

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 9, 2023

A Royal Vocation

Psalm 8

"What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (v. 4). That's the question at the center of today's text, literally and theologically. Right in the middle of our Scripture, the psalmist asks a question that's as deep as the mystery of God and as wide as the universe he has made. "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (v. 4).

Interestingly, Psalm 8 has the distinction of being the first biblical text to reach the moon. During its July 1969 mission, Apollo 11 left a silicon disc on the moon. The disc contained messages from seventy-three nations, including the Vatican, which contributed the text of Psalm 8. It was definitely an appropriate piece of Scripture for such a cosmic journey, partly because it declares the wonder of God's creation.

In fact, the vastness of God's creation is what prompts the psalmist's question about the status of human beings. The psalmist doesn't come up with this question by looking inward, by searching his own soul and exploring the mysterious inner recesses of his heart. No, the psalmist comes up with this question after looking outward at the night sky and being amazed by the vastness of God's work. As one person has put it, today's Scripture is "a psalm for stargazers."¹ The psalmist steps outside on an early summer night, just as the last bit of sunlight fades on the horizon. He sees the moon, high and luminous. He scans the stars, arranged in constellations. And all he can do is marvel at the awesome God who creates and cares for such an immense universe.

But the psalmist's unplanned evening worship also has a note of curiosity about it. When he takes what he sees in the heavens and compares it with himself, and all of us, here on earth, he wonders what God thinks of us, or even why God thinks of us at all. As Eugene Peterson renders verses 3-4: "I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous, your handmade sky-jewelry, Moon and stars mounted in their settings. Then I look at my micro-self and wonder, Why do you bother with us? Why take a second look our way?"

The psalmist's choice of words is important. Rather than using the Hebrew term for "who," as if to look at the night sky and then ask, "Who am I?", the psalmist uses the word for "what." So the psalmist asks, "What are human beings?" In other words, "What is this thing called a human?" "What is humankind?" According to Genesis, we're created from the earth, not the heavens. We're finite, frail, weak, sinful creatures. God has this vast cosmos to run. So why would he bother paying attention to tiny, seemingly insignificant beings like us?

Before we go further into the answer to that question, we need to see the big picture of Psalm 8. Naturally, our attention is quickly drawn to the question at the center of the text: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" But if we zoom out, we can see that this question is set within a larger frame. The frame is determined by the statement that both opens and closes the psalm: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

Verses 1 and 9 are the bookends for this psalm. It opens with an exclamation of praise, and closes with the same. In this way, the psalmist draws our attention to God, particularly the glory of God in creation. "How majestic is your name in all the earth." The "name" of God is a way of speaking about God's essence, God's character, in this case his power over the created order. So before the psalmist gets to the question of where human beings fit into this created order, he wants to make sure that we keep ourselves in perspective. Before we can talk about the glory of human beings, we have to acknowledge and proclaim the majesty of God.

Some of you have heard me tell the story of how, years ago, when I was working in a bookstore, some members of our staff had sort of informally gathered around a manager and another employee who were having a conversation. I don't remember the subject of the conversation, but I do remember that at one point, the manager started walking in circles around the employee, over and over. "What are you doing?" asked the employee. To which the manager replied, "Oh, I'm just revolving around you, since you think you're the center of the universe."

The Christian life means life with God, rather than yourself, at the center of the universe. It means life lived under God's sovereignty rather than your own sovereignty. God's rule rather than self-rule. "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." The psalmist intends to be subject to God in every way. That's the way it's supposed to be in our lives. We find our meaning, our identity, our purpose, in relationship with a good, loving, sovereign God.

Some of you may recall pastor Rick Warren's popular book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Warren opens the book with these words:

It's not about you.

The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born *by* his purpose and *for* his purpose.²

Right off the bat, Rick Warren does a good job of repositioning us. He moves us out of our imaginary place at the center of everything and reminds us that only God can occupy that space. When we try to make ourselves the focus, we're simply working against the way God has set things up. We're trying to work God into our story rather than locate ourselves within God's story. But Psalm 8 sets us straight by repositioning us within the narrative of God's creative activity. It opens with the majesty of God and closes with the majesty of God. And right there in the middle of it all is the question: So what are human beings? What is humankind's place in God's plan for the creation?

It's not one of those questions where we're told to go and figure it out for ourselves, as if each person needs to come up with his or her own unique response based on previous experience and individual vantage point. No, the psalmist raises the question, and then immediately answers it with a clear declaration of humanity's place in God's purposes. "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor" (v. 5).

"A little lower than the heavenly beings." Some translations render it, "a little lower than God." The word translated as "God" is a general term that can also mean "divine beings" or "angels." It's hard to tell exactly what word or phrase the psalmist intends. But the point remains the same, namely, that God gives human beings dominion, or charge, over what God has created. Thus the language about humans being "crowned," that is, given governing power, authority. What a remarkable affirmation, to hear that the sovereign God

has bestowed sovereignty upon us human beings. We're given a royal status within the created order.

In his book *Leaving Home*, Garrison Keillor tells a fictional story about a family from Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. A woman named Grace married a man named Alex and they had three children—Earl, Marlys, and Walter. One day Alex left Grace and she had to move back home, where she lived off the kindness of folks there. One day she and her children got a letter from a man in Philadelphia doing research on Scottish nobility. He asked for their ancestors so he could look it up. Grace responded, and in a few days got a letter back from the man. The letter was addressed "Your Royal Highness." In the letter the man wrote: "Today is the happiest day of my life as I greet my one true Sovereign Queen." He went on to say that Grace's branch of the Campbell family was first in line of succession of the House of Steward, the Royal Family of Scotland. Keillor writes:

[The line on the chart led] right straight to them: Earl, Marlys, and Walter. The Royal Family of Scotland living in Lake Wobegon in a green mobile home, furniture donated by the Lutheran church.

They were astounded beyond words. Disbelieving at first, afraid to put their weight on something so beautiful, afraid it was too good to be true, and then it took hold—this was grace, pure grace that God offered them. Not their will but His. Grace. Here they were in their same dismal place but everything had changed. They were different people. Their surroundings were the same, but they were different.

Years later, Walter, the youngest son, finds out that the whole thing was a fraud. But he never tells his mother or siblings. He sees how much thinking you are royalty changes a person. At the end of the story, when Grace is much older, she tells her son:

Oh, Walter, what would I do without you? You're so strong. You're so good to me. You're a prince, you know. They can put a crown on a dog and call it a prince, but you are a prince through and through. They may not know it now, but they'll know it soon. Next year we'll be in Edinburgh with the bands playing and the flags flying and the crowds cheering.³

Welcome again to this morning's gathering of royalty. In this case, it's no fraud or deception. God really has bestowed sovereignty on us. He has crowned us with "glory and honor." He has entrusted us with dominion that we can exercise, bearing his image, representing him in the world.

How remarkable that God has made the risky choice to share his power with us in the care of creation. And yet all around us is evidence of how we've been unfaithful in exercising proper governance over the works of God's hands. The depletion of the ozone. The degradation of land and water. The decline or extinction of many plant and animal species. The plastic washing up on our shores. The endless flow of trash and possessions bound for our landfills.

And yet, in his mercy, God has not revoked our authority. Through his redeeming, restoring work in Christ, we still bear God's image and are given an abundance of opportunities, day in and day out, to participate, individually and together, in the care of what the Lord has made. Remember that the Lord's name is still majestic in all the earth. Our royal vocation is still in force. God's glory is still inextricably intertwined with the destiny of humankind and the future of the created world.

¹ James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 24.

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 17.

³ Garrison Keillor, *Leaving Home* (New York: Viking, 1987) 140-141, 145.