

WHITE MEMORIAL

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

WMPC - Men's Bible Study

Psalm Eight - Spring 2017

Lesson #3

Read Psalm 8.

(Read the psalm out loud, not just silently.)

THREE SETS OF QUESTIONS:

Q1: Psalms are poems and psalms are prayers. They're poems prayed to God in the context of the community gathered for worship. As with most any poem you read or handed-down prayer you pray, you are either touched deeply by Psalm 8 and find it immensely resonant, or you are minimally impacted by it and find little there with which you connect. Which one are *you* while reading/praying this psalm? (It's okay; be honest.) What insights can you draw from observing how you're personally responding to Psalm 8? How does what you've observed factor into how you worship (corporately or personally) and pray (corporately or personally)?

Q2: The 'muse' of Psalm 8 is the observable beauty and inspirational awe of God's creation. Describe a moment when you've been humbled by the height and expansiveness of a mountain range; the depth and breadth of a body of water; a forest's density; a starry night's sky, etc.. Why do you think encounters such as these eventually direct the psalmist (and us) to self-reflection ("what are humans...)? What do you make of the fact that this moment (vv. 3-8) occurs in the context of worship?

Q3: What do you make of verse 2? How do you see it fitting together (or not) with the surrounding content of Psalm 8? Based on your reading of the whole psalm, venture to offer an interpretation of this verse and its inclusion in Psalm 8.

THREE INSIGHTS:

I1: The structure of Psalm 8 is not unusual and follows a familiar form often found in biblical literature. The structure of the psalm is chiasmic: the concepts are repeated in the reverse order of how they are first presented:

A: Doxology: O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

B: God's handiwork: You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and avenger. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

C: Who am I?: What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

C¹: Who am I?: Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

B¹: God's handiwork: You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea.

A¹: Doxology: O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Looking at the structure laid out above, it's worth noting that the anthropocentric middle (i.e., the human-centric center of the psalm) is bracketed by divine sovereignty and creation. This is a great instance of form and function operating hand-in-hand. Humans may be the crown jewel of God's creation, but the responsibility given to us as such instructs in the way of humility when we locate that

responsibility and uniqueness in the context of divine sovereignty. It is God's handiwork that humanity is tasked with caring for; we thus should be wary of any practice of "dominion" that threatens to disorder the beauty therein.

I2: Reading Psalm 8 with an eye to what sort of psalms come before (3-7) and after it (9-13) generates fascinating insight which helps us answer Psalm 8's central question: *What are human beings...?* Making connections between Psalm 8 and a reference to it in Hebrews 2, J. Clinton McCann Jr. suggests that the Psalm anticipates a New Testament understanding of the identity of God and humanity:

Heb. 2:6-8 quotes Ps 8:4-5, 6b, and Heb 2:9 applies Ps 8:4 to Jesus. It appears on the surface that the author of Hebrews has simply understood the phrase "son of man" [KJV of 8:4] in Ps 8:4 as a christological title. This may be the case; however, it is also the case that Hebrews 2 as a whole points in the same direction as Psalm 8—namely, the inseparability of suffering and glory for both God and humanity. It is Jesus—the "reflection of God's glory" (Heb 1:3) and the complete embodiment of authentic humanity—who conclusively reveals that God's glory is not incompatible with suffering and thus that the suffering of human beings does not preclude their sharing in the glory of God. ...Psalm 8, Hebrews 2, and the NT as a whole call human beings to live under God's rule and to exercise "dominion over...all things" in the same way that God exercises dominion: as a suffering servant (see Mark 10:41-45; Phil 2:5-11). (*New Interpreters Bible* Vol. IV, p. 713)

I3: The Pulitzer Prize-winning author Marilynne Robinson has an essay that is titled after this psalm: "Psalm Eight." In the essay, Robinson marvels at the artful nature of Scripture and its ability to instruct us again, and again, and again. Here is Robinson chewing on the central question of the poem found in verse 4:

The strategy of the Psalmist is to close the infinite distance b/t God and humankind by confounding all notions of scale. If the great heavens are the work of God's fingers, what is small and mortal man? The poem answers its own question this way: Man is crowned with honor and glory. He is in a singular sense what God has made him, because of the dignity God has conferred upon him, splendor of a higher order, like that of angels. The Hebrew Scriptures everywhere concede: yes, foolish; yes, guilty; yes, weak; yes, sad and bewildered. Yes, resistant to cherishing and rebellious against expectation. And yes, forever insecure at best in his vaunted dominion over creation. Then how is this dignity manifest? Surely in that God is mindful of man... (*The Death of Adam*, p. 241)

LINKS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

L1: Anneke Kaai's abstract symbolism painting, [Psalm 8](#), is a visual interpretation of the Psalm, specifically verses 1, 3, 9. Notice the size of the earth relative to the fingers barely apparent in the upper third of the painting. The Hebrew lettering barely visible in the globe read "YHWH"—a quite literal rendering of God's majestic name (8:1,9) etched onto the face of the earth.

L2: Augustine (354-430 C.E.) was a marvelous, imaginative reader of the psalms if ever there was one. Here's a [link](#) to his exegetical comments on Psalm 8.

L3: Remember the 1997 film *Contact*, starring Jodie Foster and Matthew McConaughey? The first scene of the movie offers a fitting backdrop for Psalm 8, especially the verses 3-4. [Watch the 4-minute scene](#) and then re-read Psalm 8.