

PSALM 8

- The Lord is majestic in his condescension to crown man with high honours -

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Introduction and setting

Psalm 8 begins differently from most psalms. It starts with an exclamation of praise spoken directly to God. It is not in the first place a call to fellow believers to praise God. Actually, the first word of the psalm is the name of the royal God (Hebr: *adoon* – a royal title). There is no other psalm of praise that begins in this way! Usually those psalms that call for the Lord’s help will start with his name. Here we do not have a cry for help, but a cry of praise! Usually when “*adoon*” is used to refer to God, it emphasizes his transcendent power and nature. The psalm ends in a similar way – with the majesty of the name of the Lord. This is important to note, because too frequently we think of the exalted position of man in this psalm without noting the frame in which it is put. **This psalm wants to exalt the Lord for his majestic royal condescension to man.** Man is given a position and function in God’s creation that exceeds all comprehension and evokes praise to God who is Lord/Master. It is noteworthy that the Lord is addressed directly throughout this psalm. He is not spoken about, but spoken to in wonder.

Form and structure

The psalm forms a very cohesive unit, but can be studied in four recognizable parts:

- ❖ Verses 1-2: The majesty and might of God.
- ❖ Verses 4-5: Man’s sense of insignificance.

- ❖ Verses 6-9: The function/role God has destined for man.
- ❖ Verse 10: Praise of God.

Exposition

Verse 1-2:

For the director of music. According to gittith. A psalm of David.

¹ *LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

You have set your glory in the heavens.

² *Through the praise of children and infants*

*you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.*

- ❖ This Psalm, like most, begins with a title. In this case it probably says something about the author. *“Many psalms name an individual or a group with a prefixed lamed preposition. The most common by far is ledāwid (almost half the psalms), ... First, we note that the Hebrew preposition lamed can be taken in a number of different ways. Using ledāwid as our example, this theoretically could be rendered: of David or by David (indicating authorship), concerning David, in the tradition of David, for David(s use), dedicated to David. The first meaning indicating authorship is the traditional way of understanding the phrase, and there are sufficient reasons to believe that the editors did intend to so attribute authorship. Certainly, the historical titles indicate that the early editors took the phrase that way.”¹*
- ❖ “Your name” refers to much more than a mere way to address God. It refers to the totality of who God is in his revelation of himself to his people. In this context, for example, “your name” and “your glory” function as synonyms; it represents all that God is in his person and in his works of creation and salvation. The praise in this verse is repeated at the closing of the psalm and indicates that the glory of the Lord’s name forms the main theme of this psalm. Whatever is said of man must be read in the light of the glory that belongs to the Lord. This verse does not imply that the Lord’s name is necessarily acknowledged

¹ Longman, Tremper III. *Psalms: Tyndale Old Testament Commentary*. Inter Varsity Press: Nottingham, p. 20.

universally. However, the scope of this psalm is not limited to Israel alone. The whole of creation comes into the picture.

- ❖ Verse 2 poses a fundamental contrast between “*children and infants*” on the one hand, and “*the foe and the avenger*” on the other. There is a contrast between the praise of the weak children and the silence of the enemies of God. And the fundamental position of both of these parties is determined by their attitude towards the stronghold that the Lord has established. The Lord has determined to use the praise of the weak in a mysterious way as a stronghold against his foes and avengers. The “enemies/foes” are the “wicked” of whom we so often hear in the psalms. They represent all who trust in human strength and are self-assertive. They are those who will not recognize and live from their total dependence on who and what the Lord is in his self-presentation to man. In short: they do not trust in the Lord’s name and would therefore not let go of their enmity towards the way the Lord presents himself to man.
- ❖ Who are the “children and infants”? They represent those who live in humbleness and reliance upon the Lord. These are the people of the Lord who rely upon him and his goodness alone; they embrace the Lord in faith as he presents and offers himself to man; they call on and trust in the name of the Lord. All of their strength is in the Lord! God uses the weak (real children and infants as well!) in this world. The “*foe and avenger*” are actually silenced by the praise of children and the weak! Whatever is said in the rest of the psalm about man’s greatness, it must be understood in the light of the position given to him by the God who reveals his own glory in this way. The strength of the weak lies in their access to the Lord of glory.

Verses 3-4:

³ *When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?*

- ❖ The humble, represented in this psalm by the children and infants, recognize the insignificance of man when considering the enormity of the glorious work of God’s hands in creation (represented here by the moon and stars). Man’s relationship with God is poetically

emphasized when the moon and stars are presented as the work of God's "fingers".² How insignificant does man feel in the immensity of the universe! The reaction of the humble in wonder and amazement is: "What is man?" This is in stark contrast to the anticipated reaction of the "foe and the avenger" that in this case is silenced. These enemies of the Lord would see only meaninglessness and the absence of the Lord in everything. The humble however sees much, much more than man who is insignificant in the vastness of God's universe. The amazement of the "children and infants" is not focused on man's insignificance alone, ***but rather on the Lord's mindfulness of this (seemingly) insignificant mankind!!*** This is the object of the actual praise of the children and infants; not man who is so tiny, but the Lord who is ever so mindful of this man and who finds it in his heart to care for him. In this vast creation, the Lord is truly mindful of man. Does the psalm offer an answer to the question of why God is mindful of man? No. The Lord's mindfulness and care towards man eludes all explanation, but evokes wonder and amazement!

Verses 5-8:

⁵ *You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.*

⁶ *You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:*

⁷ *all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,*

⁸ *the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.*

- ❖ These verses indicate that the Lord's mindfulness of man is of a very special nature. The Lord has exalted man to a role as master of the Lord's creation. Mankind is actually only "a little less than God" (some translations render the Hebrew "*elohim*" here as "angels", in accordance with the Septuagint). The reference to the role of dominion given to man over all

² Cf. Craigie, Peter C. Word Biblical Commentary Volume 19: Psalms 1-50. Word Books: Waco, p.108

created things is most probably to man being created “in God’s image” as stated in Genesis 1:26-28. This dominion is comprehensive; everything is put “under their (mankind’s) feet” – the land animals, the birds of the sky and all marine life. The reference to “all that swim the paths of the seas” is significant, because in Old Testament scripture, the sea is often the source of opposition to the Lord’s people and a source of all sorts of evil (cf. the monstrous animals sometimes referred to that live in the sea).

Verse 9:

⁹*LORD, our Lord,*

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

- ❖ The psalm ends with the same praise that it starts with: amazement about the majesty of the Lord, the Lord that is mindful of man.

Application

- ❖ This psalm is certainly not a tool upon which to base some sort of natural theology. When man gazes into the vastness of creation, he does not receive any revelation that brings him “closer to God”. We do not find that in this psalm. At best, staring into the heavenly glory can bring man to a realization of his insignificance or bring him to a deification of nature/creation. The worship of the heavenly bodies as divine by the nations of the ancient Near East is well known. In Psalm 8 these heavenly bodies are reduced to the “work of God’s fingers”! It will always be those alone who are already humble and righteous that will recognize these as work of the Lord’s fingers.
- ❖ It is only through the lens of scripture that man is seen in relation to the majesty of the Lord who relates to mankind. God chooses to give man a role in creation that brings man to praise God for his majesty revealed in this way. Through man, God establishes the inconceivable in his creation. It is the Lord who gives man a function that is incomprehensible. Nowhere does that come to a fuller fruition than in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is in and through him that we see the exalted function that God gives to man. In and through the man Jesus Christ, God has subjected even the world to come. That is the gospel of Hebrews 2:5-8! Humans are lower than God – that is a given. At the same time, however, they are so closely united to God that man is almost “godly”! Humans are “*a little lower than God*”.

- ❖ It is in Jesus that we see that all things in creation are subjected to man. In Jesus we see someone who for a short while was placed in a lowly position. However, he was crowned with glory and honour because of the death that he suffered. It is through this man that God brings many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10). In Jesus Christ we see how attentive God is to man. It is in man that even the future of heaven and earth is secured. It is in this man, Jesus Christ, who came to serve and not to be served, that the majesty of God's attentiveness for man is visible. It is in Jesus' sharing in our flesh that he broke the power of the devil (Heb. 2:14-15), because God has chosen to rule over his creation through man of flesh and blood. Herein lies the foundation of the praise of Psalm 8! God is mindful of man and what is done in the flesh.
- ❖ The New Testament refers a number of times to Psalm 8: Matthew 21:16; 1 Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:22; Hebrews 2:6-8. In all of these texts as they function in the New Testament, a Christological meaning is recognized. In Matthew 21 the contrast between the praise of the children is opposed to the silence and even enmity of the foes and avengers.
- ❖ The righteous is encouraged to note their enormously important function in God's plans and purpose for his creation. Even though we might feel very insignificant, the Lord nevertheless in his wisdom and mercy uses the "*praise of children and infants*" to work out his purposes. His might is demonstrated in their weakness and full dependence on the Lord. The Lord's enemies are defeated by the praises of the weak! It is as if the songs of praise of children overpower the enmity and shouts of anger of the wicked. What is this strong weapon that the infants and the weak have against the Lord's enemies? Their "battle cry" is nothing but their praises. God's people is therefore a singing/praising people before all else! We see this so often clearly demonstrated: when Israel went out to fight against their enemies, the musicians went up front and the soldiers merely followed, demonstrating that the battle belongs to the Lord – he is their strength and shield. The Lord has chosen to fight his battles on earth through lowly, meek and weak human beings.

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