

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Two

PSALM 8

The Son of Man Crowned with Glory

Get far enough away from a town and look up. That is where this psalm begins, with a man outdoors at night under a sky he did not make, doing the arithmetic that every honest person eventually does. All of that, and me. The moon and the stars are the work of God's fingers. A human being is a few pounds of dust with a short life and a long list of failures. "What is man that you are mindful of him?"

Psalm 8 is the answer to its own question, and the answer is not the one we expect. It does not say that man is nothing. It says that God crowned him. This is a psalm about human dignity and human dominion, about the astonishing office God handed to creatures who die. But every one of us knows that the arrangement is not working. The world is not in subjection to us, and a good deal of the time we are not in subjection to ourselves. The New Testament takes that failure seriously, refuses to pretend, and then does something remarkable with this psalm. It says: look at Jesus.

Read Psalm 8 several times this week, and read it outdoors at night if you can. Then read Matthew 21:12 to 16 and Hebrews 2:5 to 18, slowly, with a pencil in your hand. Watch the small joining words in Hebrews 2:8 and 2:9. Everything in this lesson hangs on the difference between "we do not yet see" and "but we see him."

First impressions

Psalm 8 is the first psalm in the Psalter that is praise from beginning to end. There is no petition in it, no enemy chasing the writer, no complaint. Its superscription reads, "To the choirmaster: according to The Gittith. A Psalm of David." Nobody today knows for certain what *gittith* means. The word looks as though it is built on the name of Gath, so it may be a tune, an instrument, or a style of singing that came from there; the same word stands over Psalms 81 and 84. Notice also how the psalm is framed. Verse 9 repeats the opening line of verse 1 word for word: "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Everything the psalm says about the greatness of man sits inside a fence built out of the greatness of God. That fence is not decoration. It is the point.

1.
 - a. Read Psalm 8 through three times, once quickly, once slowly, and once out loud. What is the first line, and what is the last line? What does that frame tell you about what the psalm is really about?
 - b. What surprises you most about this psalm?

Study Skill, Noticing the Superscription: Most psalms carry a heading before verse 1, and most of us skip it. Do not. The superscriptions are part of the Hebrew text, and they tell us four kinds of thing: who wrote or received the psalm, what occasion produced it, what tune or instrument went with it, and how it was to be used in worship. Psalm 8 gives us a choirmaster, a musical direction, and David. Psalm 51 gives us an entire scandal. Psalm 3 gives us a son in rebellion. When a heading names an occasion, go read the story it points to before you read the psalm. And when a psalm carries no heading at all, as Psalm 2 does not, notice the absence too, and let the New Testament fill in what it can (Acts 4:25).

How majestic is your name (8:1-2)

"Your name" in Hebrew is not a label; it is the whole revealed character of God, everything He has made known about Himself. David says that name is majestic "in all the earth," and then adds something larger still: God has set His glory above the heavens. The sky that overwhelms us in verse 3 is not the ceiling of God's greatness. It is the floor. Then comes verse 2, one of the strangest sentences in the Psalter. "Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger." God's chosen fortress against His enemies is the noise small children make. Hold on to that verse. Jesus quotes it.

2. Read 8:1 to 2. What two things does verse 1 say about God? In verse 2, what has God established, out of whose mouths, and for what purpose?

For Thought and Discussion: Verse 2 says God builds His stronghold out of the voices of infants. Read 1 Corinthians 1:26 to 31 and 2 Corinthians 12:9 to 10. Why would God consistently choose to work this way? Where have you seen Him do it in your own congregation?

What is man? (8:3-4)

Verse 3 keeps the scale honest: the heavens are "the work of your fingers." Fingers, not arms. The entire night sky is God's needlework. Then verse 4 asks its question in two lines, and Hebrew poetry ordinarily says a thing twice with different words. "Man" here is *enosh*, a word for a human being that leans on frailty and mortality. "Son of man" is *ben adam*, literally a son of Adam, and in this psalm it means nothing more mysterious than "a human being." The second line is not introducing a new figure. It is the first line said over again. Remember that when you reach Hebrews. Two verbs carry the wonder of the verse: God is *mindful* of us, and He *cares for* us, a word that means to visit, to come and attend to someone in person.

3. Read 8:3 to 4. What is David looking at, and what question does it raise in him? Write the question out in your own words. When have you felt it?

4.
 - a. Read Genesis 1:26 to 28. What did God say He was making man to be, and what did He tell him to do?
 - b. Now read Psalm 8:5 to 8 again. How much of Genesis 1 do you hear in it?

For Further Study: The question of Psalm 8:4 is asked twice more in the Old Testament, each time in a different key. Read Job 7:17 to 18 and Psalm 144:3 to 4. What is Job's tone? What is the tone of Psalm 144? Set all three beside one another. The same question can be a complaint, a sigh, or a hymn, depending on who is asking and why.

Crowned with glory and honor (8:5-8)

Verse 5 is where the translations divide. The Hebrew says God made man "a little lower than *elohim*," a word that can mean God, or gods, or heavenly beings. The Greek Old Testament, which most first-century Christians read, rendered it "a little lower than the angels," and that is the wording Hebrews will use. Either way the placement is the same: man is set just beneath heaven and just above everything else. And the words that follow are royal words. Crowned. Glory. Honor. Dominion. All things under his feet. The inventory that comes next, sheep and oxen and beasts and birds and fish, is Genesis 1 set to music. This is not a psalm about how small you are. It is a psalm about the office God gave to dust.

5.
 - a. Read 8:5 to 8. List every word in these verses that belongs to a king.
 - b. What has been placed under man's feet? Make the list the psalm makes.
6.
 - a. Now look honestly at the world. Read Genesis 3:17 to 19 and Romans 8:19 to 22. What happened to the dominion of verse 6?
 - b. Where do you see, in an ordinary week, that things are not in subjection to us?

Optional Application: Dominion in Scripture is stewardship, not license. The man in Genesis 2:15 was put in the garden "to work it and keep it." Choose one thing under your care this week, a yard, an animal, a tool, a body, a household budget, a piece of work, and

tend it as though you will give an account for it. Then ask yourself afterward why doing that felt something like worship.

Children in the temple (Matthew 21:14–16)

Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David." In Matthew's account He goes into the temple, drives out those who were buying and selling, and then heals the blind and the lame who come to Him there. Children who had watched all of it began crying out through the courts, and the chief priests and the scribes were indignant. "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said that He did, and quoted Psalm 8:2 back to them. Notice the wording Matthew records: "Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise." Your Old Testament says God established *strength*. The Greek Old Testament that Matthew's readers knew says *praise*. Both are faithful to the verse, and together they say something worth carrying out of this lesson. The praise of the weak is the strength God has set against His enemies. In a temple full of experts who would not say it, the children said it.

7.
 - a. Read Matthew 21:12 to 16. What had just happened in the temple? What were the children shouting?
 - b. Who was indignant, and why?
 - c. Jesus answers by quoting Psalm 8:2. Read Psalm 8:1 to 2 once more. If the children's cry is the strength, or the praise, that verse 2 speaks of, what is Jesus quietly claiming about Himself?

For Further Study: Compare Psalm 8:2 in your Bible with the wording quoted in Matthew 21:16. They are not identical. The New Testament writers usually quoted the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was in common use in their day, much as we might quote a familiar English version rather than translating the Hebrew ourselves. Watch for this all the way through this series. It is not a problem to be explained away. It is a window into how ordinary people in the first century actually read their Bibles.

We do not yet see everything in subjection (Hebrews 2:5–9)

Hebrews has spent its first chapter proving that the Son is greater than the angels. Now, in chapter 2, the writer seems to change the subject: "it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking." Then he quotes Psalm 8:4 to 6 in full. And then he does the thing that makes this paragraph one of the most important in the New Testament for understanding what a human being is. He takes the psalm at face value. God really did put everything under man's feet, and "he left nothing

outside his control." And then he says out loud what everybody in the room already knew: "At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him." He does not soften it. He does not pretend. He looks straight at the gap between the psalm and the world and names it.

Verse 9 is the turn, and it is only three words wide. "But we see him." We do not see the psalm fulfilled in the human race. We do see it fulfilled in one Man. Jesus was made lower than the angels "for a little while," which is how the writer reads the psalm's "a little lower," and then He was crowned with glory and honor. Read the reason slowly, because it is the last one any of us would have written. He is crowned "because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." The crown was not handed to Him instead of the cross. It was handed to Him because of it. The glory of humanity, given to us in Genesis and wrecked by our sin, is restored in the true Man, and He restores it by dying.

8. Read Hebrews 2:5 to 8. What Old Testament passage does the writer quote, and how much of it does he quote? According to the middle of verse 8, how much did God leave outside of man's control?
9. Read the last sentence of Hebrews 2:8 again. What does the writer freely admit? Why does it matter that he says it out loud instead of avoiding it?
10.
 - a. Read Hebrews 2:9. What do we see, and whom do we see? What reason does the verse give for His crowning, and what purpose does it give for His death?
 - b. Put the argument of verses 8 and 9 into your own words, in two sentences.

Study Skill, Tracing the Logical Connectors in an Argument: The little joining words in a passage are the hinges the whole thing swings on. Read Hebrews 2:5 to 18 with a pencil and circle every "for," "now," "at present," "but," "therefore," "since," and "because." Then write out what each one connects to what. In verse 8 the "now" introduces the writer's own comment on the quotation, and "at present, we do not yet see" concedes a real problem. In verse 9 the "but" answers it. In verse 10 "for it was fitting" explains why God chose that answer. Do this with any argument in the New Testament letters and you will stop reading verses as beads on a string and start hearing a man reason.

11. Read Hebrews 2:10 to 18. Why did the Son have to share in flesh and blood? Name at least three things that verses 14 to 18 say He accomplished by it.

All things under his feet (1 Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:22)

Two of Paul's letters reach for the same line of Psalm 8. In 1 Corinthians 15 he is arguing about the resurrection and the end of all things. Christ must reign, he says, until all His enemies are under His feet, and then in verse 27 he quotes Psalm 8:6, "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." He immediately adds the obvious exception, that the Father who did the subjecting is plainly not Himself included. In Ephesians 1 the same words describe what God did when He raised Jesus from the dead and seated Him at His right hand, and there Paul adds a clause you would never have predicted from Psalm 8: God "gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body." The dominion man lost is being exercised right now, by a Man, on behalf of His people.

12. a. Read 1 Corinthians 15:24 to 28. Which words of Psalm 8 does Paul quote in verse 27? What exception does he insist on, and why do you think he bothers?

- b. Read Ephesians 1:20 to 23. Where is Christ, what is under His feet, and who is said to benefit from it?

13. Read Romans 8:18 to 25 and Revelation 22:3 to 5. What is creation waiting for? What is finally promised to those who belong to Christ, and how does that relate to the dominion of Psalm 8:6?

The true Man

Put the pieces together. God made human beings for glory and gave them the world to keep. We handed the world over to death instead, and any honest look at the news, or at our own hearts on a bad afternoon, confirms that the crown does not sit straight on us. So God became one of us. He took the dust, wore the frailty, went lower than the angels for a little while, and died. And He was crowned. What was lost in Adam is not going to be repaired by our improvement; it is restored in Him and shared with everyone joined to Him. That is why this psalm can still be sung with a straight face. It is also why it ends exactly where it began, with the majesty of God's name and not with ours.

Your response

14. The question of Psalm 8:4 can be asked in wonder or in despair. Which way have you been asking it lately? What has been telling you that you are too small, or too used up, to matter to God?

15. Hebrews 2:9 says that we do not yet see everything in subjection, but that we do see Jesus. Name one specific thing in your life right now that is not in subjection, that you cannot fix, and that you keep staring at. What would change this week if you spent as much time looking at Him as at it?
16. Write one specific step you will take because of what God has shown you in this psalm, and one prayer you would like the class to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Ask each person to name the most beautiful thing they have ever seen outdoors, and where they were standing when they saw it. Then read Psalm 8 aloud, all nine verses, and go straight into the lesson without comment. The psalm will do its own work.

Discussion. Give the first half of the hour to the psalm and the second half to Hebrews 2. Questions 9 and 10 are the center of the lesson; do not let the class hurry through the admission in verse 8 in order to get to the good news in verse 9, because the good news is only as strong as the honesty that comes before it. Question 6 will draw out real pain from some in the room, so leave room for it. Question 12 keeps the class from thinking of Christ's reign as something still waiting to begin.

Wrap-up. Read Hebrews 2:9 aloud, then Psalm 8:9, and close there. Pray for the people in your class whose bodies or circumstances make it hard to believe they were crowned with glory and honor, and thank God for the one Man in whom the psalm has already come true.