

Psalm 8

“Is there any significance to our existence?”

Introduction:

This is the first Psalm in the Psalter that is an expression of praise to God. In the Psalm, David, overcome by the vast expanse of the heavens is motivated to ask the question, is there significance to human existence? Then as the Psalm continues, David expressed the answer to the question. Human beings are indeed significant, but not by virtue of what they are in themselves, their significance lies in the role that was given to humanity by God, the role of reigning over the earth so that God’s purposes for it are fulfilled. Thus, the Psalm is about the relationship that human beings have with God. The Psalm has the following chiasmic structure (a common one in Hebrew literature):

- A. Ascription of Praise (v. 1a)
- B. The Glory of the Great King (vv. 1b–2)
- C. God’s Interest in Man (vv. 3–4)
- C’. Man’s Derived Glory (v. 5)
- B’. Man’s Glory as Ruler (vv. 6–8)
- A’. Concluding Ascription of Praise (v. 9)

I. The Question: (vs.1-4)

In verse one we read, “*O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth, who have set Your glory above the heavens!*” Though many Psalms begin with an exhortation to others to give praise to God, this Psalm begins with David’s own praise of God. David began the Psalm by addressing God using His personal covenant name “*Yahweh*”. Then David referred to Yahweh as “*our Lord*”. The title “*Lord*” here is a translation of the Hebrew title “*adonai*”. When this title is applied to God it refers to God’s transcendent power and nature (Ps.135:5-12; 147:5). Here in this Psalm, the title specifically evokes the idea of both God’s infinite superiority to humans, and it also foreshadows the idea that human beings are God’s royal representatives within creation (an idea that is fleshed out later in the Psalm). The ascription of the title “*Lord*” to Yahweh also carries the idea of monarchical power or authority, and the appropriate response to such power is not only wonder or admiration but also deferential submission, which is an implication that is significant for all that follows. The possessive pronoun “*our*” underscores the relationship that exists between God and human beings that is at the heart of what the Psalm expresses. In this beginning portion of the Psalm, Yahweh is the object of David’s praise. Therefore, the opening expression of praise is not a declaration of joy in creation itself apart from the Creator. Rather it is a declaration of worship directed to God in response to His awe-inspiring creation. Whereas pantheism deifies and glorifies nature as a separate entity from the Creator, theism joyfully celebrates God as the good Creator, who has provided humanity with wonderful things that surround us.

In addressing Yahweh, David proclaimed, *“how excellent is Your name in all the earth”*. The Hebrew word translated as *“excellent”* would be better rendered as *“majestic”* or *“magnificent”*, as the word expresses the idea of that which is filled with splendor. This introductory ascription of praise to God is mirrored by an identical one in the concluding verse (vs.9). Together, these expressions of praise form what is called in literature an *“inclusio”* (two statements that act as bookends that bracket what is between them, and which expresses the theme of a given piece of literature). In this case it expresses that the majesty of God’s name is revealed through creation to the entire earth. The word *“name”* here points not only to God Himself, but also to God’s revelation of Himself. Recognizing this is critical to an understanding of the theme of revelation in the Psalm as a whole. Thus, God’s name and God’s majesty are synonymous. The idea is that creation reveals the power and glory of God’s name (Rom.1:20). However, the truth is that only God’s people know how to respond to this revelation of God’s majesty in nature, because He has fully revealed his *“name”* only to them (Exod.3:14–15; I Cor.2:14).

Then David wrote, *“who have set Your glory above the heavens!”*. Though the NKJV captures the literal Hebrew wording that uses a relative pronoun to begin this verse, a smoother English translation that conveys the intended thought is found in the ESV, *“You have set Your glory above the heavens”*, using the second person pronoun which makes it clear that this is an additional statement about what God has done. David wrote *“You have set”*, which expresses that His glory has been intentionally exalted above the heavens. The Hebrew term translated as *“glory”* (hod) refers to majesty, and thus it reinforces the earlier statement in the first clause of the verse about Yahweh’s awesome power and authority. This first verse makes it clear that this Psalm is a prayer to God and not simply a poetic expression about God. And it expresses a radically different view of the heavens than that which was held by Israel’s neighbors. The pagan peoples believed the objects in the heavens possessed sentience, power, and identity. However, David sees them merely as inanimate objects that demonstrate the glory of their Creator.

In verse two we read, *“Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength, because of Your enemies, that You may silence the enemy and the avenger.”* This verse can be difficult to interpret. What helps the reader is to keep in mind that in Hebrew poetry it is common to employ metaphors that more powerfully convey ideas than what one finds in simple prose. The language of the verse indicates that a contrast is made between babies and nursing infants on the one hand, and God’s enemies and those who seek to take revenge on the other. The question is to what sort of people do these words refer, and how does this relate to the overall theme of the Psalm? In attempting to answer this question we turn to Jesus’ quotation of this verse where He makes it clear how at least part of the verse is to be understood:

“Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they were indignant and 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 babes and nursing infants You have perfected praise'?"

Matthew 21:14-16

The children that were crying out in celebration of Jesus at the temple were clearly not infants who were still nursing. Therefore, the reference to infants was not intended to be taken literally. Instead, based upon how Jesus applied the words of this Psalm, it is clear that we are to interpret the imagery of infants as representing those (like children) who are weak, powerless, and without influence. The idea is that it was God's intention that He receive praise not from the powerful and influential in the world, but from those who in a sense have no voice in the worldly scheme of things. This implies that those who are God's enemies and who seek to avenge, represent the powerful who seek to resist God's purposes in this world, and who also seek to suppress the revelation of God that surrounds us all. This idea plays into the theme of the Psalm by making it clear that human beings will fulfill God's purpose for them, not through their own strength or significance, but in the midst of their own weakness and insignificance. And those who properly serve God will succeed even though those with worldly power resist them. In support of this interpretation, it is helpful to recognize that in the Scriptures, primarily the cries of infants relate to expressions of pain or calls for justice among the oppressed (Lam.2:11; Matt.21:6-18). Here David used this image of vulnerability and dependence to create a dramatic contrast with those who are God's enemies and suppose themselves to be self-sufficient and powerful. If a person has God on their side, those who are otherwise weak are more than able to overcome the power of those who are God's enemies. Therefore, regardless of how the wicked assert themselves, they cannot successfully suppress the evidence of God's glory on earth and in heaven. The Hebrew words translated as "*you have ordained strength*" refer to founding a barricade of some sort, and here the idea is that the revelation of God in His creation, and the purposes He has for this world are being resisted by His enemies. But those who seek to fulfill God's purpose will "*silence*" (sabat) those enemies. Through those loyal to Him, Yahweh will cause the resistance of His enemies to fail and come to an end. An idea embedded here, is one that is emphasized throughout the Scriptures, that the recognition of one's human weakness is the starting point for being able to rely upon the power of God to work through us. God has chosen to use the weak things to confound the mighty (I Cor.1:27). He does not need to use powerful people or eloquent speakers to silence His adversaries, rather a simple cry for help from God will unleash the power that overcomes the evil of the world. How the truism expressed here fits into the overall theme of the Psalm is made clear when David begins to answer his own question about human significance.

In verses three and four we read, "*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?*" Here David wrote that the majesty of the heavens which God has created made him wonder why God even takes notice of mankind. Therefore, in this Psalm, the idea is not that gazing

into the heavens gives a person a revelation about their place in the world; instead, the idea is that looking at the heavens causes one to question one's significance in light of the vastness of the heavens, wondering if in fact we have any real place in the creation at all. David used the imagery of God creating the cosmos with His fingers to create a contrast between the majesty of God and the smallness of human beings. Though the vastness of the heavens shows us how small human beings are in comparison to the scope of the cosmos, David magnified this by picturing the cosmos itself as small in comparison with the majestic nature of God who formed the vast heavens with only His fingers. The imagery stresses not only God's artistry in creation, but more importantly here, stresses how tiny the great heavenly bodies are in comparison to God who has shaped them with His fingers. The questions in these verses are poetic devices to evoke a greater sense of awe regarding the nature of God, so that a person can have a proper perspective on one's own self-worth. By magnifying the awesomeness of God, the imagery naturally diminishes any notion we have about our own inherent greatness.

As is reflected in the English translation, David did not use the personal relative pronoun that is usually used in reference to animate beings (*who*), instead, he used the pronoun normally used in reference to inanimate objects (*what*). David's purpose in doing this seems to have been to create a belittling reference to mankind, conveying the idea, "*what are mere human beings that you take notice of them?*" The titles "*man*" and "*son of man*" are to be understood as poetically synonymous. Both titles convey the idea of the inherent weakness of human beings. But in regard to human beings, the puzzling reality is that though it is hard to understand why He does so, God does see significance in human beings. God's regard for mankind is said to be demonstrated by the fact that He remembers us and visits us. The Hebrew word translated as "*mindful*" means to remember someone, to call them to mind. It conveys that God is not simply aware of our existence but also gives us attention and consideration. The Hebrew word translated as "*visit*" means to seek out and take care of. Together the terms indicate that despite the fact we would appear to be insignificant, God regards us as very significant.

The purpose of what David wrote in these verses was to deliberately create a sense of despair in order to make the positive answer to the question that follows that much more powerful. For from an objective perspective, human beings represent the tiniest of fragments of creation when seen in the context of the immensity of the universe. Therefore, from that perspective it is not conceivable that human beings could have any real significance and certainly could not occupy a central place in the created order. But God's revelation has made it clear, that despite how unlikely it would seem, human beings are in fact at the very center of God's purposes in creation. And this leads the reader to the next question, why does God see us as significant?

II. The Answer: (vs.5-8)

In verse five we read, "*For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor.*" At the conclusion of the previous

verse David made it clear that despite the grandeur that surrounds us, human beings are not insignificant, rather His attention and care is focused upon us, more than on anything else in creation. Now, at this point in the Psalm David turned to address why God regards human beings as significant. In the first clause, David wrote “*You have made him a little lower than the angels*”. In this clause there is a debate over the above translation. The debate is illustrated by the various ways different versions render this clause:

NKJV	ESV	NASU
You have made him a little lower than <i>the angels</i>	You have made him a little lower than <i>the heavenly beings</i>	You have made him a little lower than <i>God</i>

The Hebrew term in the text is “*elohim*”, and though it can refer to either angels or heavenly beings, the word itself is basically the Hebrew word for “*God*”. Since neither angels nor other heavenly beings are not mentioned in the Psalm, it is best to translate this word in its usual sense, that David was saying that human beings were made a little lower than God Himself. The main reason some translations have chosen to render the word as “*angels*” is because the Septuagint translated this Hebrew word with the Greek term for angels.

David wrote that human beings were made a little lower than God to reflect what was revealed in Genesis chapter one. That chapter expresses that human beings were made in the image of God and were given the role of exercising God’s delegated authority over the rest of creation. This means that human beings have been given a position of great significance in creation. It means that mankind has been exalted to a position far above what their seeming weakness and insignificance would warrant for them. David further elaborated on the position that was given to mankind by writing in the second clause, “*and You have crowned him with glory and honor*”. This latter assertion is meant as a parallel to the previous statement that human beings were made a little lower than God. This captures an element of the Genesis creation story that is so markedly different from the creation narratives of the Mesopotamian cultures. In the other ancient cultures, human beings were created to relieve the work of the gods. But here, David asserts that human beings have been “*crowned*”. This word means that God has designated human beings to be sovereigns over the rest of creation. Their crown is a share in God’s glory and honor. The Hebrew words translated as “*glory*” and “*honor*” are usually used to refer to the Divine majesty. The first word stresses dignity and importance, and the second word stresses external splendor. The idea in this verse is to stress the value that human beings have before God. However, the reader needs to observe that all the verbs in this verse have God as their subject. This grammatical construction expresses that human worth is something that God has bestowed upon us by virtue of the place He has given us in creation. Therefore, our significance does not come from something we are, nor from something that we have accomplished for ourselves, but is something God has given to us by His grace.

In verses six through eight we read, “*You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen — even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas.*” The idea of receiving “*dominion*” from God carries the connotation that human beings have been crowned to have royal authority over the rest of creation. In these verses David continued to reflect on what was written in the Genesis creation account. After God made Adam and Eve, He commanded them to have dominion over all the earth (Gen.1:28). All living creatures were to be under their authority. In verses seven and eight, David listed a series of animals, and he did this to clarify what was meant in verse six when he wrote that “*all things*” were put under mankind’s feet. Though mankind’s mastery is over the created world as a whole, the focus in this Psalm is on animal life, both domesticated and wild. But as David lists the animals that God has placed under human authority, the order in which they are listed is not random, but reflects vertical dimensions, descending downward from God to marine life. Therefore, mankind’s role on earth is to maintain order, to care for creation and maintain the beneficial environment that was entrusted to us. God has appointed mankind to maintain dominion over creation rather than being controlled by creation. All animals are subject to man’s authority, and this includes using those which we choose for food (Gen 9:3). This role of responsibility sets humans apart from the rest of creation and emphasizes their essential unity with the Creator from whom their responsibility and authority derive. The imagery of someone or something being under someone’s feet came from an ancient custom of the Near East wherein a ruler would place his foot on the neck of a defeated enemy laying prostrate at his feet. This pictured absolute authority over the one under his feet (though it is clear here that this authority is delegated by God, and therefore human authority is to be exercised in submission to God’s will).

The dominion spoken of here and in Genesis chapter one seems to indicate a role that is much more comprehensive than simply controlling animals so that they do not do harm or destruction. It seems to imply a role that culminates in what we are told is goal that God is working toward in redemption, the animate world living together in harmony (Isa.11). Therefore, this suggests a larger commission. When the work of creation was finished, this did not mean that God had brought the Creation to its ultimate destiny, it simply meant that there was nothing else new that God was going to create. And with that completion, humanity was given the role of bringing creation to that intended goal. Of course, humanity failed to fulfill this commission from the very beginning, and because of this, in the present age, the creation must continue in anticipation, groaning as it does, for the redemption that will come through Christ (Rom.8:19-23). It was because of Adam’s sin that the intended goal of our dominion has never been fully realized. The irony is that a significant element of our dominion was lost by submitting to the will of the devil, expressed through the form of one of Adam’s subordinates, the serpent.

In verse nine we read, “*O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth!*” The psalm closes with the same expression of praise for God's majestic

name with which it began (vs.1). The repetition of the above assertion is meant to return the mind of the reader to the majesty of God, lest one's mind become absorbed with thoughts of our own grandeur. Human beings have real significance, but because God has invested us with that significance, and we must remember that only God is truly majestic and awesome.

Conclusion:

We gain many helpful insights from this Psalm. It gives corrective instruction to us who live in a time dominated by speculative scientific thought in regard to creation. The biblical account of creation is phenomenal (focuses on effects rather than causes) and was intended to help Israel and us praise Yahweh as the sole Creator of everything in heaven, on earth, and in the sea. The reality of a created universe and the account of Creation itself (Gen.1:1–2:3) should evoke praise in us for our wonderful Creator.

The Psalm also teaches us about God's purpose for us in this world, setting part of the foundation for us to understand how that purpose will be fulfilled through the person and work of the Messiah. For in the book of Hebrews, we find a quotation from this Psalm that is applied to Jesus' role as Messiah:

"...For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone."

Hebrews 2:8b-9

In that passage, the author quoted this psalm to make a contrast between mankind's failure on the one hand with the exalted destiny we receive because of Jesus Christ on the other. Jesus, the second and final Adam (I Cor.15:45, 47) came to fulfill God's redemptive purpose for mankind and all creation. The New Testament would later clarify that because of sin, mankind has not ruled over creation as was intended. Creation is not in submission to mankind but instead is in chaos. Through the incarnation of Christ, and His redemptive work on the cross and in His resurrection He will enable humanity to once again have authority over all creation, and this time, by His power and grace, the goal will be achieved, creation will be fully submitted to its Creator, and will experience its ultimate glory.

This quotation seems to explain why God in His providence chose to allow a mistranslation by the Septuagint into the New Testament. For though positionally Christ was made lower than the Father when He became man, a statement that He was lower than God could have easily been misunderstood. While the reference to Him being lower than the angels allowed the writer to express Jesus' superiority to them.