



# PSALM 8

PRAISING 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.
- ▶ 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
- ▶ The focus is on God's might displayed in using the weak and insignificant in order to accomplish his purposes.



# 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 a 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



# Structure

► 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



# Translation

To the Chief Musician. According to the *gittith*, A psalm by David.

- 1 O Yahweh, our Master, how mighty is your name in all the earth,  
who has set your majesty above the heavens
- 2 From the mouths of infants and nursing babies you establish strength,  
because of your foes, in order to bring to end enemy and avenger.
- 3 For I see your heavens—the works of your fingers,  
the moon and stars which you established.
- 4 What is man that you remember him,  
or the son of man that you attend to him?
- 5 You have made him a little lower than God,  
with glory and majesty you have crowned him.



# Translation

- 6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands,  
all things you have put under his feet.
- 7 Sheep and oxen—all of them,  
even the wild beasts of the field,
- 8 The birds of the sky and the fish and the sea,  
that pass through the paths of the sea.
- 9 O Yahweh, our Master,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

For the Chief Musician. On *muth laben*.



# 1. Superscription

- ▶ *To the Chief Musician. According to the gittith.*
  - ▶ Subscription to Psalm 7
  - ▶ Superscriptions = historical background/authorship
  - ▶ Subscriptions = musical instructions
- ▶ *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.
- ▶ *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 (8:1)

- ▶ *O Yahweh, our Master, how mighty is Your name in all the earth.*
  - ▶ Inclusio/envelop—sets theological framework for content
  - ▶ However, this first iteration of the phrase focuses the 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.
  - ▶ 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.
- ▶ *O Yahweh, our Master*
  - ▶ *Yahweh* = covenant name—reveals him as the God of covenant intimacy
  - ▶ *Master* = *Adonai*—reveals him as sovereign and authoritative
  - ▶ Together, they perfectly capture God as the all-powerful sovereign who has a personal relationship with his subjects. He is both authoritative and intimate.



## 2. The Principle Revealed (8:1)

### ▶ *How mighty*

- ▶ 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.

### ▶ *Name*

- ▶ “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).



## 2. The Principle Revealed (8:1)

- ▶ *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 (8:2)

- ▶ *From the mouths of infants and nursing babies*
  - ▶ No other statement like this in OT
  - ▶ Symbolic of human weakness and vulnerability
  - ▶ Quoted in Matt 21:16 to describe praise of children...juxtaposed to opposition of religious leaders
- ▶ *You establish strength*
  - ▶ Principle = strength displayed through 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)
  - ▶ “God uses the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27)



# 3. The Principle Illustrated (8:2)

- ▶ *Foes, enemy, avenger*
  - ▶ symbolic of human strength/hubris
  - ▶ Include all who stand opposed to God and refuse to recognize his name
  - ▶ Cosmic scope of psalm may also reflect Satanic adversaries
- ▶ *In order to bring to an end*
  - ▶ 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 (8:3-8)

## Verse 3

- ▶ *For*
  - ▶ indicates cause—v. 3 gives cause or reason for the psalmist's meditation on the principle
- ▶ *the works of your fingers*
  - ▶ Word picture heightens immensity of God compared to universe
  - ▶ "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)
- ▶ *Established*
  - ▶ "fixed/set in place"—reinforces power of God—only someone greater and more immense than the cosmos could set them in their places in the heavens



# 4. The Principle Applied (8:3-8)

## Verse 4

- ▶ *What...*
  - ▶ rhetorical question w/ expected answer--"he is nothing!"
- ▶ *Man...son of man*
  - ▶ *Man* = *enosh*—emphasis on mortality
  - ▶ *son of man* = *ben adam*--derived from *adama*, "dirt, ground" = "son of dirt"
  - ▶ composite emphasis on frailty and insignificance of man
- ▶ *Remember*
  - ▶ "The psalmist is amazed that the majestic God of creation thinks of msn in such a way as to do things for him, to meet his needs" (Ross, 295)



# 4. The Principle Applied (8:3-8)

## Verse 4

### ▶ *Attend*

- ▶ = “visits/cares for”—God cares for man intimately and tenderly. His immensity does not mean he does not condescend

## Verse 5

### ▶ *You have made him...you crowned him*

- ▶ arranged as chiasm:
- ▶ central focus on man’s surprising status in cosmos

### ▶ *A little*

- ▶ could indicate degree (“a little bit”) or time (“a little while)
- ▶ LXX takes the latter and Heb 2:7 quotes from it



# 4. The Principle Applied (8:3-8)

## Verse 5

### ▶ *God*

- ▶ Heb = *Elohim* = God, gods, supernatural beings...can sometimes refer to human judges (cf. Ps 82:1, 6-8)
- ▶ LXX = angels
- ▶ Heb 2:7 quotes from LXX version to demonstrate Jesus' superiority to angels
- ▶ best seen as poetic reference to image of God (Gen 1:26)

### ▶ *Glory and majesty*

- ▶ usually divine qualities now applied to humans
- ▶ demonstrates man's uniqueness in creation



# 4. The Principle Applied (8:3-8)

## Verse 6

### ▶ *Dominion*

- ▶ cf. Gen 1:26
- ▶ Man = God's vice-regent over created order
- ▶ Royal language (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

### ▶ *All things under his feet*

- ▶ quoted by Paul in 1 Cor 15:27 to demonstrate the universal reign and dominion of Christ



# 4. The Principle Applied (8:3-8)

## Verse 7

- ▶ *Sheep and oxen—all of them*
  - ▶ = domestic animals
  - ▶ extends to animals not listed
- ▶ *Wild beasts of the field*
  - ▶ = non-domesticated animals
  - ▶ All living creatures fall under man's dominion

## Verse 8

- ▶ *Birds...fish*
  - ▶ territory moves from earth to sky to sea



# 4. The Principle Applied (8:3-8)

## Verse 8

- ▶ *that passes through the paths of the sea*
  - ▶ could refer to fish
  - ▶ could expand to larger marine animals
  - ▶ “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 (8:9)

- ▶ *O Yahweh...earth*
  - ▶ return of v. 1 refrain
  - ▶ statement takes on new depth of significance after vv. 3-8
  - ▶ God's might exceeds his creation of the cosmos
  - ▶ It is displayed through insignificant man reigning and ruling over the vast cosmos as God's representatives



# 6. Subscription

- ▶ *For the Chief Musician. On muth laben*
  - ▶ appears as superscription to Ps 9
  - ▶ actually belongs to Ps 8 as musical instructions
- ▶ *On muth laben*
  - ▶ uncertain meaning
  - ▶ possibly refers to particular tune to which psalm should be placed
  - ▶ lit. trans. = on [the tune of] death to the son"



# Final Considerations

- ▶ Man is viewed as God's crowning achievement...his status in creation should evoke humility, praise, and renewed resolve to fulfill his divine responsibilities
- ▶ The Fall has seriously impaired man's dominion mandate—under the first Adam life has been foiled
- ▶ Psalm 8 is utilized by NT writers to demonstrate how Jesus—the last Adam—fulfills what the first Adam failed
- ▶ His universal reign in the millennial kingdom pictures the ultimate purpose for man—reigning and ruling over creation in God's stead



# Final Considerations

“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.”