

PSALM 8: PRAISE FOR DIVINE CONDESCENSION

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 8 is beloved by God's people as a transcendent praise to God for his condescending grace toward man. It is, as Tate observes, the only psalm in this first collection of psalms to be addressed completely to God (Tate, 343-59).

What makes this psalm so impactful is that it is immediately universally identifiable. Who hasn't asked the same questions when looking into the night sky? Even secular atheists recognize the seeming insignificance of humanity in comparison to the enormity of the cosmos.

Yet the focus on the psalmist is never on mankind and his position of authority—it is on God's might displayed in using the weak and insignificant in order to accomplish his purposes. When God does his will with that which is obviously weak, his strength, might and sovereignty are amplified beyond the vastness of the heavens.

Structure

Psalm 8 is well-known for its structure, which is apparent to all readers, regardless of their facility in Hebrew. The psalm opens and closes with the same words, framing the contents of the psalm within an thematic bracket.

More subtle, however, is how this bracketing device functions to communicate the point of the psalm. The psalm moves from the obvious to the not-so-obvious, all of which is designed to reinforce the point of the bracketed doxology—that Yahweh's mighty name is extolled in all the earth.

The principle developed by the psalm is that God's might and glory is revealed by the fact that he uses that which is weak by nature to accomplish his purposes. This act runs completely contrary to human reason and intuition and thus invites praise from all who recognize it.

This leads to a 6-part outline:

1. Superscription
2. The Principle Revealed: The Mighty Name of Yahweh (8:1)
3. The Principle Illustrated: Strength Established through Weakness (8:2)
4. The Principle Applied: The Exaltation of Insignificant Man (8:3-8)
5. The Principle Reviewed: The Mighty Name of Yahweh (8:9)
6. Subscription

1. Superscription

The superscription introduces the psalm with information regarding the psalm's background and authorship. In the Hebrew Bible, superscriptions are counted as the first verses, whereas in English translations, they are treated as pre-verse text. This is why you may sometimes see different verse numbers listed for psalms. In such cases, subtract 1 from the Hebrew Bible verse reference to get the equivalent English Bible reference.

¹To the Chief Musician. According to the *gittith*.¹ A psalm² by David.³

Notes:

1. *To the Chief Musician. According to the gittith*. This phrase is actually the subscription to Psalm 7. As demonstrated by the models in Habakkuk 3 and Isaiah 38, poetic superscriptions normally contained information related to authorship and historical background. Musical instructions were reserved for the poetic subscription at the close of the song.
2. *A psalm*. The Hebrew term is *mizmor*, and is used to designate 57 psalms. It refers to a musical composition denoting a song set to musical accompaniment, as the root verb *mazar* seems to imply.
3. *By David*. Despite the clear reference to David in the superscription, many interpreters still suggest that the time and identity of authorship is uncertain.

2. The Principle Revealed: The Might and Glory of Yahweh (8:1)

The opening verse of the psalm introduces what will be the overarching principle of the psalm: the mighty name of God revealed in the world. At this point, the principle is first established. By the end of the psalm, when the opening phrase is repeated verbatim, the principle will take on a depth and reality not fully recognized.

1 ¹O Yahweh, our Master,² how mighty³ is your name⁴ in all the earth,¹
who has set your majesty above the heavens.⁵

Notes:

1. *O Yahweh, our Master, how mighty is Your name in all the earth*. This phrase opens and closes the psalm, creating a theological framework for understanding the central contents. However, this first iteration of the phrase focuses the

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reader's attention on the mighty name of God in creation. It almost works as a diversion—we believe that God's might will be discussed as it relates to the grandness of creation. However, the principle to come is the exact opposite: God's might is revealed in that he uses the small, the weak, the seemingly insignificant and inconsequential, to accomplish his will.

2. *O Yahweh, our Master.* The English translations for these two terms obscures the theological significance of the phrase used to open this psalm. Virtually every translation translates both terms as “Lord,” and distinguishes them with the use of capitalizations. In reality, the two are distinct and communicate different aspects of who God is which add to the weight of the psalm. *Yahweh* is the covenant name for God—it reveals him as the God of covenant intimacy and relationship—God is close and personal. *Master* is the term *Adonai*, denoting God as sovereign and authoritative. He is master and owner. Together, they perfectly capture God as the all-powerful sovereign who has a personal relationship with his subjects. He is both authoritative and intimate.
3. *How mighty.* Usually translated “majestic,” this term describes a display of divine power which evokes awe, wonder, and even intimidation (cf. Ps 93:4). While the first appearance of the term certainly strikes one as appropriate when one considers the display of divine power in creation, the repeat of the term in v. 9 increases the awe when one considers the power displayed in God utilizing the weak to do his will.
4. *Name.* God's name is closely connected with his character and nature. So here, God's “name” and his “might” are poetically synonymous: “The majesty of both God's person and creation are revealed to mankind in the divine name and all that it implied. The majestic name of God both permeates the earth and transcends the heavens, thus evoking the words of mortal praise. And as this psalm begins with an explanation of the majesty of God's name, so too it ends in the same words (v. 10), indicating in part that it is the majesty of the divine name which provides the central theme of the psalm and which provides the clue to its fundamental meaning” (Craigie, 107).
5. *Set your majesty above the heavens.* The setting for the psalm seems to rise from the psalmist's gaze into the night sky (cf. 8:3). Here, the reason why God's mighty name is revealed “in all the earth” is because his majesty is set “above the heavens.” Psalm 19:1 offers a parallel idea, but there it is clear that divine speech occurs to some degree through natural revelation, whereas here we will soon discover that the heavens merely set the scene for a greater display of divine might.

3. The Principle Illustrated: Strength Established through Weakness (8:2)

The principle of God's strength which was introduced in the opening verse is given a profound illustration through the contrast of two diametrically opposed symbols of weakness and strength.

- 2 From the mouths of infants and nursing babies¹ you establish strength,²
because of your foes,³ in order to bring to an end⁴ enemy and avenger.³

Notes:

1. *From the mouths of infants and nursing babies.* This verse is unique in the OT. Humanly speaking, there is no better illustration of weakness than the defenseless baby. However, note that the emphasis is on the words of these babies (i.e., "from the mouths..."). The inarticulate babble of infants and young babies still too young for solid food is used as a demonstration of God's might. It is quoted in Matt 21:16 and applied to the praises of children who were celebrating the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. In this case, their child-like faith stood in stark contrast to the unbelief of the Jewish authorities, who stood opposed to Jesus. It was upon this kind of faith that Jesus said his kingdom belonged.
2. *You establish strength.* The principle is one of strength displayed through utter weakness. "The sound of the children is concrete evidence of God's fortress on earth.... The sound of opposition is silenced by the babbling and chatter of children. What a contrast! What a King!" (VanGemeren, 5:111). One could be impressed enough with God's might by observation of the created world. But his strength is truly revealed when he works through the weak. This is part of God's working nature—"God uses the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27). Paul applies this principle to the gospel—a message of foolishness which no one would believe apart from divine illumination. God is "pleased through the folly of the preached message to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21).
3. *Foes, enemy, avenger.* These three terms appear as symbols of human power in contrast to the weakness of "infants and nursing babies." The words of foes are arrogant and rash. They stand in opposition to the authority of God. Historically, all who stand opposed to God and refuse to recognize the name of Yahweh could be referred to here. However, because Psalm 8 is a reflection on Genesis 1, the reference to foes could be more cosmic than human adversaries. At a theological level, Satan stands as God's ultimate adversary. God's elevation of mankind as divine image-bearers could be the springboard for the angelic rebellion which led to the Fall of man in Genesis 3. In that case, Psalm 8 reveals that God's elevation of mankind displays his might to the angelic forces who oppose his authority. Despite their show of force, he uses the apparently weak (man) to accomplish his purposes (creation) and bring to end his foes (Satan).

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4. *In order to bring to an end.* This statement establishes the purpose of the principle. Apart from the existence of enemies in opposition to God, his name, and his purposes, the effect of the principle is lessened. But when the humanly weak stop the humanly powerful, it is clear that God is truly mighty.

4. The Principle Applied: The Reign of Insignificant Man (8:3-8)

Having illustrated the principle through comparison with infants and enemies, the psalmist now expounds upon the thing which has sparked his praise and wonder from the start—man’s seemingly impossible position as rulers over the created order despite his obvious insignificance in relation to it.

3	For ¹ I see your heavens—the works of your fingers, ² the moon and stars which you established. ³
4	What ⁴ is man ⁵ that you remember ⁶ him, or the son of man ⁵ that you attend ⁷ to him?
5	⁸ You have made him a little ⁹ lower than God, ¹⁰ With glory and majesty ¹¹ you have crowned him. ⁸
6	You have given him dominion ¹² over the works of your hands, All things you have put under his feet. ¹³
7	Sheep and oxen—all of them, ¹⁴ Even the wild beasts of the field; ¹⁵
8	The birds in the sky and the fish in the sea, ¹⁵ that pass through the paths of the sea. ¹⁶

Notes:

1. *For.* This indicates a causal clause—v. 3 gives the cause or reason for the psalmist’s meditation on the principle of God’s counterintuitive display of strength.
2. *The works of your fingers.* The language heightens the enormity of God in comparison to the cosmos—the heavens are but the work of his “fingers” (rather than hands). “We may have left our footprints on the moon, but the further we probe through radio telescope and orbiting satellite, the more awesome becomes the

immensity of space and the whirling galaxies” (Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship*, 38).

3. *Established*. The verb expresses sovereign intent and permanence—“fixed,” “set in place”. This further reinforces the idea of God’s might—only someone greater and more immense than the cosmos could set them in their places in the heavens.
4. *What...* A rhetorical question flows out of the psalmist’s observation of vast heavens. The assumed answer—“he is nothing!”
5. *Man...son of man*. The first term is *enosh*, which emphasizes man in his mortality. The phrase “son of man” is *ben adam*, the latter term being derived from *adamah*, “dirt, ground,” from which man was originally formed. The two terms work together to emphasize the frailty and insignificance of man—he is mortal, a son of dirt!
6. *Remember*. “The psalmist is amazed that the majestic God of creation thinks of man in such a way as to do things for him, to meet his needs” (Ross, 295).
7. *Attend*. This verb is often translated as “care for,” but there is a distinct emphasis on action. God “visits” or “attends” to man—he cares for him intimately. He is a God of relationship and tenderness. His immensity does not mean he does not condescend.
8. *You have made him...you crowned him*. This verse is arranged in a chiasm, with two verbs enveloping the central element which focuses on man’s surprising status in the cosmos.
9. *A littler*. This phrase can be understood in terms of degree (“a little bit”), but it can also be temporal (“a little while”) which is how the LXX translates it and how it is used in Hebrews 2:7. See the note below for a fuller discussion.
10. *God*. This word is notoriously difficult to interpret. The MT has *Elohim*, which could mean the one true God or simply refer to plural gods. In other contexts, it can refer to people in high authority, i.e., judges (Ps 82:1, 6-8). The LXX takes it to be supernatural beings and so translates it as “angels.” The issue is further complicated by the fact that the writer to the Hebrews quotes from the LXX version in order to demonstrate Jesus’ superiority to angels. Regardless of that fact, the MT is preferred. The clear reference to creation makes it far more likely that this is a poetic reference to man created in the image of God. The writer to the Hebrews used the LXX version based on its ubiquity in Hellenistic culture and because, though it may not have reflected the original text, it nonetheless expressed truth about Jesus which was useful for furthering his Christological arguments (consider Jude’s use of extrabiblical references in Jude 9, 14-15).
11. *Glory and majesty*. These two words usually appear as divine attributes. Here, we see them applied to humans. This, once again, demonstrates man’s

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uniqueness in creation. Only he is made in God's image, and only he is crowned with glory and majesty.

12. *Dominion*. The reference to Genesis 1 continues as the psalmist considers God's sovereign plan to make mankind his second-in-command—his vice-regent. The royal language of v. 7 (e.g., crowned, glory, majesty) leads to royal responsibility. Even though man appears to be the most insignificant particle in the cosmos, he has been given full dominion over it.
13. *All things...feet*. A parallel statement explaining the significance of the dominion given to man. This phrase is quoted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:27 to demonstrate the universal reign and dominion of the risen Christ.
14. *Sheep and oxen—all of them*. Referring to domestic animals, with the phrase "all of them" included to extend the reference to those not listed (e.g., goats, etc.).
15. *Wild beasts of the field*. Man's dominion is not limited to domesticated animals. Every animal falls under his dominion and responsibility.
16. *Birds...fish...* The territory and subjects of man's dominion continue from the land to the sky and the sea. All constitute the "works of your hands" and all are "put under his feet."
17. *That pass through the paths of the sea*. This participle "that pass through" could refer back to the fish, or it could expand the reference to include other creatures such as whales. Some even see in this a reference to the mythological monsters of the ANE: "The reference to "whatever passes through the pathways of the sea" (v 9b) may simply be an all-embracing way of describing marine life, but it may indicate that even the monsters of the ocean (whales, or even mythological monsters), which were so much larger than tiny humans, were to fall under human control. The words are reminiscent of the ships and the monstrous Leviathan (Ps 104:25-26) that ply the waterways of the world" (Craigie, 109).

5. The Principle Reviewed: The Might and Glory of Yahweh (8:9)

The opening refrain is revisited again to envelop the psalm and draw the reader to the psalm's ultimate goal—praise of the mighty name of Yahweh.

9 O Yahweh, our Master, how mighty is your name in all the earth! ¹

Notes:

1. *O Yahweh...earth*. The refrain of v. 1 returns to close the psalm. This time, however, the reader is invited to ponder God's might within the context of God's counterintuitive display of strength through human weakness. The praise offered reaches a new depth as we meditate on God's unmerited favor toward man, whom he has given rulership and glory to despite his insignificance.

6. Subscription

The subscriptions to psalms were placed at the end and provided information related to musical performance, instrumentation, tunes, and dedications for use in corporate worship.

¹For the Chief Musician. On *muth laben*.²

Notes:

1. *For...laben*. This appears as the superscription to Psalm 9, but actually belongs to Psalm 8 as musical instructions.
2. *On muth laben*. The meaning of this phrase is uncertain. Possibly, it designates a particular tune to which the psalm should be played. In that case, the literal translation of the tune title is, "death to the son."

"In the New Testament, the apostles point out that because of the presence of sin, mankind has not ruled over God's creation as intended. Creation is not in submission, but in chaos. The message of the New Testament explains how this plan will be fulfilled. By the incarnation, the Son of God took on mortal flesh and was made a little lower than the angels (the New Testament using the wording of the Greek translation), He never ceased being divine, but he did empty himself to become the second Adam., Even though all dominion and authority has been given to him, we do not yet see all things put under his feet. That will happen at the end of the age. Paul emphasizes that he will not simply put created life under his feet. He will subdue things visible and invisible, and the last enemy that he will subdue will be death. Those who trust in the Lord will share in that dominion, for they will reign with him (Rev 5:11). Then the human race will fulfill its destiny, in and through the new Adam."

--Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume I (1-41)*, 297