

UNIT 1: OUR LOVING, CREATING GOD

When you hear the word “creation,” what do you think about? Maybe your mind goes to the debate between creationists and evolutionists. Perhaps you think of the creative process or of people who create things for our use or entertainment. Perhaps you think of procreation, bringing new life into the world.

What do you think when you hear the phrase “Bible passages about creation”? Most Christians would probably mention Genesis 1–2, where we read not just one but two accounts of creation. If we stop at Genesis, however, we’ll miss a lot of what the Bible has to say about creation.

It turns out that creation is not a one-time act. Rather, it is something God does continuously. In ways we may not understand, our loving, creating God is still creating, even now.

For the next four weeks, we’re going beyond Genesis to study what the Bible says about creation and about God as Creator. In the process, some of our preconceptions about creation may be challenged. Hopefully, we’ll also expand our knowledge of the Bible.

In these lessons, we’re going to study the Bible, but not in our usual verse-by-verse way. We’re on a quest to find some missing pieces and see what they say when examined together. Our goal is to consider creation in a systematic way that informs us about the vastness of God’s creative powers. So put on your explorer’s hat and lace up your shoes. We’re going on an adventure!

Mark Wingfield is the Executive Director and Publisher at Baptist News Global. He is a veteran journalist on the religion beat and writes monthly for several media outlets. His latest book is Why Churches Need to Talk about Sexuality.

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The Works of God’s Hands

 Psalm 8



Central Question

What is my place in God’s world?

Scripture

Psalm 8

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

Reflecting

Think of all the popular Disney songs that feature the word “world.” Most notably, there are three big hits: “Part of Your

World” from *Little Mermaid*, “Two Worlds” from *Tarzan*, and “A Whole New World,” the epic hit from *Aladdin*.

Within the Disney universe—which has shaped American kids and adults for at least four generations—there’s always a yearning to be part of someone else’s world, to gain understanding, to be accepted and included. These storylines sell for Disney because they speak to some of the deepest yearnings of the human heart.

Consider these lines from “A Whole New World”:

Unbelievable sights
Indescribable feeling
Soaring, tumbling, freewheeling
Through an endless diamond sky

That’s not far off from Psalm 8: “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?” (vv. 3-4). This psalm calls us to imagine the wonder of God’s creation and our part in it. The writer imagines what it is like to be part of God’s world.

As we approach today’s study, however, we face a temptation to fall off the main road into a ditch on either side. We might get sidetracked by slack-jawed wonder at what God has created. Or we might just as easily get sidetracked by all the nice things God thinks about us, seeing that we are “only slightly less than divine.”

Our best learning will occur when we hold these two ideas in tension and seek to understand where the two worlds connect. Hold on to your explorer hats, though, because with greater knowledge comes greater responsibility.



Do you think people are more likely to think too highly of themselves or too lowly? Why do you think this is so?

Studying

Today’s Scripture text doesn’t require knowledge of the Hebrew language to understand. There are no tricky words to interpret, other than some difficulty knowing how the end of verse 1 should connect (or not) to the beginning of verse 2. Most of our English translations admirably capture the poetic vision of the psalmist. All in all, this is a psalm any layperson may read with confidence.

Above all, remember that the psalms are poetry. They are not intended to be literal descriptions or historical accounts. They paint pictures in broad strokes rather than filling in fine detail. When we read that God has set the divine glory “above the heavens” (v. 1), we are not to think of physical distance. Rather, we are called to consider the never-ending reach of God’s glory. This idea is echoed in Psalm 139:7: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?”

Likewise, the psalmist is not a scientist telling us that the moon and stars are set in fixed positions. We know that is not true. Rather, the message is that God is the Creator of all we see, including the planets and stars that swirl in the universe. That should evoke in us tremendous awe that the Creator has made everything that is.

The Jewish scholar and translator Robert Alter notes that the language of this catalog of creation deliberately recasts the words of Genesis 1, the first of two creation stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. We are meant to hear in the psalm an echo of the creation story.

Alter also calls attention to the vertical arrangement of the created order in the psalm, beginning with the heavens and ending with the fish of the ocean and everything that



For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38-39)

travels the sea. Another way to say this is that God's care for creation spans from top to bottom, from the farthest height to the lowest depth. And if that sounds familiar, it's because you're thinking of Romans 8, where the Apostle Paul tells us that nothing can separate us from God's love, neither height nor depth (see vv. 38-39).

Psalm 8 highlights a fundamental question about human existence: What could such a grand and glorious God have to do with mere mortals? Remember that in the ancient world, including even New Testament times, other belief systems drew firm lines between the gods and mortals. To envision a God who had something positive to do with humanity was unusual, and to declare that humans were one step short of the divine would have been mind-boggling.

Yet in this poetry of Judaism, we may have a foretaste of the incarnation. We see a God who loves creation enough to enter our world, not as a foil or on a dare but on a search-and-rescue mission to redeem the world.

Go back to Genesis 1, where we first learn that God created humankind in God's own image. And then join the psalmist in marveling that the same God who put stars in the heavens and fish in the seas values us—you and me—above all creation. Would God really think this way about us?

Again, we humans are prone to two errors in assessing our worth before God. Some of us believe we are of such little worth that neither God nor other humans could truly love us. We see only our unworthiness.

By contrast, others of us position ourselves far higher than we deserve, either as self-made wonders or as God's



Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26-27)

greatest gifts to humanity. The psalmist says we are neither unworthy nor uniquely worthy. We have value because God has created us and endowed us with God's own graces.

Psalm 8's message reaches backward and forward in Scripture, connecting us to creation, redemption, and consummation. And just as with the creation account of Genesis, we humans are given work to do, not merely glory to bask in. Like Adam and Eve, we have been given responsibility. To say that the rest of creation has been "put under their feet" (v. 6) implies that we are to be caretakers.

Imagine you wake up one morning and someone hands you a baby to keep and raise. You can't abdicate this responsibility because a life is at stake. Isn't the same true of the care-taking task God has given us in creation? Many lives are at stake if we fail to tend the gardens of the Lord.

The irony of our modern mindset is that we so easily disconnect the majesty of God from the care of creation. Those who devote themselves most freely to the worship of a majestic God too often fail to put on their work boots and pick up the gardening tools. And those who devote themselves most freely to the care of creation too often fail to worship the God who made the world they cherish.

Understanding

If you've ever traveled to New York City, you've likely taken a walk or run through Central Park and marveled that such prime real estate has remained a public park for 150 years—and a beautiful park at that. But did you know there's a religious backstory to the park as well?

Its chief designer, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), wanted the park to be seen as "a specimen of God's handiwork" that would heal "the hundreds of thousands of tired workers" of their "vital exhaustion," "nervous irritation," and "constitutional depressions."

In an excellent web-based article, Tony Carnes tells how Olmsted, then the vice president of the New York State

Charities Aid Association, circulated appeals to ministers asking that they send to the park their congregants who needed recuperation from stress and illness. Carnes writes:


[Olmsted's] and Calvert Vaux's design of Central Park artfully and systematically provided vistas and paths that would make one feel like the special object of a loving God and a beautiful city. Olmsted said every path, rock, flower and tree had a functional purpose in the creation of a healing scene. The park would then revive "the poetic element of human nature" and exercise a "harmonizing and refining influence...favorable to courtesy, self-control and temperance."

Olmsted got some of his ideas from an unusual religious upbringing that was in part a reaction against Calvinism as well as a reaction to the Hudson River School of landscape painters, who also sought to display the glory of God.

Carnes further writes:

Olmsted went on to design Central Park based on the principles he outlined in his apologetic argument for Jesus Christ. He wanted a park that would display the natural glory of God's plan. A park should also welcome people of all classes and persuasions, just as Jesus welcomed all who came to him. The design would allow people of all faiths to enjoy the park in their own ways and would not force belief in God on anyone.

Through our lives, we have the opportunity to do the same everywhere we go: to see God's handiwork all around us and to proclaim with wonder, "God has done this." It is not enough to stand in awe of nature as an end unto itself. Our calling is to call out the work of the Lord wherever we see it and to be laborers together with God in the care of God's creation.

 How do you see yourself as an aspect of God's handiwork?

What About Me?

- *What makes God mindful of human beings?* Consider your understanding of how you are "fearfully and wonderfully made." What does that say about God's intention for all creation? Often we struggle with the question, "What is God's will for *my* life?" Perhaps it would be more productive to ask instead, "What is God's will for *our* lives?"

- *What is our place in the universe, and how does this place relate to God's eternal plans?* Few of us carry such an awareness of destiny that we dare to think of God having a specific plan for us to accomplish. God's eternal plan seems so far beyond our place that we cannot fathom our part in it. Psalm 8 dares us to think bigger, to see ourselves—individually and collectively—as part of God's creative plan.

- *What does it mean to have "dominion" over creation?* Various English translations use words such as "dominion" or "rule" to describe the task given us by God (Ps 8:6). Some modern Christians see this as freedom to use up the earth's resources at their pleasure, while other Christians see this as a generative stewardship assignment. What's your view? What do you see as your own responsibility or mandate from God?

- *How does Psalm 8 help you make sense of other Scriptures?* We've highlighted the connection to Genesis 1, but what other scriptural connections come to mind? If this psalm truly reaches backward and forward in the biblical narrative, how does it help us understand any of the other great themes of the Bible, such as the problem of pain and suffering, the meaning of Christ's atonement, or the Great Commission?

Resources

Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2009).

Tony Carnes, "Central Park: The Largest Religious Art Work in the City," *NYCReligion.info* <<http://nycreligion.info/central-park-largest-religious-art-work-city/>>.