

# Mindful of the Calling

Numbers 6:22 | Psalm 8 | Galatians 4:4-7 | Luke 2:15-21

## PSALM 8

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. <sup>2</sup> Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. <sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; <sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? <sup>5</sup> Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. <sup>6</sup> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, <sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, <sup>8</sup> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. <sup>9</sup> O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

## INTRODUCTION

There was a little girl happily walking along with her father. A very inquisitive little girl, she asked out of the blue: ‘Daddy, where do people come from?’ She’s a little girl, so we won’t fault her for poor grammar. Her father gently explained the concept of natural selection and how, over millions of years, human beings most likely evolved from an ape-like ancestor that we have in common with modern-day chimpanzees. A few days later, the little girl was with her mother and asked the same question. ‘Mommy, where do people come from?’ Her mother explained to her that God created human beings and that we all descend from Adam and Eve. Confused, the little girl protested: ‘But daddy said we came from monkeys.’ And her mother replied: ‘Well, he was talking about his side of the family.’<sup>1</sup>

It seemed right to start the new year with a joke. But it is an interesting joke, because it addresses one of the great philosophical questions intrinsic to our very being. Where do we come from? It’s an important question—often paired with the possibly more important question, what is our significance? Is humanity important? Is it unique? Why do we even exist? Well, that joke addresses the first question and, today, I would like to suggest that Psalm 8 addresses the second. How are human beings significant? And as we look at this Psalm this morning, I will suggest that it makes this point: *The significance of humanity is graciously granted by God.* The significance of humanity is graciously granted by God. And as a result, God’s people are called to reflect his unparalleled and royal majesty. Let’s take a closer look.

## 1. GOD, THE MAJESTIC KING

First, we must consider who the Psalm is about—or really, to whom it was written. While it will address the place of humanity, it is unequivocally a Psalm that is about God, first and foremost. The Psalm begins and ends with the same phrase: “O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”<sup>2</sup> This phrasing indicates that it is a hymn of praise, and it is, in fact, the only Psalm of praise, out of 150 Psalms, that is entirely addressed to God. Some translations render that first line “O LORD, our Lord,” but there are actually two different words behind that

<sup>1</sup> This is a variation on an old joke of an unknown origin.

<sup>2</sup> Psa 8:1, 9.

phrasing.<sup>3</sup> The first is *Yahweh*, the covenant name of God, which is often translated as *LORD* in English, but used to be translated as *Jehovah*, and means something like *I am that I am*. It is a statement of God's eternity. The second word, however, is *Adonai*, also translated as *Lord*, but in the sense of *king* or *governor* or *sovereign*. It's a fitting address for an eternal God—a God who is before creation—and who *rules* over all creation. It is no wonder, then, that his name would be known and seen as majestic in all the earth, that his royal splendour would be observed by all.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. GOD, THE CREATIVE KING

This brings us, then, to the first major stanza of poetry after the opening line. If the first line told us who the Psalm is about—the LORD, our Sovereign, then this stanza tells us why he is so important. *"You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger."*<sup>5</sup> Notice how it opens with a contrast. While his name is majestic in all the earth, his position is above it, in the heavens. This contrast evokes the creation imagery of Genesis 1—and is why many scholars categorize this Psalm as a hymn of praise to God, the Creator. Earth and heaven. Night and day. The imagery is that of the first few days of creation. But the intended goal here is not awe, it is not wonder at God's creative power. It is deference. God is Creator in the sense of ruling creation. That becomes clear in the second line. His glorious reign over all creation is established through defeat of enemies, which in the context of the first line of this stanza, and light of the rest of the Psalm—suggests the enemy is the darkness of and chaos of pre-creation. Remember back: *"the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep."*<sup>6</sup> God defeated that enemy and inaugurated creation through speech—through his Word—through declaring light in the dark—through silencing the chaos with his voice. It was through his speaking creation into being that he has undone chaos.<sup>7</sup> In other words, he is Creator in the sense of ruler, king, sovereign over all things, who commands creation with his word. And this is why more than wonder and awe are in order, but deference and submission are the right response.

## 3. GOD, THE GRACIOUS KING

Having considered how God is our Sovereign, and worthy of praise because of his creative power and rule, the Psalmist then turns to the second and longer stanza of poetry—and to the existential question of humanity: What is our place in this creation of God? And the answer is quite simple: privileged. We are in a privileged place. Listen again:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. 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 seas.

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<sup>3</sup> See the King James Version, for example.

<sup>4</sup> This is not a pantheistic statement about God being in everything and everything being God. This is a much narrower statement about how his majesty is evident in all the earth.

<sup>5</sup> Psa 8:1b-2.

<sup>6</sup> Gen 1:2.

<sup>7</sup> See also Psa 89:5–14, Psa 104:1–9, and Psa 29:10.

Notice how this stanza begins again contemplating the heavens. Notice the creation language of *moon and stars, beasts of the field, birds of the air, fish of the sea*. Yet, the pinnacle of creation was not beasts, birds, or fish. On the sixth day, it was human beings.<sup>8</sup> What are human beings? This is not an absolute question—with Adam, Eve—or possibly monkeys—as part of the answer. This is a question of position. ‘What is mankind that you, God, are mindful of them? Why would you privilege, or even care about, humans?’ the Psalmist wonders.

In the answer that follows, two things are worth noting. First, privileged as we are, we are not God. We are lesser. We are imperfect and weak. Notice the verbs—humans need to be minded and to be cared for. We are limited in our nature and being. There is something intrinsic to us—at least after the fall—that causes us to be frail, fallible, and flawed. And to be honest, we live in denial of this a lot of the time. We convince ourselves that medicine or technology or diplomacy or economic prosperity or state security will solve our problems. Or we reduce everything to self-perception—something you’ve heard me talk about before—so that self-realization is all that matters. But God sees us differently. He sees us as beings that need to be minded and cared for, to be helped in some way. We do well to have a realistic view of ourselves.

Nevertheless, secondly, and despite our fallibility, he privileges us to be like him. The Genesis language is ‘made in his image.’<sup>9</sup> But here, in Psalm 8, it is quite specific. He bestows upon us the royal traits of *glory* and *honour*. The verb there is even *crowned*. God is the Sovereign, the King and Ruler of all creation, and yet he makes us like him in this. He gives us his royal task, even, in having dominion over creation. We are a representation of God’s majesty in participating in his rule. What a privileged position indeed!

And yet, remember we are fallible. We may have this high calling, but it does not mean we execute it well. Look around. The pain of failure and loss is all around us. The frailty of our bodies has become so evident through the pandemic. The frailty of our society has become so evident through the war. Our frailty is always on display, through the loss of loved ones to death, the fracturing of relationships through sin, the destruction we bring upon ourselves through our own weakness. As James Mays, a scholar of the Psalms put it: “Dominion has become domination; rule has become ruin; subordination in the divine purpose has become subjection to human sinfulness.”<sup>10</sup> Privileged as we are, and hopeful as this Psalm may be, our reality simply does not live up. But this, friends, is why we do not stop with the Old Testament. We keep reading. There was a human being born who did not fail, who was not fallible, who actually lived up to this high calling and was worthy to rule alongside God. As the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Gen 1:24-31.

<sup>9</sup> Gen 1:26-27.

<sup>10</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 70.

<sup>11</sup> Col 1:15-16.

Jesus was before Creation, and yet, he was fully human, including participating in the rites of normal human beings, the point of today's celebration of the naming and circumcision. But he was not merely an example, the only human who lived up to the privileged calling laid out in this Psalm, he was more than that. Paul goes on to say:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.<sup>12</sup>

You see, our frailty and fallibility—our inability to reflect God's majesty—was addressed by Jesus in the cross. Our wickedness, our rebellion against God, our selfishness, our sin was addressed by Jesus in the cross. He was not just the perfect human being who perfectly embodied the image of God and was worthy of having dominion like God, but he was the mediator—the one who allowed us to continue to be privileged, to be favoured by God, even when we don't deserve it. He died that we might be reconciled to God. Praise be to God through Jesus Christ.

And what's more, the Psalmist anticipates it. Even this lengthy stanza about humans never leaves the *you* language of the Psalm, it never leaves the mode of praise song to God for his graciousness in caring for us, in giving us this privileged position and then giving us a Saviour in Jesus Christ when we failed to live up to that privilege. It is a Psalm of praise to God for his grace.

## CONCLUSION

As I begin to close, I hope it is now clear: *The significance of humanity is graciously granted by God.* It is by his grace, his mercy, and not our merit, that we are so privileged. The significance of humanity is graciously granted by God, our Sovereign. And as a result, God's people are called to reflect his unparalleled majesty—to be gracious as he was in our coming and going. So let us go forth into this new year, mindful of the calling to be God's people, and confident that he is mindful of us. As we sing in the hymn:

Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us,  
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne;  
past put behind us, for the future take us,  
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.<sup>13</sup>

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, we thank you for sending your son in human flesh, to reconcile us to you, that we may be who you have called us to be. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>12</sup> Col 1:19-20.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Dudley-Smith, "Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided," (Hope Publishing Company, 1969)