

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 8 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PS. 8:1-9 ESV

1 To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. 2 Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger. 3 When I look at your heavens, 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, and the son of man that you care for him? 5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. 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. 9 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

STRUCTURE

- I. God's name is globally majestic (1a).
- II. God's glory is above the heavens, yet He wins victory through infants (1b-2).
- III. God's glory is above the heavens, yet He cares about people (3-4).
- IV. Man is lower than heavenly beings, yet he rules the earth under God (5-8).
- V. God's name is globally majestic (9).

GENERAL COMMENTARY

At first glance, it's easy to miss that this Psalm is about the glory of God in man, not about His glory in the heavens. This inclusio (a literary term for "bookends"), "How majestic is Your name in all the earth," makes this conclusion certain. So why does the author three times magnify the glory of God in the heavens?

- "You have set Your glory above the heavens" (1b).
- "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, what is man...?" (3-4).
- "You made him [man] a little lower than the heavenly beings" (5).

In extolling the glory of God in the heavens, the author's intent is not merely to point to God's glory there, but to contrast such obvious heavenly glory with the greater (though less obvious) manifestation of God's glory on earth through man. See the contrast noted above in italics.

- God's majesty is seen in the way He silences enemies through the praises of His people (2), and this is even more glorious than His glory in the heavens (1b).
- God's majesty is seen in the way He confers His authority to rule upon mankind (5b-8), and this is ultimately more glorious than even angelic creatures (5a).

All of this is made possible by the humility of God, displayed in caring for such insignificant creatures (3-4). Oh, to be noticed by God! We see the spectacular but God's eye is on the small. Earth is tiny; man is infinitesimal; children and infants—a metaphor for the humble—they are the smallest of the smallest of the small. We might as well be microbes. Yet God notices us, and this alone can explain the victory of His army of little ones (2).

Why is it that God takes notice of mankind over the rest of creation? Verse 5-8 reminds us of the order of creation. Those magnificent luminaries were sparked to life on Day 4 (Gen. 1:14-19), but God crowned His creative work on Day 6 with the creation of mankind who was made in His image: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, overall the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (Gen. 1:26). This sounds very familiar to Ps. 8:5-8.

Notably, God's command in Gen. 1:28 becomes more significant in the light of Ps. 8. The command: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." God's original command was His method for making His name globally majestic. Of course, we failed to fulfill that command, but Jesus—our Second Adam—fulfilled the

original mandate to subdue the earth by prevailing over Adam's original enemy, the Serpent, at the Cross. As we'll see in the verse-by-verse commentary, Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of Psalm 8.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY

1 To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

— "O LORD our Lord":

- The LORD is Yahweh, God's personal name, which ties back to Exodus 3 when God spoke from the burning bush, as the great "I AM." God is a consuming fire that needs no fuel, for He is all-sufficient, independent, and eternally existent.
- "Lord" speaks of God as sovereign ruler over the galaxies and over us. Yahweh is thus not only the self-sufficient, independent God; He is also our friend since we know His name; furthermore, He is also our Lord, for we submit to Him as King.
- He is not just THE Lord but OUR Lord. We, the people of God, gladly surrender to His Lordship. The "lordship" of a tyrant is not worth celebrating; the Lordship of OUR Lord is entirely different.

— "Majestic":

- Ross: "wide, great, high, powerful, noble."

—"name": God's character and nature

—"in all the earth":

- Even though Psalm 8 repeatedly references heavenly glory (8:1, 3, 5), the psalm is truly not about that; it is about God's glorious splendor, His resplendent majesty—on earth. This is emphasized not just by the internal content (children praying and praising, v. 2; God's care for mortals, v. 4; man's dominion over creation, vv. 7-8), but especially, by the inclusio: both the first and last verse repeat the same line about God's majesty "in all the earth."
- For those who lack eyes of faith, God's majesty cannot be found on earth. Chaos, destruction, injustice—these are what they see. These are easy to find. But glory and majesty? If it was so plain, there would be no atheists.
- Nevertheless, it is plain to the Psalmist, who offers his reasons. He sees God's majesty in the way He uses the weak to shame the strong (8:2), in the way He takes notice of mortals (8:4), and in the way He has entrusted them with dominion (8:5b-8).
- Once we observe, through childlike faith (8:2), the reasoning of the Psalmist, we see not pockets of divine majesty in creation; we see it "in all the earth." Everywhere we turn, there again is the majesty of God. We behold this splendor not just in Yosemite or at Niagara Falls, but even more than these, wherever there are people. God's majesty on earth is His majesty in man. We are made in His image. Traces of divine glory can be found in each one of us, even atheists.
- In the words of Irenaeus: "The glory of God is man fully alive." Every living person displays God's glory; Christians display it even more, for we are "fully alive" in Christ.

—"You have set your glory above the heavens":

- This is a strange line to follow the introduction, which is about God's majesty on the earth. It forces the reader to ask, "What is the relevance of God's glory in the heavens, if the Psalm is about God's majesty on the earth?"
- The answer, we'll see in subsequent verses, is that the contrast is intended as a foil. David is teeing up his real point, which he does by way of contrast:
 - His glory is in the heavens (8:1b), but even more in "children" who cry to Him in prayer and praise (8:2).
 - His glory is in the heavens (8:3), but even more in His mindfulness of mortals (8:4).
 - His glory is in the heavens (8:5), but even more in the way mankind images Him (8:5-8).
- The reason I say "even more" for each of these has theological grounding in the fact that mankind was created on the sixth day, as the crown of creation, the only work fashioned in God's image. More importantly, it is exegetically grounded in that David marvels—not at God's work in the heavens—but at God's work in man. In fact, He seems to almost pass over the majesty of stars and even angelic beings. These are like a background that make God's greatest work of art "pop." We are God's greatest work of art. This is especially true after we are re-created in Christ as God's "workmanship" (Eph. 2:10). Even angels marvel (3:10).

2 Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.

—"mouth of babies and infants":

- On one hand we can see ways in which this was fulfilled literally. John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit and prophesied Christ's arrival, even from the womb (Luke 1:15; 2:44). More importantly, Jesus sees direct fulfillment of this verse in the way children shouted His praise during the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, before His crucifixion:
 - Matt. 21:13 He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers." 14 And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. 15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant, 16 and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, **""Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?"**"
 - Interestingly, this is a claim by Jesus to be Yahweh. By quoting Psalm 8, where children worship the one addressed as "O LORD, our Lord," Jesus claims to Himself be both Yahweh and Sovereign King.
 - This is the argument used by John Chrysostom in the fourth century to contend against Arians who thought Christ "began" in the incarnation.
- On the other hand, "babies and infants" or "children" are symbolic of the ideal disciple for their weak, humble dependence on God. We see this even in Matthew 21, where "the blind and the lame came to him in the temple." Symbolically, these too are "children." Unlike the religious leaders, they acknowledge their weakness and humbly cry out to God.
- Waltke describes the "babies and infants" as "a hyperbolic metaphor for people who depend totally upon him."
- It is not the proud who win in the end; it is the humble. Not the great ones, but the little ones, for God delights in using the weak to shame the strong, and the foolish to shame the wise (1 Cor. 1:27-29).
- Waltke: "Luther sees the whole psalm as a glorious prophecy of the future kingdom of God, using babes and sucklings to describe the kingdom's unique character of humility. He contrasts its nature with that of the Turks and the Papacy, and, feeling his own weakness, he sees the power of the Word as being expressed through children, the unlearned, the weak, and the despised."
- In 8:2, this victory is manifest in the way the "mouths of babies and infants"—surely a reference to their humble praise and desperate prayer—are used by God to defeat "the enemy and the avenger."
- God's majesty is seen, not just in the heavens, but on the earth—He defeats His enemies WITH AN ARMY OF BABIES!! We are those babies. We are the ones who call out to Yahweh as "our LORD." We are the weak and desperate ones who cry to Dad for help. And it is through our prayers that we defeat the mighty. This is the majesty of God.

—"you have established strength because of your foes":

- This is slightly different from the way Jesus quotes it when He says, "from the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise."
 - The reason it's different is a translational issue. The Greek Septuagint translates it as, "you have prepared praise." The Hebrew Masoretic text translates it as, "you have established strength."
 - In the end, both are true. God's majesty is made known in desperate prayers and humble praise of His people, which God has prepared in advance as a military base for destroying the strong.
- Some Christians think that the power of the church is in occupying seats of power and using our influence for good. Surely, this is a good thing—but we don't need it. There will always be only a few Christians who possess such power (1 Cor. 1:26). True power is not found on the lips of those who wield worldly power, but in the mouths of babies and infants, that is, humble disciples of Jesus who cry out to Him in desperation and who shout in celebration like kids at the Triumphal entry.

—“to still the enemy and the avenger”:

- The “enemy” and “avenger” are perfect opposites of “babies and infants.”
- They are proud, they oppose God, and they use their power for harm, not good.
- Calvin: “What majesty accrues to God when he brings onto the field of battle the poor in spirit against the arrogant hordes of wickedness in order to slay their intolerable pride in the dust.”

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

—This verse begins our second contrast between the heavenly and earthly. It is more expansive than what we saw in v. 2 (“You have set your glory above the heavens”). Here we describes “the moon and the stars” as “the work of your fingers” which God “set in place.”

—The reason for this expansion is that vv. 3-4 are the central verses of the song. God’s name is majestic on the earth because of the way He is mindful of man, made in His image. That mindfulness displays itself in how He uses the weak to shame the strong (v. 2), and in how He entrusts a dust-made mortal with dominion over His works (vv. 5-8).

—Just as God “set” the moon and stars in the heavens—none can disturb them—“children” and “infants” are set in place by the “fortress” created through prayer and praise. In other words, we are as fixed as the moon and stars by prayer and praise.

—“When I look at your heavens”:

- The Psalm enters something like a “narrative form” here. He could have just remarked on the glory of God in the heavens, or on the earth, but instead he invites us into his moment of reflection.
- His pausing to ponder is a model for all of us. Too often, the reason we fail to wonder at God’s majesty is we never pause to ponder. Just one letter separates the words ponder and wonder. But we don’t get one without the other. O, how important it is that we ponder! O, that we might ponder, and therefore also, wonder—at the majesty of God.

—These are not just “the heavens” but “your heavens.” Ownership belongs to God. The Creator owns His creation.

—“work of your fingers”:

- This line emphasizes that God created the cosmos with ease. If a farmer plants a crop, or if someone builds a skyscraper, these require not just fingers, but hands and arms and everything else.
- Of course, we know that God created with words from His mouth (Gen. 1; Ps. 33). This line does not diminish that truth. Again, it merely emphasizes ease. Nothing is hard for God.
 - And yet, what is so amazing, is that in 8:5-8, He uses us! He has no need of us, but He delights to use us to fulfill His eternal purpose.
- “work of your fingers” also matches 8:6, where God gives man “dominion over the work of your hands.” Why?
 - I don’t think we should understand a hard contrast between “the work of your fingers” in the heavens and “the work of your hands” on the earth. Logically, it would make no sense, for instance, that God’s creation of the earth “required more effort.” No, all of God’s creation was effortless for Him. For this reason, I believe this is merely an example of poetic variety.
 - I do still think, however, that the Psalmist intended us to connect the two phrases. Again, why? Because God did not entrust the galaxies to man; He entrusted the earth to Him. This agrees with Psalm 115:16: “The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth He has given to man.”
 - This does not discount that man might explore outer space, but it does suggest that man will never conquer it in the way he does the earth. Every year, fewer frontiers remain on the earth; but in an ever-expanding outer space, the frontier grows at a rate far beyond we could possibly explore, much less subdue.
 - And this brings us back to the point of the Psalm: God’s glory is most manifest, not in outer space, but on earth. It is on earth, not in space, that God has given dominion to man. It is down here, not out there, that we behold God’s majesty in the humble prayers and gentle stewardship He has entrusted us with.

4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

—This question makes a statement: God's majesty is seen in the way He sees mortal man. Despite our insignificance, and despite the universe's vastness, God sees US. And yet, this does not redound to our own glory—as some Christians would say ("see how great we are!")—rather, it redounds to the glory of God. We are babies and infants, subject in our humanity to the violence of foes and avengers. We are nothing in light of the cosmos. And yet God sees us because, according to vv. 5-8, He sees Himself in us.

—Waltke: "Job inverts David's rhetorical question of praise, 'What is man?' into a satirical sneer vis-à-vis his personal misfortunes: 'What are mere mortals that you raise them up, and that you put your mind on them? You take account of him every morning, and test him continually' (Job 15).

—"man":

- This is not the normal Hebrew word for mankind; it is the word for "mortal."
- Not only are we a man of dust in a universe of marvels; we return to the dust from which we came! We are not just small; we are perishing!

—"son of man":

- This emphasizes that, unlike the self-existent and eternal I AM, we have a beginning. We are just sons (and daughters) of man.
- Thus, we are not just small and perishing; we are dependent! Each of us depended on parents, but God depends on no one. He is the Great I AM!!
- "son of man" also has typological significance, since it points forward to the title Jesus used for Himself more than any other—over 100x in the Gospels. Jesus is not just divine, as we saw in 8:2; He is also man.
- The sense "son of man" takes in 8:4 is that of humanity. The sense it takes in Daniel 7:13-14 is that of divinity. The latter is a vision of Christ receiving His eternal kingdom, which happened at the resurrection/ascension (Matt. 28:18; Acts 2:36; 5:31; etc.). For a typological interpretation, I think we can understand it in both ways. On one hand, he truly was a man, although He was not technically a "son of man." He was born of a virgin and of God the Father by the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, He was and is and has always been God.

5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

—This is the third occasion for David to contrast that which is heavenly with that which is earthly. Thus, it begins a fresh thought.

—This time, however, David contrasts man not just with heavenly bodies (stars and moon), but with "heavenly beings"—in Hebrew, Elohim.

- This is the normal word used for God—and some translations render it this way (NLT, CSB, NASB). But we are not "a little lower" than God; we are a million miles lower, which is a major point of the Psalm. We are children and infants, and He is majestic.
- This could have been translated as "gods," as it often is throughout the Scripture. When it is used in that way it is a reference to heavenly beings, which is how the ESV renders it.
- Hebrews 2 quotes Psalm 8, using the word, "angels." This is how the Greek translators of the Old Testament understood the word. They knew it wasn't a reference to God, but to heavenly beings.

—What does it do for us that we are contrasted with heavenly beings? It emphasizes David's point even more. It would be one thing if we were merely contrasted with the moon and stars, but the introduction of "heavenly beings" reminds us that there is an entire UNSEEN universe, and we are less glorious than these creatures too—although only temporarily.

—*Hebrews 2: 5 For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. 6 It has been testified somewhere, "What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? 7 You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, 8 putting everything in subjection under his feet." Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. 9 But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

- First off, I note again the translational differences:
 - "for a little while lower" (Heb. 2) vs. "a little lower" (Ps. 2)
 - "heavenly beings" (Heb. 2) vs. "angels" (Ps. 2)

- Again, these are the differences between a Greek and Hebrew manuscript. Both discrepancies can be explained by the fact that the essential meaning is unchanged, and perhaps even clarified. "Angels" are the same as "heavenly beings," and it clarifies that we should not understand the "elohim" as God.
- Second, the author of Hebrews interprets Psalm 8 typologically—as pointing to Christ and the world to come.
 - The world to come will be, according to Hebrews 2, subjected not to angels but to Christ (2:5).
 - Furthermore, even our present world is subject to Christ (Heb. 2:8).
 - Finally, this subjection was achieved in history through the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.
 - Given that Psalm 8 was based on Gen. 1:26-28, this means that God never gave up on His creation. Man truly will rule the earth. No, man *does* rule the earth because Jesus is already crowned with glory and honor over it.
 - Nevertheless, there is a tension. Jesus already rules as earth's true sovereign, and yet we cannot see all that is subject to Him. Faith has not yet become sight. Another passage will help clarify this tension.

—1 Cor. 15: 22 *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.*

- Another New Testament author quotes Psalm 8. Here it is in 1 Cor. 15:27, where God speaks of all thing being placed under Christ's feet.
- Paul speaks both in the present perfect tense ("has put in subjection") and in the present tense ("are put in subjection"). Then he even moves into a future tense: "When all things are subjected to him..." Oh, the tension!
- There is a sense in which all things have already been put under Christ's feet—right now, He reigns over heaven and earth—but there is another sense in which His reign will not be consummated until the resurrection (15:22-23), which is at "the end" (15:24). It is not until the consummation that the final enemy to be destroyed—death—finally, truly, dies (15:26).
- Putting it altogether, all things have been placed into subjection to Christ, but presently He reigns "in the midst" of His enemies (Ps. 110:2). These enemies include death, Satan, unbelievers, and sin. Each of these is under Christ's reign, but He has chosen to not yet squash them. That will come only once the full number of elect have been gathered, and the Gospel has gone out to every tribe (Matt. 24:14; 2 Pet. 3:8). When it does come, however, all things will be subjected to Christ, and He will inaugurate a new creation. This new creation will fulfill what the first creation was intended to do, before the first Adam failed to exercise dominion. The new creation will display in the Second Adam (Jesus) how majestic is God's name in all the earth.
- Now, we see the majesty of His name by faith. Then, we will see with our eyes.

—"glory and honor":

- Ross: "The words 'glory and honor' (Ps. 19:1; 96:6) are words that usually refer to the divine majesty; the first stresses dignity and importance, and the second the external splendor."
- Words that normally describe God, here, describe man. We are made in His image and thus maintain vestiges of God's glory, God's honor.
- We are "crowned", which speaks of human rulership over creation.
- Chrysostom: "You see the glory and the honor that occur in the New Covenant are greater, when they have Christ as their head, when they come to fulfillment in his body, when they become brother and co-heir with him."

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.

—Structurally, this stanza mirrors vv. 1b-2. The complement of the two reminds us that the man of vv. 5-8 is designed by God to steward the earth, not as a tyrant, but as a child; not through worldly force, but through humble prayer and praise.

—Brueggemann: "Human power is always bounded and surrounded by divine praise. Doxology gives dominion its context and legitimacy."

—We have noted that these verses tie back to Gen. 1:26-28, where man is created in God's image, which exerts itself in the way he exercises dominion over the earth. Just as God rules over the heavens, man is to rule over the earth.

—Just as Adam and Eve were commissioned to expand Eden to the ends of the earth, we are commissioned to make this world look more like heaven and less like hell. We do this by exhibiting kingdom values (see Matt. 5-7) and by demonstrating the Gospel of the kingdom through signs and wonders (see Matt. 9:38-10:1). Finally, we do this by making disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey the One who has all authority (see Matt. 28:18-20).

—There is a (seemingly) less spiritual dynamic of man's dominion also. That less spiritual dynamic is: work. Adam and Eve were to cultivate the garden. God's creation, even before the fall, resisted cultivation. Work was not yet toil, but it was still work. It required effort. The cultural mandate of Gen. 1:26-28 is to use our work to make the world a better place.

- Waltke: "There is within the creation, even before the Fall, a nature that resists domination. Humans must subdue the hose to harness it to their chariots; the oxen, to plow their fields; and flocks to give them milk and fleece. Whereas I AM has inscribed his own splendor on the celestial bodies (v. 1), he gives his image honor in its own right by empowering him to rule over all things (1 Chron. 29:12). Mortals have not gained power over the creation by a chance mechanistic process but by a mandate from the Creator to establish a culture that expresses God's character. This mandate suggests that history will end in humankind's triumph, not in tragedy."

—Waltke: "In contrast to Darwin's thought that humans gained master over their environment by their own strength, the psalm teaches that this dominion is a gift of God..."

—Of course, Gen. 1:26-28 would also include raising children in how we subdue the earth ("be fruitful and multiply"). We are to raise our kids to love God and spread the knowledge of Him to the ends of the earth.

—Ross: "It is the glory of God to form a frail man from the dust of the ground and then entrust dominion over the earth to him."

—Waltke: "The Pioneer of our faith, as Son of God and as son of man, has extended humankind's dominion over sin and death. Jesus Christ began the dominion over all things, including sin and death, and his followers are bringing that dominion to its full realization."

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

—This final line is the same as the first. Before we reached the end of the song, we did not know precisely how God's name would become globally majestic. Now we do.

—The final line not only emphasizes the point of God's glory on the earth, but it also prevents us from singing a song about God that's really about us. It keeps us from man-centered worship. Having just celebrated man's dominion over the earth, if we had stopped there, we might have turned this into a song about us. Too many worship songs do that. Not David. Even when David sings about mankind, it is only his way of celebrating God. Far from making much of man—we are just babies and infants—the song makes much of God, who crowned a dust-made mortal with glory and honor. And then when that mortal failed in the Garden, God Himself became a mortal and died on a Cross. Afterwards, He rose again. One day will put all things under His feet—and ours.