

A Song for Every Season – Studies in the Psalms (Part 2 of 10)

How Majestic is Your Name!

Psalm 8

Mark Vroegop

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens. 2 From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? 5 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

6 You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: 7 all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

9 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

A number of years ago I took my wife out on a special date to enjoy the symphony. Neither of us had ever attended an official performance in a professionally designed auditorium. We were seated in the balcony so we had a commanding view of the entire symphony and the audience. However, seeing was nearly as important as hearing.

I will never forget the moment after the conductor gave the cue and the entire room filled with amazing, full, and melodious sound as the symphony began their performance of Mozart. The music was breath-taking – almost overwhelming. And as I sat there, this thought came to my mind: “Only God could create the possibility of sound like this.” The music made me marvel and worship God.

Other things in life can create the same effect. There are few things as amazing as the moment when a baby enters the world. I’ve had enough kids and been to enough hospitals in my lifetime to know that there is something really special about that first cry of a new baby. And if you are the Mom and Dad of that baby whose life you conceived, whose arms and legs you’ve watched nearly pierce through Mom’s skin, and who you’ve talk to through the womb,

then the sight of that very alive, very loud, and very human baby is something to behold. I have often thought: "How can anyone witness the birth of a baby and deny that God exists?"

The sound of the symphony and the birth of a baby are just two examples where the beauty of life points us to something beyond ourselves. Everyone has experiences like that in life, but not everyone makes the connection between beauty and the worship of God. Not everyone sees the link between our experience in life and the glory of God.

David sure did. Psalm 8 is a song written by a man who saw the link. It is the very first Psalm of praise and adoration in the entire book of Psalms, and it provides a great model for how one should look at life. In fact, I would argue that you really do not see true beauty if you don't see life through the lens of Psalm 8.

Last week we learned that in the Psalms there is a song for every season in life. Psalm 8 is for moments of beauty, seasons of great joy, and situations where you behold something stunning. But the question is: When you go "Wow!" Who comes to mind?

The Psalmist answers that question with three statements that reflect on the beauty of a sovereign God who is a caring creator, three statements that I long for you to be able to say.

"God, you are amazing!"

Psalm 8, like many Psalms, has a contextual piece of instruction at the very beginning. It says, "To the choirmaster: according to Gittith. A Psalm of David." These headings were likely added later as the Psalms were collected in a book, and they gave guidance as to their context, authorship or how they were to be used. In this case we learn that it was to be sung according to "Gittith" which was a musical instrument, a particular tune, or a special occasion.

Verse 1 begins in a way that at first seems redundant. However, you need to look closely at the words used for Lord. Notice that the first use of the word Lord is an all capital letters. The second word "Lord" is spelled in a normal fashion. All of the major translations handle these words like this. What is going on here?

The Hebrew language has a number of different words for God, and they are different in meaning and reverence. And what you see here is an important difference between two words that were used to address God. When you see Lord in all capital letters that indicates that the word is Yahweh. Lower letters typically means that the word Adonai is used. The difference is important.

Yahweh is the sacred and self-revealed name of God. It is famously used by God when he meets with Moses in the wilderness and gives him the charge to confront Pharaoh and demand that the Israelites be released from slavery.

13 Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'" 15 God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations (Ex 3:13-16).

The name Yahweh means "I am," and it points to God's self-existence, independence, and absolute sovereignty. It was a name so sacred that often those reading this Psalm would not even pronounce the actual name, but would instead simply say "The Name."¹ It had symbolism and meaning that is hard to fully capture.

The name was special because "Yahweh" was how God described himself, and it was an amazing gift of grace that God had revealed himself to his people. It was a powerful and a personal name indicating that he was the creator, dependent on nothing. His name came to represent himself, his glory, his blessing, and his authority. Therefore, wherever God sets his name – like in a land, a temple, or on his people – he was indicating his blessing and his presence.² "In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you" (Ex 20:24).

So when the Psalmist says "O LORD" he is saying something like: "O self-existing, universe-creating, self-revealing, slavery-breaking, grace-giving, always-existing, never-ending, nation-conquering, people-loving and promise-keeping God!" And he says that all in one word: Yahweh.

But there is more. He says this mind-blowing Yahweh is "our Lord." Here the Psalmist identifies a gracious contrast that we will see repeated. Although God is glorious beyond our comprehension, he is personally involved in the lives of his people – our Lord. Thus the Psalmist says that he is "Our Adonai." This term means owner, Lord, master, and controller. In other words, this great God is the personal master of the Psalmist. This self-existing, universe-creating, self-revealing, slavery-breaking, grace-giving, always-existing, never-ending, nation-conquering, people-loving and promise-keeping God is our God! This is personal.

Now that we've covered the first four words, let's move on to what is next: "how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Once again we see the importance of "name." It is not just that God's name is known; it is that everything the name represents – his glory, his rule, his essence, his power – is on full display. That is why the Psalmist uses the word "majestic" to

¹ Gerald Wilson, The NIV Application Commentary. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2002), 200.

² Ibid

describe this demonstration of God's name. The word is used to describe one who is of "impressive – almost intimidating – power...a power that is visible, on display for all to see."³ The Psalmist is saying that everywhere that he can look – "in all the earth" – the majesty of God's name is declared with triumphant power. This self-existing, universe-creating, self-revealing, slavery-breaking, grace-giving, always-existing, never-ending, nation-conquering, people-loving and promise-keeping God is our God, and everything we see declares his greatness. In other words: God is amazing!

The Psalmist is overwhelmed by the beauty, power and graciousness of God. He is so transfixed by his love for God that he looks at the world, and he can't help but see the glory of God revealed. The whole earth declares "God is amazing!" This is the predominant theme of this Psalm, and that is why it both starts and ends with this statement. He will lead us to other places, but in true form of a song, this is the chorus that is repeated – God you are amazing!

"You have been so gracious to me"

Part of the beauty of what happens in this Psalm is the contrast between God's amazing power and majesty and the gracious way that he operates. God is amazing in his power, but he is also amazing in the kindness and grace he displays.

To set up this contrast, the Psalmist points us even beyond the earth. He takes the scope even further out. "You have set your glory above the heavens." He is trying to capture the full scope of God's beauty, and he extends it to regions beyond his own existence and beyond even what he knows. God's glory is set even above the heavens. In other words, this is glory beyond what we can even grasp. He wants us to see the enormity of the display of God's fame. He takes it as far as he can. But then look what he says next: "Out of the mouth of babes and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger" (Ps 8:2).

He goes from the highest of heights to describing the most limited and powerless. He takes us from the regions beyond the heavens to the babbling, incoherent speech or cries of children. "Babes and infants" means toddlers and babies, and he is referring to the sounds that come from such children. And from these seemingly powerless, helpless children Psalm 8 says that God establishes strength. The NIV renders this "ordained praise." Apparently it is hard to translate, but the meaning is fairly clear when you put it in the context of foes, enemies, and avengers.

The Psalmist is contrasting God's incredible might with the fact that he is able to defeat his foes using the most weak and helpless creatures. The young children are a sufficient army to both praise him and to conquer the foes of God. It is a remarkable statement. God is so powerful

³ Wilson, 201.

that he can use children to bring down those who oppose him. Now if you were raised in church, you are hearing a song in your head right now: "Only a boy named David, only a little sling..."

45 Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. 46 This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, 47 and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand" (1 Sam 17:45-47).

David is not talking smack. The name of the Lord always trumps ability, age, or strength. And the Psalmist (likely David) is reflecting on how gracious God is to use people who are weak and powerless on their own. God graciously gives power to those who are naturally weak. The formula goes like this: "God, you are amazing in your power; you are amazing in your grace."

This theme is repeated in verses 3-4. The Psalmist looks up at the heavens, seeing the moon and stars that God has set in place, and he says that God did all of this amazing work by using his fingers. In other words, the beauty of what is seen in the night sky was created by an almost effortless use of God's fingers. God is that powerful.

This amazement with God's power leads the Psalmist to ask "what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" His amazement at creative power now turns to wonder that God would consider and care about insignificant human beings. It is as if the Psalmist looks at the sky and says, "Why would you even care for us, God? We're nothing. We are so insignificant. We are so helpless, weak, and dependent." The Psalmist is overwhelmed with the contrast of God's power and his grace. He is amazingly powerful and yet so thoughtful and kind.

"In spite of the incredible chasm that separates humans and their God, so that humans appear as but minuscule specks of dust on a rock revolving around one of thousands of stars in but one of countless galaxies flung across the universe, God is still mindful of human and has the will, purpose, and incredible gifting for our lives. In a world of human kings, a peasant subject might languish unknown and uncared for in the furthest reaches of the empire, but Yahweh remains mindful of all those whom he has made for a purpose."⁴

This is what happens when you behold the real beauty of God. This is why I love the Bible, and why I love theology. The more that I understand about God, the more amazed I am that he cares for humans – let alone sinful human beings.

⁴ Wilson, 205.

And yet the Psalmist didn't even know half of the story that we know. The New Testament unpacks this graciousness of God at an even deeper level as the Son of God actually becomes a human being in order to redeem us from the curse of our sin. Just listen to how the Apostle of John presents it and listen to how gracious God has been:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made (John 1:1-4).

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") 16 And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John 1:14-16).

10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:10-13).

If you understand God's glory and your own sinfulness, then the more that you learn about both, the more amazed you are at God's graciousness to you. In fact, it is overwhelming at times when you consider that this self-existing, universe-creating, self-revealing, slavery-breaking, always-existing, never-ending, nation-conquering, people-loving and promise-keeping God is our God, and that he cares personally for you. And then he sends his Son to become a man who died for the payment of our sin. It is just beyond belief. In fact, to understand this mystery of grace should make us heartily agree with the Psalmist – "what is man that you are mindful of him!" God has been incredibly gracious.

"Everything I have is a gift from you"

The third and final thought is found in verses 5-8 as the Psalmist reflects not only on the general grace of God in considering mankind, but even more on the countless ways that God has blessed us. It really is as John 1:16 just said it: We have received grace upon grace.

Human beings have special and honored role in God's creation, and it is a gift from God. Unlike any other creature on the planet, human beings are made in the image of God. We are unique in that God said about human beings, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:24). The image of God is the imprint of the creator whereby human beings in thought, feelings, creativity, action, and soul mirror what God is like. The Psalmist marvels at God's gracious exaltation of humans: "made him a little lower than the heavenly beings."

However, the overarching tone of this section of Psalm 8 is not a fascination with mankind. The real focal point is that everything that human beings have is given by God. We didn't make ourselves; we didn't create the image of God; we did not create the gifts. God did all of this.

Again, this changes what we see in life. Humans are able to do some very amazing things. Technological, societal, medical, and industrial advances are amazing things to behold. It is amazing to watch a skilled athlete, a gifted musician, a talent artist, or prolific writer use his or her talents. But underneath all of that talent should be a clear understanding that it is God who provided these gifts.

Beyond the specific gifts, God has also granted an amazing amount of authority to us. That is what the Psalmist reflects on in verses 6-8. God has entrusted us with an incredible role:

6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, 7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas (Ps 8:6-8).

To have dominion and to put something under one's feet both indicate a level of authority and victory. But notice that God has given us authority over the works of your hands, and the victory is something that God has created. In both cases, God is clearly at the center. Therefore, any authority that is exercised on the earth – personal, family, church, governmental or legal – is derived and given authority. In other words, you may hold the position, you may have some clout, and you may have power but you do not hold it exclusively or independently. Further, you only have it because of the good graces of God.

This is, by the way, why you pray before a meal. It is the offering of thanksgiving for God's care and provision. It is remembering that without God's grace sustaining everything that went into getting this food on the plate in front of you, there would be no food.

Where then does this receiving of grace lead us? Back to consider how great and marvelous God is! The Psalmist comes full circle and closes out the Psalm in verse nine by repeating the theme that we heard in verse one: "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth."

Theology Leads to Doxology

When you see life from this vantage point, it changes everything! Rightly understanding God in all of his beauty will lead you to a heart that must praise him. The study of God (theology) leads to the worship of God (doxology). So what should be our takeaways from the glorious Psalm?

1. Look at life theologically

How sad it must be to listen to a piece of music or to behold the birth of a baby and think, “That is beautiful” but to view it is impersonal chance, fate, or luck. To see life this way is to miss the beauty of God. Therefore, I want you to remember that everything in this world is not created as an end in itself; it was created to point us to God. So enjoy the blessings and the beauty of what life is. But use it for its full purpose – as a platform of praise of a great God.

2. Look at yourself humbly

How tragic and silly to think that we have made something of ourselves! A right understanding of this Psalm should bring us to our knees in humble acknowledgement that anything good, any blessing, and any success comes from the hand of a gracious God. How awful to have a heart filled with self-praise and pride when everything you have – including the mind that thinks such wicked things – is only doing its work because of a kind heavenly Father.

3. Look to Jesus solely

In Hebrews 2, the writer uses Psalm 8 as part of his argument regarding the importance of the work of Jesus. And in that chapter we told about Jesus’s humanity (2:9), his suffering (2:9), his endurance (2:10), and his understanding (2:10). In Hebrews 3:1, the writer captures the effects of this identification: “Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus...”

In other words, if you want to see the most glorious demonstration of the majesty and mercy of God, look no further than Jesus. For in his life and death we see a self-existing, universe-creating, self-revealing, slavery-breaking, always-existing, never-ending, nation-conquering, people-loving, promise-keeping, personal-caring God lay down his life and die for sinful human beings. Nothing is more worthy of praise than that.

And that should cause us to say: “O Jesus, our Jesus how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

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Summer Challenge:

- Memorization – Psalms 1:4-6
- Reading:
 - — Psalms 22-25
 - — Psalms 26-29
 - — Psalms 30-33
 - — Psalms 34-35
 - — Psalms 36-37