

# What is Man?

Psalm 8

## Introduction

Imagine, if you will, a young Israelite shepherd watching over his father's flock out in the countryside. As the sun sets, he has corralled his flock into the best-protected area he can. He checks them over, makes sure they are all present and settled, and moves to the door of the pen or enclosure, where he will stay—a presence any predator or thief must go through to get to the sheep. Perhaps as he sits down, he pulls out a loaf of bread and eats a bit, swallowing it down with a drink of water from his water skin. By this time, the sun is gone, and the moon and stars watch over the landscape. And at this point, the young shepherd looks up to the skies. Imagine what this Palestinian night must look like. There is no artificial light or the light pollution we are so accustomed to. The scene the shepherd observes is entirely natural. The moon shines bright, and the stars look like dust in the sky. And as this young shepherd gazes into the majestic scene of an infinite universe, he marvels. He may be young, but he has a keen mind. And a spiritual one. He is young but has already proven to be a "man after God's own heart." Of course, the young shepherd is David. And as young David gazes at the stars, his mind turns to his God. And in his meditations, he finds words fit for a beautiful song. A song of praise and a song of hope. A song he can sing and a song that will one day be sung by thousands of God's people. A song that looks back to the beginning of time and a song that looks forward to One who will be in one sense his descendant, but also his Lord.

We don't know this is the exact scene and circumstances under which David wrote Psalm 8. But it is a Psalm of David. And whether these thoughts came to him from the roof of a palace, in the wilderness on the run from Saul, or as a young shepherd watching his father's sheep, the Psalm derives from an experience we've all had—gazing in wonder at the stars of heaven. While this may be a universal experience, David, enabled further by the spirit, put the perfect words to the occasion. More, he answers the question that we all ask, at some point, as we gaze into an infinite and unfathomable space: What is man? The answer comes from a greater truth, which David proclaims in a majestic song about a majestic God.

## Verses 1-2

Psalm eight begins the same way it ends. The first half of verse one and verse nine are identical. These bookends of the Psalm reveal the Psalm's primary focus—the majesty of God's name. While God's care for humanity and the dignity of mankind are a part of this Psalm, they are not separate points—they flow out of the primary point that God's name is majestic and glorious.

David begins his Psalm addressing God by His revealed covenant name, "YHWH." God is the self-existent, great "I Am." As such, He is naturally "our lord" (Heb. *Adonai*), our sovereign, our king, and our master. David opens the Psalm with God's name and then proclaims, "How majestic is your name in all the earth." God's name is more than just an identifying label—it refers to His nature, being, and authority. And all of this David praises as "majestic" or "excellent." The word means something that is splendid, powerful, and awesome and often appears alongside the words "glory," "beauty," and "honor." And while David speaks of God as "our Lord," perhaps

meaning “Israel’s Lord,” he states that God’s name is majestic in “all the earth.” God’s awesome sovereignty doesn’t belong to just one group of people—He is sovereign over everything and everyone.

The following four lines (vv. 1b–2) proceed from David’s opening praise and how we can see God’s majesty. First, God’s glory is above the heavens. God transcends humanity, the earth, and even the universe. As David says in Psalm 19, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” Also, Psalm 113:4 says, “The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.” The most glorious, beautiful, incredible things we can see or know in our universe are still beneath God, for He created them all.

God’s majesty is revealed in the great things (like creation) but also in the little things. The God of grandeur is also the God of detail. The strength of almighty God does not crush the weak but actually can work through the weak.

Different interpretations exist as to whom David refers to when he speaks of “babies and infants.” Perhaps David is contemplating the cries of a newborn child. Surely, anyone who has witnessed the birth of their child has experienced the awe and wonder of such a moment. It is no less awe-inspiring than staring at the vast stars of the heavens. In the cries and life of a newborn infant, something stirs within us that moves us to contemplate, thank, and praise our Creator.

Or perhaps the “babies and infants” are used symbolically. Throughout the Old Testament, “babies” are often mentioned in passages that refer to cruelties of war and oppression. As the weakest of humanity, they often suffer the most from humanity’s sinful rebellion. If so, then perhaps David ponders that the almighty and majestic God above the heavens is also the protector and avenger of the smallest and weakest of humanity. Again and again, God displays His anger and wrath towards those who hurt and oppress the innocent, especially orphans and widows. While the mightiest of men often overlook, or worse, are the cause of the oppression and suffering of society’s weakest, the mightiest One in the universe hears their cries. Not only does He hear their cries, but He will work out justice for the weak and innocent in His great eternal plan. The enemies will not always be able to oppress and hurt—they will be overcome (cf. Goldingay, 156).

Some see in David’s words a possible allusion to God’s promise in Genesis 3:15 that it would be the “seed/offspring of woman” who would bruise the serpent’s head (cf. Grogan, 53).

Or maybe this is just a poetic way of stating that God often uses unexpected means—even the small and weak to overcome the strong and mighty.

“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:26–29, ESV)

Whatever the specific meaning, David contemplates God’s majesty through protecting and using the weak over and against His enemies. Notice, it is not that “babies and infants” overcome God’s

foes, but God stills the enemy and establishes strength out of the mouths of babies and infants. God is so great and powerful that He can work through the weakest of His creation to overcome the strongest of His enemies!

And we do see this in Jesus' life. Matthew tells us that after Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem and after He cleansed the temple, children cried out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" This enraged the chief priests and the scribes, and they asked Jesus, "Do you hear what these are saying?" implying that Jesus should make them stop. In response, Jesus said, "Yes; have you never read, 'out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?'" Jesus quoted Psalm 8:2 as justification for the children crying out that Messianic confession. Those children recognized and proclaimed a truth that the influential leaders of Israel had missed! And we can't ignore what that means—Jesus applies Psalm 8:2 to Himself, thus claiming to be the God of Psalm 8:2!

### **Verses 3-4**

These verses may well be the foundation for David's Psalm. This Psalm seems to flow out of this context of gazing into the night sky. The first thing the sight did was cause David to adoringly acknowledge God's greatness as being even bigger than this world and universe. But staring into the beautiful and majestic night sky brought another incredible thought.

As if the opening verses weren't enough, David describes the heavens as the work of God's fingers. The vast universe is something that fits within God's fingers! Not just the flowers and trees and animals, but planets, moons, and stars are the detailed artistry of a masterful Creator God. Like a potter works the clay with his fingers, so God works the material of galaxies. Like a painter sets every detail of the masterpiece, God sets the moon and stars in the place He desires them. When we stand before a beautiful painting, we are impressed and maybe even emotionally moved by the artist's vision and talent. When we step outside and gaze into the night sky, we have the privilege of gazing at the masterful artwork of the Great I AM.

But gazing into the night sky can and does have another effect—something every human has felt deep in their soul. When we stand in the blackness of night and look at the stars, after the initial sense of wonder and beauty fades, we begin to sense something—our own smallness. For all our learning and advancement, modern man is no better off. In fact, all our increase in knowledge and ability only makes us realize our smallness that much more.

The closest star in the universe to our sun, Proxima Centauri, is 5,880,000,000,000 (5.88 trillion) miles away! Between here and Proxima Centauri, you could fit 742,658,667 Earths! The fastest speed humanity has ever traveled was the command module of Apollo 10—it traveled an astonishing 24,816.1 mph. If we traveled at that speed, reaching Proxima Centauri would take a little over 27,048 years—the closest star in the universe to us. And it is only one out of 200 billion trillion stars! What does that mean? The nearest star to our planet after the sun is unreachable, and it is a speck of dust compared to the whole universe. Our little lives in our little corner of the world in this speck of the vast universe certainly seem quite small. And that's the feeling that all people get when they look at the stars—smallness and insignificance.

Which leads David to his next amazing thought—how can something so small and insignificant be remembered and cared for by God? The universe is unimaginably bigger than us—and it is the

work of God's fingers. So how much bigger and greater is God than us? But God does remember us. As small as we appear to be amidst the rest of His creation, we are not forgotten. And not only does He remember humanity, He cares for us! David is not melodramatic or falsely humble—he is genuinely amazed, astounded, and awe-struck at the great truth that God Almighty cares for him, and you and me. In our daily lives, we get so busy and distracted that we may not consider our smallness. Thus, it's good now and then to go out and gaze at the stars and remember God's greatness, our smallness, and how amazing it is that God cares for us; to remember that we are not insignificant—no, we are very significant because the Great I Am knows us and cares for us. And that's just the beginning.

## Verses 5-8

David reflects not just on the fact that God cares for man but on the role God has given man. It turns out that while man may seem insignificant—he is not at all. How can we know? Because of God's revealed Word.

This is an important note. Creation reveals there is a Creator. It demonstrates His existence, glory, and power. But creation alone doesn't show us God. Creation doesn't reveal His heart and mind. It doesn't tell us *who* He is or whom He wants us to be. Creation alone doesn't tell us if God even remembers us, much less cares for us. Just looking at the created universe will lead to despondency and insignificance. But God has not left us with just creation to know Him by. God has spoken.

...the psalmist is not concerned here with presenting nature as a vehicle of revelation; nature rather evokes the necessary sense of nothingness which must precede a specific kind of revelation, namely the revelation of the name of God to mankind and within that, God's revelation of mankind's role within the created world. The role of human beings in the universe, in other words, is not something which can be discerned from reflecting upon nature, or from a kind of natural philosophy; it is something which may only be known on the basis of special and specific revelation. (Craigie, 109)

And that is precisely what David does. David is amazed that God cares for us but trusts that God does because of what God has said. While David does not directly quote the opening chapters of Genesis, he alludes to that passage—the grouping of animals from the land, air, and sea is reminiscent of Genesis. Where do we learn that humanity has dominion over creation? Genesis. David isn't just imagining the care of God. David isn't trying to erase or ease his feelings of insignificance. God has declared and revealed man's role in creation. And what a role it is!

David says, "Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings." Verse 5 presents one of the most significant interpretive challenges of the psalm. The difficulty can be seen in comparing translations:

- Heavenly beings (ESV, LEB, NET)
- Angels (NKJV, MEV, NIV, LSB)
- A god (REB)
- God (NASB95, NRSV, CSB, NLT, RSV)

Why so many translations? The Hebrew word is “Elohim,” and it can refer to angels or even false gods, but it is most often used as a title or name for God. But what sense should it be given here? Is David saying humans have been made a little lower than God Himself or a little lower than angels/heavenly beings? Commentators are as split as the translators. In my humble opinion, “angels” seems the best fit. First, as many commentators point out, the entire Psalm is addressed directly to God(YHWHY). Thus, it would seem more natural to say, “You have made him (man) a little lower than Yourself.” Second, when this passage is quoted in Hebrews 2, it is quoted in Greek as “You made him for a little while lower than the angels.”

But either way, David’s point is a powerful one. The vastness of creation and our circumstances might make us feel insignificant, but that is untrue! God has given humanity great significance! And whatever we are created lower than (God or angels), David adds that God has crowned humanity with glory and honor. The value and dignity of humanity could not be stated any plainer. The almighty Creator has given glory and honor to mankind.

David’s perspective is important, especially in modern times. David views humanity as slightly less than those in the heavenly realm. He does not describe humanity as a little higher than the animal realm. Modern minds and evolutionary thought would have us believe we are only slightly higher than animals, and that is only because of chance, accident, and time. And which way we look at life is important. James Boice points out in his commentary on Psalms that when we live by looking upwards to God, we become more like Him. But when we look down to earthly beasts, we become increasingly like them. (Smith & Akin, 63). And how true society has proven that to be. As people “move on from God,” they do not actually progress—they regress and become more and more like the animal world around them.

Considering the dignity given to humanity in this passage, John Piper makes a powerful point. He says,

- You cannot starve the aged human and glorify the majesty of God.
- You cannot dismember the unborn human and glorify the majesty of God.
- You cannot gas the Jewish human and glorify the majesty of God.
- You cannot lynch the black human and glorify the majesty of God.
- You cannot treat human pregnancy like a disease and glorify the majesty of God.
- You cannot treat the mixing of human ethnicities like a pestilence and glorify the majesty of God.
- You cannot worship and glorify the majesty of God while treating his supreme creation with contempt. (Smith & Akin, 63-64)

If we do not understand who God is, we will not understand who we are. And when we do not understand who we are, we will never fulfill our designed and created purpose. Instead, we will wreak havoc and ruin on creation and ourselves, which is precisely what humanity has done through sin.

But David’s psalm does not digress to consider man’s failures. His focus is on God’s design and plan. Caught in the majesty and wonder of God’s creation and revealed will, David revels for the

moment in Genesis 1-2 without the blight of Genesis 3 and all that follows. And that's important. We need to understand God's original design for mankind to fully grasp our purpose now. And God has not just given humanity a great status; He has given mankind a great work.

The world is God's creation, but part of His plan and design was for humanity to exercise dominion over that creation. "Dominion" means to rule, govern, or control. God put humanity in charge of His creation! It was after God had created everything else that He said:

...Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. (Genesis 1:26, ESV)

In the vast physical universe, only humans were created to be image-bearers of God. As such, God's intent for man was that he be a beneficent and good ruler, just as God is. Mankind is not given the status of God, but we are appointed as vice-regents to be good rulers over God's good creation. And this authority is absolute. God put all things under man's feet. In language similar to Genesis 1:28, David recalls that all animals—those of the land, air, and sea, are under the authority and rule of man.

So, David marvels not just at the fact that he exists but at the purpose of his existence. We may wonder how and why God would give mankind such glory and honor—why would God entrust us with such a significant role? But wonder as we might, we can trust that it is true because God has told us it is so.

## **Psalm 8, Jesus, and the New Testament Christian**

As noted, David's Psalm seems to revel in a Genesis 1-2 world. But we live in a post-Genesis three world. As lovely as David's Psalm sounds, if we're honest, life certainly doesn't feel that way. David's brief Psalm isn't a complete thesis on God's scheme of redemption. It is one look at how man began, and therefore also a hopeful look towards what man, through God's gracious plan, will become. But the reader of Psalm 8 might say, "That all sounds nice, but we messed that all up. We weren't the good rulers we were supposed to be. We sinned, we fell, and we lost control. Is it even possible to regain paradise and fulfill our glorious and honorable roles as God's vice-regents? And if so, how?" The author of Hebrews addresses that very topic.

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. <sup>6</sup>It has been testified somewhere, "What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? <sup>7</sup>You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, <sup>8</sup>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. (Hebrews 2:5-8, ESV)

Hebrews states what we all probably feel—"but we don't see things that way!" So, what's the answer? Was David wrong? Not at all. Next, Hebrews says,

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. (Hebrews 2:9, ESV)

We don't see things the way they are supposed to be—not yet. But we see how they are going to get there—Jesus! We do see Jesus, the Word of God Himself, become flesh, who was willing also to be made, for a little while, less than the angels, just like us. And not only did He become man, but He also experienced suffering and death as a perfect sin-sacrifice for man. He paid the price that was needed, but that man could not afford to reverse the effects of man's rebellion in the garden. That alone has not immediately reversed sin's consequences. But it has set the final era of God's redemptive plan in motion. And as we see God's plan revealed and know His might and power to fulfill His promises, we find hope to press forward toward the goal. Paul states it beautifully in Romans 8:18-25

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. <sup>23</sup> And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Our world is filled with pain and suffering because of sin. And it can be discouraging. It can be demoralizing. But we know Who is in control. We know what God's plan for mankind was and is. And we know how God's plan will be accomplished. We've seen it accomplished in Jesus. So now, it simply falls on us to be faithful, patient, and worshipful while God's plan comes to completion.

## **Verse 9**

And so, we return to David and Psalm 8. Gazing towards the stars, David is moved to praise God out of awe. But that marvelous site evokes questions—how can a God so big even think of much less care for man who is so small and insignificant? And yet he knows it's true, for God has revealed that not only does He care for mankind, but He has given man glory, honor, and dominion. And this truth brings David back to where he started—awe-inspired praise. So, he repeats his opening remarks, "O LORD our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" David ends where he began, just as humanity will end where we began in God's plan! And like David, that should move us to worshipful praise.

## **Conclusion**

So, what is man? Who am I, and who are you? To a world of unbelievers, you are simply another clump of cells. We are accidents, experiencing existence for a brief while before we return to nothingness. In a word—you and I are insignificant. But thankfully, that's not true.

On the contrary, you are incredibly significant. You are crowned with glory and honor. You are made only a little lower than the angels. You are made in the image of Almighty God, who put this universe together. So, yes—you are valuable and important!

But why you are important and valuable is vital. While we want to combat the wrong attitudes of the carnal world, we don't want to twist the meaning and focus of Psalm 8. Our significance—our glory and our honor—is not a reason to boast because our glory does not come from us. Our glory comes from God. It is bestowed and given by our heavenly Father. As we look at this vast universe, the knowledge that we are not insignificant should not detract from God's majesty—it should cause us to wonder and appreciate it all the more. Like David, when we truly know Who God is, we can find comfort and hope in whom He made us to be and then return to praise Him even more.

And true—our lives are often filled with struggles, pain, and failures. But, while we don't see the world David describes just yet, we do see Jesus. And we see God's plan. And we can trust that the One who placed the stars, the One who spoke the cosmos into existence, the One who tasted death for us and rose to life again—He is able to bring about the final purpose He began in us. And for that, we can sing with David, "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

Sermon by: Nate Bibens

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