

What is Man?

Psalm 8

A psalm by David.

1 *I AM*, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You who have set your glory upon the heavens.

2 From the mouth of children and infants

you have laid the foundation of a strong bulwark

in order your foes, to eliminate the enemy and the avenger

3 When I consider your heavens, the works of your fingers,

the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

4 what is a mere mortal that you are mindful of him,

a common human being that you care for him?

5 And so you made him lack a trifle from the heavenly beings

and you crown him with glory and honor.

6 You cause him to rule over the works of your hands;

you put everything under his feet:

7 all flocks and herds,

and even the wild animals;

8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,

the one that swims the paths of the seas.

9 *I AM*, our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Bruce Waltke translation¹

I. Meditation #1: Splendor in heavens and “infants” defeat God’s foes

A. God sets his splendor in the heavens (Isa 40:26)

While the heavens are singing God’s glory we are confronted with the rising discord of powerful foes and avengers, who devour the weak on earth. The juxtaposition of these two brings to light the unexpected and mysterious way that God makes his rule majestic on earth.

B. God uses the prayer of the meek to destroy enemies – “children and infants,” occurs in contexts of destruction and horror, when helpless offspring of a people are threatened with annihilation by a ruthless foe.

II. Meditation #2: The glory of God stooping to help man

A. Meditation of heaven (Ps 19:2) – we stand in awe of the immensity of God’s handiwork, yet the ease that he established the stars, “*the work of his fingers.*”

B. Meditation of man – Who am I? “*Care for him*” - means “to visit” in the sense to take careful notice of one’s situation and to act appropriately, sometimes “to come to the aid of.”

III. Meditation #3: The glory of man as the crown of creation

A. Mortals crowned with splendor: man lacks only a little, “just a bit,” from the exalted status of the heavenly court.

B. Mortals commissioned to rule *all* the earth: Whereas God has inscribed his own splendor on the celestial bodies, he gives his image honor in his own right by empowering him to rule over all things.

C. No creatures left out of his rule: both domestic and wild animals created on the sixth day and the birds and the fish created on the fifth day.

IV. Meditation #4: The theme reiterated

a. The single sentence explodes as an exclamation of surprise over the discovery of God’s name in all the earth.

b. *majestic* (*‘addîr*) – denotes someone or something that commands respect through the excellence of *power*. It is used of the ‘mighty’ Reed Sea when it engulfed the Egyptian army, of the Lord’s dominion over the stormy seas (Ps 93:3-4), and of his right hand when he shattered Pharaoh’s picked troops (Exod 15:6). It speaks of God’s willingness to be seen publicly.

¹ Translation and observations taken from Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston with Erica Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 254-75.

The Message of Psalm 8

Psalm 8 is a magnificent hymn of praise to God as Creator of the cosmos and as Ruler of history by paradoxically celebrating the grandeur of humankind. Irenaeus put it succinctly: “The glory of God is man fully alive.” Amandus Polanus, sixteenth-century Basel professor and Reformer, stated the complementary truth: “the glory of man is the living God.” The mortal fully alive is childlike, not a tyrant. I AM’s name becomes majestic in all the earth by his using mere mortals as his vice-gerents to establish his rule over all the earth. The inclusio, “I AM, our I AM, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” sets the psalm’s boundaries and sounds its theme, while the rest of the psalm develops that theme by pointing to the grandeur of humankind, who by their dependence upon God fulfill their mandate to rule over all the earth.

Chiastic Structure

a Inclusio: *How majestic your name in all the earth*

b First Quatrain: Splendor upon the heavens

c Second Quatrain: *Work of your fingers . . . you have set in place*

x Pivot Quatrain:

1. What is a mere mortal you care for
2. You made him a little lower than angelic beings to rule

c' Third quatrain: *Work of your hands . . . you put*

b' Fourth quatrain: *birds of the heavens*

a' Inclusio: *How majestic your name in all the earth*



Marc Chagall – Solitude 1933

I AM AN IRONY

I am an irony
I am an ordeal,
weak as water
strong as steel.

Battered and beaten
flat and cold,
glistening and glowing
round and gold.

I am a river
I am rust,
wet as wine
dry as dust.

I am a bore
I am a thrill,
easy to empty
hard to fill.

Hunted and hounded
pushed and shoved
admired and honored
blessed and beloved.

I am a saint
I am a sinner,
crawling the race
chasing the winner.

I am a tortoise
I am a hare
I am common
I am rare.

Lacking and leaking
spilt and spent,
brimming and bursting
gathered and sent.

I am alone
I am together
embracing the future
in spite of the weather.

I am an irony
I am an ordeal,
weak as water
strong as steel.

Besought and beset
round and about,
calm and collected
within and without.

I am a metaphor
I am a poem,
walking on words
heading for home.

Jim Foster