

**Session 4: Psalm 104****God the Creator and Provider**

<sup>1</sup> Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, you are very great.

You are clothed with honour and majesty,

<sup>2</sup> wrapped in light as with a garment.

You stretch out the heavens like a tent,

<sup>3</sup> you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,

you make the clouds your chariot,

you ride on the wings of the wind,

<sup>4</sup> you make the winds your messengers,

fire and flame your ministers.

<sup>5</sup> You set the earth on its foundations,

so that it shall never be shaken.

<sup>6</sup> You cover it with the deep as with a garment;

the waters stood above the mountains.

<sup>7</sup> At your rebuke they flee;

at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

<sup>8</sup> They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys

to the place that you appointed for them.

<sup>9</sup> You set a boundary that they may not pass,

so that they might not again cover the earth.

<sup>10</sup> You make springs gush forth in the valleys;

they flow between the hills,

<sup>11</sup> giving drink to every wild animal;

the wild asses quench their thirst.

<sup>12</sup> By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;

they sing among the branches.

<sup>13</sup> From your lofty abode you water the mountains;

the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

<sup>14</sup> You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,

and plants for people to use,

to bring forth food from the earth,

<sup>15</sup> and wine to gladden the human heart,

oil to make the face shine,

and bread to strengthen the human heart.

<sup>16</sup> The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,

the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.

- <sup>17</sup> In them the birds build their nests;  
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
- <sup>18</sup> The high mountains are for the wild goats;  
the rocks are a refuge for the coney.
- <sup>19</sup> You have made the moon to mark the seasons;  
the sun knows its time for setting.
- <sup>20</sup> You make darkness, and it is night,  
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
- <sup>21</sup> The young lions roar for their prey,  
seeking their food from God.
- <sup>22</sup> When the sun rises, they withdraw  
and lie down in their dens.
- <sup>23</sup> People go out to their work  
and to their labour until the evening.
- <sup>24</sup> O Lord, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.
- <sup>25</sup> Yonder is the sea, great and wide,  
creeping things innumerable are there,  
living things both small and great.
- <sup>26</sup> There go the ships,  
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
- <sup>27</sup> These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;
- <sup>28</sup> when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
- <sup>29</sup> When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die  
and return to their dust.
- <sup>30</sup> When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground.
- <sup>31</sup> May the glory of the Lord endure for ever;  
may the Lord rejoice in his works—
- <sup>32</sup> who looks on the earth and it trembles,  
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
- <sup>33</sup> I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;  
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
- <sup>34</sup> May my meditation be pleasing to him,  
for I rejoice in the Lord.
- <sup>35</sup> Let sinners be consumed from the earth,

and let the wicked be no more.  
 Bless the Lord, O my soul.  
 Praise the Lord!

### Commentary

Genesis 1:1-2:4a is turned into magnificent poetry. Psalm 104 shows many parallels with an Egyptian hymn to the sun god Aten, composed during the reign of the monotheist Akhenaton (ca. 1380-1362 BC). Psalm 104 does not acclaim creation but Yahweh the creator; Yahweh appears not primarily as all-powerful but as all-merciful. Yahweh creates a happy world where even the lion's roar becomes a prayer (v. 21). The psalm does not reason from creation to the existence of God, but vice versa. It proceeds from faith in the covenant of God of kindness and fidelity (Exodus 34:6-7) to a new appreciation of creation. God's people Israel are at the center. Psalm 104:30 accounts for the Christian use on the Feast of Pentecost.

Verses 1-9 acclaim the royal creator, who in:

- vv.10-18 is dispenser of nourishment;
- vv.19-23 is master of seasons
- vv.24-26 is Lord of earth and sea
- vv.27-30 is controller of life and death.

Verses 31-35 provide a glorious finale. The psalm also divides according to the days of creation in Genesis 1:

- first day, creation of light – vv. 1-2a
- second day, creation of the firmament or sky – vv.2b-4
- third day, separation of heaven and earth - vv.5-9, and the adornment of earth – vv. 10-18
- fourth day, creation of heavenly bodies – vv.19-20
- fifth day, creation of ocean creatures – vv. 25-26
- sixth day, creation of terrestrial creatures and humankind – vv.21-23

Verse 24 is like the refrain in Genesis 1, "And God saw that it was good!"

Psalm 104:1-9 begins with "Bless the Lord" (Psalm 103:1-2, 19-22), an important theological formula. Here the active form of the verb occurs, an indication of early origin. Later Hebrew tradition turned it into the passive, more dignified form, "Blessed be the Lord." The latter phrase is followed by an account of what God has done for the chosen people (Genesis 24:27; Exodus 18:10-12; 1 Kings 8:56-61). This account belongs to a liturgical reenactment of God's gracious deeds and to a hymn of praise. Praise, therefore, is much less Israel's gift to God than it is a recognition and ritual reliving of God's gifts to Israel.

The language of praise (Psalm 104:1-4) and of cosmogony (vv.5-9) can be traced back into ancient mythology: the Lord's palace built above the heavenly waters (Psalm 11:4; 18:5-10; 29:10),

surrounded by stars and moon and wind as attendants and servants (Psalm 29; 82; 103:20). Psalm 104:9, repeated almost verbatim in Jeremiah 5:22, refers to the taming of primeval chaos.

Psalm 104:10-18 reveals the abundant graciousness with which God creates. Very clearly God is at the source of whatever human beings need for physical nourishment and delight, even of “wine to make the heart joyful” (v.15). Verses 19-23 show Yahweh to be master of the seasons of the year and of the passage from night to day. The heavenly bodies, which regulated the seasons, were worshiped as divine by many people (Deuteronomy 4:19), but here (Psalm 104:1-4) they are God’s heavenly retinue and servants. When vv. 24-26 extend God’s control over the oceans, the imagery is unusually tranquil as compared to Psalm 89:1-11 and Isaiah 51:9-10. The Lord even makes sport of the sea monster Leviathan, a feat declared impossible for human beings (Job 40:25-32).

In Psalm 104:27-30, Yahweh directs life and death through the gift or withdrawal of the spirit. The sequence life, death, new life through the spirit follows the common biblical pattern for Jerusalem or the people Israel. Those persons upon whom God bestows promises generally succeed at first, undergo serious difficulties to the seeming frustration of faith (Psalm 44), but rise to a fulfillment never anticipated earlier.

In the glorious finale (Psalm 104:31-35) Yahweh reaches down from the heavenly sanctuary touching the earth with smoke, a symbol of divine manifestations (Exodus 19; Judges 5:4-5; Habbakuk 3:3-6). Such a world has no place for sinners. The psalm, therefore, sees a world of good people, innocent of any innate corruption, with God’s gift of goodness.

### Questions

1. Are you a “detail person” or a “big picture thinker”? What evidence do you have to support this claim?
2. What do you make of this elaboration of the creation story? Does it sound primitive and simplistic? Grand and holy? Has science added or subtracted from the wonder of the natural order?
3. What is the ultimate purpose of nature?

4. What is humankind's role?
  
5. Should Christians take on a special role in preserving creation? How so?
  
6. What does the infinite variety of creation say about God?
  
7. How does God provide for you physically? Spiritually? Emotionally? Is it enough, or are you left wanting more? Is it good or mixed with bad, and why?
  
8. When has God's provision come at just the right time? In the nick of time? Have you thought God was tardy? Does God tend to "run late" or operate on "standard time"? Could your watch have been running a few minutes fast?
  
9. Is dependence on God a happy state? Is it frightening to be distant from God? Is it possible to benefit from God's care without a total dependence on God's provisions? What does "total dependence" mean? How does it relate to self-reliance or reliance upon others?