

What is Man?

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Psalm 8:3–4: “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him.”

Imagine David as a young shepherd boy in the fields of Bethlehem, keeping watch over his flocks by night. He is lying on his back, surrounded by his sheep, gazing up at a clear night sky. Or picture David as king in his palace in Jerusalem. He is on his rooftop at night, not looking across at his neighbor’s wife, but up into the night sky to drink in the beauty of the moon and stars. It was a scene like this that led David under the inspiration of the Spirit to cry in astonishment, “What is man, that thou art mindful of him?”

Like Psalm 19 (the theme passage of the retreat), Psalm 8 is generally about the creation. But Psalm 8 has a different emphasis. While Psalm 19 speaks of the creation generally, Psalm 8 emphasizes God’s creation of and provision for the highest of his creatures: man.

Although there is this difference between the two psalms, both have the same major theme: “O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!”

OUR GLORIOUS CREATION

In one of the versifications of Psalm 8 we sing, “When thy wondrous heavens I scan, then I know how weak is man.” That is one of the important truths that comes out of this psalm: the smallness and insignificance of man.

This is plain when we simply consider who we. We are weak, easily laid low by the smallest bugs and diseases. We are limited: limited in ability, limited in knowledge, limited in strength. We are insignificant, one person amongst billions upon the face of the earth.

But this is also something that God impresses upon us by means of the heavens (vv. 3–4). Think about the size of the earth. Then think about how the earth occupies just a small place in our solar system. Then think about how our solar system makes up just a small part of our galaxy. Then think about how our galaxy occupies just a small part among the many galaxies in

the universe. When you think about that, what impression are you left with about yourself? How small and weak man is. We are nothing in comparison to the heaven. We are a puny, insignificant speck of dust.

This is something that has always impressed me about Northwest Iowa. When you stand outside during a clear summer day, the sky feels so big and open and impressive. And the same is true at night; you go outside and gaze up into the vast, inky sky and see thousands of stars shining brightly. And there is a thought that rises unavoidably to the forefront of the mind: I am nothing.

How humbling! This is contrary to the attitude of the world (including the worldlings competing recently at the Olympics) as they strut with their chins in the air and their chests puffed out, boasting that man is might. This is contrary to my self-important, self-confident, self-seeking attitude. When we consider the heavens, and when we truly examine ourselves, we see that there is no room for pride in our lives. We are puny, insignificant, weak creatures of the dust. This ought to humble us deeply so we cry, “What is man? Who am I?”

How humbling, but also how amazing! The Creator is mindful of us puny creatures so that we are in his thoughts – how amazing! The Preserver visits us, sustains us, provides for us, bestows life and breath, food and drink, health and strength – how amazing! Stand in awe and amazement that God would condescend to us: “Who am I, that thou art mindful of me?”

The fact that God condescends to us is even more amazing when we consider how highly he has exalted us. He does more than feed and clothe us like the birds and lilies; he has given us honor unmatched.

There are two parts to our exaltation. First, God has exalted us in our creation. “For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour” (v. 5). The word “angels” is actually the word “God.” Sometimes in the Bible the word is used to describe beings other than God (cf. Ps. 82:1, 6), but ordinarily it refers to God. However you take it, it still describes the exaltation of man. God made man lower than himself and a little lower than the angels. Man is the highest of all earthly creatures. What distinguishes us from the animals is that we have a soul, a spiritual dimension, that makes it possible for us to stand in a relationship to God and the angels. And the explanation is that God created man originally in his own image. This is the crown of glory and honor with which we were crowned. From a spiritual point of view, we were the children of God and looked like him.

Second, God has exalted us in our position. “Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet...” (vv. 6–8). In the beginning God gave to man dominion over the creation (Gen. 1:26, 28). As the highest of all earthly creatures and the one made in God’s image, God entrusted to man the rule of the creation. God made man to rule as king over the creation under God, in that way bringing the praise of the whole creation to the Creator.

How humbling! Not only does he think of and care for us puny creatures, but God has seen fit to create us a little lower than the angels, crown us with glory and honor, and give us dominion over all the works of his hands.

How amazing! What condescension of God in exalting insignificant creatures so highly!

OUR GLORIOUS FUTURE

But there is more to Psalm 8 than a description of God’s original, glorious creation of man. There is a description of a higher mountain peak of glory here, but to reach it we have to descend from the mountain peak of our original creation and pass through a deep, dark valley. To appreciate fully the amazing condescension of God described in this psalm, we have to be reminded of the sad and shameful story of the fall.

Much of what has been said so far was true of us at creation, but is no longer the case. God made us in his own image, but we have lost the image of God and have taken on its opposite: the image of the devil. God gave us dominion over the whole creation as kings under him, but now we press the creation into the service of self and sin and Satan. God crowned us with glory and honor, but we have abdicated that crown and lost that glory. This took place when we fell into sin. When Father Adam and Mother Eve ate of the forbidden fruit and rebelled against God, we sinned in them and thereby fell from that original state of honor and glory.

But that took place according to the sovereign good pleasure of God in order to raise us to a far higher glory in Christ. Psalm 8 is a Messianic psalm. There are a number of times that this psalm is quoted in the New Testament as applying to Christ (cf. Matt. 21:15–16; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22; Heb. 2:8–9). Jesus Christ is “the son of man” (Ps. 8:4). He was made a little lower than the angels when he took upon himself a human nature and was born of the virgin Mary. He entered into our shame and humiliation and went to Calvary in order to make atonement for our sins. And having made perfect satisfaction there, he arose victorious from the grave and ascended into heaven where he was crowned as King of kings and given rule over all

things. And he will come again as King to create a new heavens and earth where his kingdom will be fully realized and he will have dominion over all things. Christ is crowned with the greatest glory and honor.

By his saving work he causes us to share in that glory and honor and dominion. Although we are undeserving, God is mindful of us and visits us with his salvation and love. Although we lost the image of God at the fall, he recreates us in his image and crowns us with a greater glory and honor. In Christ the King we reign over all things now. This creation is our rightful inheritance. All things work together for our good.

This is something we will enjoy fully at the return of Christ. When he returns, we will be crowned with the highest glory and honor. We will be like Christ, bearing perfectly his image in perfection. We will receive the new heavens and earth as our inheritance where we will live and labor in the service of Christ. We will be given rule over all things with Christ. We are sons and daughters of the King, destined to reign with him forever!

How humbling! Who am I that God would choose to crown me, an undeserving sinner, with the highest glory in heaven?

How amazing! Who am I that God would be mindful of me and visit me with his salvation in Christ?

OUR GLORIOUS GOD

But, in the end, Psalm 8 is not about man and his original glory, or even the church and the glory of her salvation. In the end, Psalm 8 is about God and his glory.

This is the theme of Psalm 8. This is how it begins (vv. 1–2), and this is how it ends (v. 9). Some commentators are confused and say that there are really two themes running through Psalm 8: the glory of God and the place of man in his creation. But this is not true. There is one theme that runs through this psalm, and it is the glory of God as he reveals it in the honor he bestows upon man. The second idea is intended merely to serve the first and most important idea of the excellency of God.

Therefore, it would be wrong for us to end our consideration of Psalm 8 by talking about man and his glory. Then we've missed the whole point of the psalm. We have to end by talking about the glory of our God. This is what we constantly need throughout our life: a glorious, expansive view of our God.

Everything that's been said so far about us ought to lead us back to God. When we see the honor which God originally gave to man, we remember how puny man is in comparison to the heavens. Then we are led to consider how puny the heavens are before the God who has "set [his] glory above the heavens" (v. 1). The glory of man is a drop in a bucket compared to the exceeding greatness of the glory of the Creator.

What is true in creation is also true in salvation. The glory with which God crowns us is not our own but his own glory. And though he crowns us with great glory and honor and gives us dominion over the new creation, we are still lower than the one who is "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

Our response to the vision of God's glory we receive is to glorify him.

As you consider his glory in the works of his fingers in creation, praise him: O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

As you consider his glory in how he has made you, praise him: O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

And as you consider his glory in how he has remade you and glorified you in Christ, praise him: O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

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