, but how the one has come to be revealed in the other – how the glory of God set above the heavens has come to be **revealed and displayed and magnified** in and through that which is most frail and most weak and most powerless in this world. “You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of infant children and nursing babies... you have **established strength**...”

The Hebrew word for strength ['oz] is the Hebrew word for – strength! That’s what’s so shocking. It literally *means* strength and power and might. And throughout the Psalms, strength always belongs uniquely and exclusively to **God** and not to any other.

- Psalm 62:11 — Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power ['oz] belongs to God.
- Psalm 29:1 — Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength ['oz].

And yet, what do we have here? Out of the mouth of infant children and nursing babies God, who has set His glory above the heavens, has established **strength**. How can this be? And what does this mean?

Notice that the reason for establishing this strength is because of God’s foes – in order to bring to an end the enemy and the avenger. Do you see, now, the contrast between the enemy and the avenger on the one hand and the infant child and the nursing baby on the other? The enemy and the avenger is the one who attacks God’s people. And who are God’s people? *They* are the ones being compared here to infant children and nursing babies. The one appears to have all the power and thinks that he does, while the other is totally helpless and vulnerable, and knows that he is. And so, into the midst of *this* equation comes the God who establishes **His strength** out of the mouths of these infant children and nursing babies.

The people of God are the ones who see things truly. They know that they are frail, and weak, and vulnerable, and helpless – as all human beings really are. And so what is it that comes out of their mouths?—Words of **petition** and **praise**, words **confessing** that God alone is strong and mighty to save and to help. And it’s in these confessions of powerlessness and trust that the Lord’s strength is established and displayed – as He comes to the aid of His weak and needy people and delivers them from the wicked.

What is it that overwhelms David with awe and moves him to praise and worship?—That the God who has set His glory **above the heavens** has most fully established and revealed **His strength** out of the mouths of infant children and nursing babies. Are we overwhelmed with the same feeling of awe and amazement? Do we see ourselves to be this frail and this helpless? And

do we see revealed **in** our frailty and weakness the almighty power of God who has set his glory above the heavens?

So now David continues, building on all that he's just said:

III. Psalm 8:3-4 — When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you remember³ him, and the son of man that you pay attention to⁴ him?

After starting with the heavens (“You have set your glory above the **heavens**”) David now returns to the heavens: “When I look at your **heavens**, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place...”

God's glory is **so far** above the heavens that they are, as it were, His play thing. They are *His* heavens; “*Your* heavens,” David says. In fact, the moon and the stars which God has set in place are described as nothing more than the work of His *fingers*. But if this is so, then *how* great and *how* mighty and *how BIG* must God be? How quickly do we reach the end of what our feeble minds are capable of even imagining? Even the moon and the stars are nothing compared to the God who has made them and set them in their place. **And yet if the moon and the stars in the heavens are nothing compared to God, then we are nothing compared to the moon and the stars.**

And so as we look upward with the Psalmist, we become aware of *ourselves*, and we cry out to the one who made the heavens and set His glory *above* the heavens: “What is man that you remember him, and the son of man that you pay attention to him?”

The Hebrew word for “man,” here [*enosh*], is only used in poetry, and it almost always has in mind “man” as one who was created on the *same day*, and shares the same “*creatureliness*” as all the rest of the animals and beasts that walk about on the earth. (cf. Gen. 1:24-26, 31)

- **Psalm 90:3** — You return man [*enosh*] to dust and say, “Return, O children of man!”
- **Psalm 103:15-16** — As for man [*enosh*], his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

Are we beginning to feel how unfathomably wide is the gulf between the Creator of the moon and the stars in the heavens, and tiny, mortal creatures like you and me who walk about on the earth? And do we then feel compelled to ask the same question with David: “**What is** man that you **remember him**, and the son of man that you **pay attention to him**?”

The Hebrew for “what” is the same word for “how” in verses 1 & 9 (*mah*). But this time the question mark has **not** been overtaken by the exclamation mark. In verse one, “**How** majestic is Your name...!” expressed an outburst of praise and worship. But now, “**What** is man...?” might almost lead us to despair. Because the answer, of course, is “**nothing**.” Man is nothing. *We* are nothing. Mortal, weak, frail creatures of dust. It's only when we've fully come to see this—

³ Heb. *zakar*

⁴ Heb. *paqad*

perhaps to the point of almost despairing of any significance or meaning to our existence at all—that we’re ready to truly appreciate what David prays next, and what *we* can also pray and confess along with him.

IV. Psalm 8:5–8 — Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings⁵ and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion 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 along the paths of the seas.

Yes, it’s true that we were created on the *same day* and we share the same “*creatureliness*” as all the rest of the animals and beasts that walk about on the ground. But it’s also true that the God who has set His glory above the heavens and who makes the moon and the stars and sets them in their place—it’s also true that *this same God* has breathed into our nostrils the breath of life. *He* has created *us* in His image and likeness. And therefore, in the very beginning, it was to the creature man, made from the dust of the ground, that God gave rule and authority and dominion over all **His** works – over all that **He** had made on the earth.

➤ Genesis 1:26 (cf. Ps. 115:16) — 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.”

Here in Psalm 8, David wonders at this when he follows up his “what is man...?” with *these words*: “**Yet** you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.” Here again is man’s creatureliness (“Yet you have **made** him”), and yet it’s even *IN* man’s creatureliness that we come to see his true importance and significance in the world: “*Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings [the divine beings, the divine counsel, the gods, elohim] and crowned him with glory and honor.*”

Should there be any breath left in us after thinking about these things? Can you see how the glory and the honor given to the frail and creaturely man of dust is actually *revealing* the glory and the majesty of the one who creates the heavens and sets the moon and the stars in their place? Where is the glory of Yahweh, our Adonai, revealed? We might expect to see it most powerfully revealed in the heavens, which are still just the playful work of His fingers. But, no! Where we see the glory of God supremely revealed is in the glory and honor, and in the rule and authority and dominion over all *His* works that **He has given** to *us* frail creatures of dust. Does this remind you of the first part of the Psalm where David prays: “Out of the mouth of **infant children and nursing babies**, you have **established strength**”? It’s as though David were saying that God crowns infant children and nursing babies with glory and honor and strength, and in so doing, He reveals His *own* infinite glory which He has set above the heavens.

And so now David returns to where he started, and really to the whole point of it all, but now with a higher pitch and intensity than ever before:

⁵ Heb. *elohim*

V. **Psalm 8:9** — O YAHWEH, our Adonai [our sovereign Lord and King], how majestic [how lofty and high and exalted] is your name in all the earth!”

And in this very confession of praise—in these very words of adoration—what do we know, by faith, is happening? The glory, and the honor, and the strength of God is being **established** in and through *us* who are frail and helpless creatures of dust.

What is the place of man in the world? What is my **place** and your **place** in this vast universe? Psalm 8 answers that question, revealing to all who know God *as Yahweh* that our life and our existence on this earth has been invested with a meaning infinitely **higher** than we can ever possibly conceive. The God who has set His glory above the heavens reveals that glory—His glory—in you and in me – in *us*.

O YAHWEH, our Adonai, how lofty and high and exalted is your *name* in all the earth!”

Conclusion

But there’s more.

Throughout the second half of this Psalm, David has had in mind Genesis 1, where God gave royal dominion and authority to **all** human beings *before* the fall. But as David looks back to Genesis 1 from his position *after* the fall, what he’s especially thinking of is not humanity in general, but rather a *redeemed* humanity – a *covenant* humanity. It’s true that all human beings still have a royal dominion over God’s works, but that dominion has become the tool of evil and unrighteousness. And so now the *true* dominion of Genesis 1, the true glory and honor of man, can only be seen in a *redeemed* people. The true dominion of Genesis 1, the true glory and honor of the *creature*, man, now includes not just his authority and dominion over all the works of God, but also his defeat and his triumph over all the works of evil and unrighteousness. This reminds us of when David prayed: “Out of the mouth of infant children and nursing babies, you have established strength **because of your foes, to bring to an end the enemy and the avenger.**”

Now, what we have to remember in all this is that David is the one appointed by God to be king in Jerusalem – to sit on the royal throne in the city of God. David is the one to whom the Lord has said:

➤ **Psalm 2:7–8** — “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.”

So how do you think **King** David understands this glory and honor, and this royal authority and dominion that God has given to **him**, a mere man – a mere creature of dust? He understands it in the light of Genesis one. He understands it as the beginning of the **fulfillment** of Genesis one living in a world *after* the fall. In other words, His role as the King in Jerusalem was to exercise dominion over all the works of God in creation and to defeat and triumph over all the works of evil and unrighteousness. (cf. 1 Sam. 2:4, 8-10) And if that was the role of the king in Jerusalem, then *with him* it was also the role of all his people—of all his brothers and sisters who cried out together *with him*: “**O Yahweh, our Adonai**, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

But even King David and all the covenant people could never ultimately fulfill the destiny of man, because they, too, were still a part of this fallen world. And so in the person *and in this prayer* of King David we can see now that all along God was setting the stage for **Jesus**, the one who would successfully restore all of us to that high and awesome calling for which we were created. In Christ, the Son of God **who became MAN(!)**, *we* come to finally fulfill our true purpose in life. In Christ, **who became MAN(!)** – we become **the ones in whom God most fully, most supremely, reveals HIS awesome glory**. And so the writer of Hebrews says:

- Hebrews 2:5–11 — 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 remember him, or the son of man, that you pay attention to 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. 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. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers.

And then, skipping all the way ahead to the last chapter in the Bible, we see as through a window what it will look like when we are made to be eternally, unceasingly, and flawlessly the supreme and ultimate display of the glory of GOD:

- Revelation 22:1–5 — Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

In the full light of Christ—who became **MAN** and now is enthroned in heaven crowned with glory and honor—let’s all pray together from our hearts using David’s prayer in Psalm 8:

Psalm 8

O YAHWEH, our Adonai, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the **heavens**.

Out of the mouth of *infant children and nursing babies*, you have established strength because of your foes, to bring to an end the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your **heavens**, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place...

what is *[mere] man* that you remember him, and the *son of man* that you pay attention to him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion 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 along the paths of the seas.

O YAHWEH, our Adonai, how majestic is your name in all the earth!