

# IN HONOUR OF KING YAHWEH: The Book of Psalms

Week 3 — Messiah in the Psalms



## Review

The Psalms are a bit like onions: you peel back the skin, only to discover there are several more layers of meaning underneath. At the heart of every Psalm, the core is that YHWH is king; he rules the nations, and he does that through his representative kingdom—Israel. Israel's Psalms are therefore responses to God's kingship over them, and—through them—over the wider world:

- YHWH's kingship, expressed in Israel's king (royal psalms)
- ascribing honour to their heavenly king (praise/hymn psalms)
- giving thanks for the way he rules (thanksgiving psalms)
- expressing confidence in his reign (trust psalms)
- teaching obedience to his laws (wisdom psalms)
- requesting the king to intervene in injustice (lament psalms).

Each genre within Psalms is a response to God as sovereign ruler.

All the stories about God's rule on earth through his representative people came together in the person of Jesus, the Christ (anointed ruler). Since all the Psalms have as their core that God rules, and since Jesus is God ruling, everything in the Psalms takes on new shape in the light of Jesus the anointed ruler, the Lord of heaven and earth. Once you understand what the Psalms meant to Israel, you can then grasp what they mean in Christ Jesus our Lord. Only then can we see the richness of what they mean to us.

Let's try that with a couple of Psalms tonight: Psalms 8 and 22.

## Psalm 8

### Genre and structure

Psalm 8 is a praise psalm, celebrating creation.

It opens and closes with the same words. Scholars call this an *inclusio*, (the same word or phrase opening and closing a passage).

Sitting within those bookends is the change of perspective the Psalm intends to give. So, the Psalm is structured like this:

- The majestic heavenly ruler (8:1-2)
- Human insignificance (8:3-4)
- Human significance (8:5-8)
- The majestic heavenly ruler (8:9)

### Meaning for Israel

The title over verse 1 contains musical instructions, so we know Israel used this Psalm in corporate worship.

#### *The majestic heavenly ruler (8:1-2)*

**8:1** Where you see the word *LORD* in all-capitals, it indicates that this is the divine name—YHWH in Hebrew. God's personal name was so holy that later Judaism avoided pronouncing it, just to ensure they were not breaking the third commandment. Even today when Jewish people read their Scriptures, they read *ha-shem* (the name) instead of saying the sacred name.

The second word *Lord* in 8:1 is not all-capitals. This is a Hebrew title of respect: a master or ruler.

God's *name* is his reputation, the honour due to him because of his authority and character. In this case, one can see how majestic God's name is by looking at his realm—the creation that exists in response to the authoritative word he spoke.

We could therefore translate 8:1a like this:

*YHWH, our ruler, your majestic authority fills the earth.*

The parallel phrase declares that God's *glory* (his pure and powerful magnificence) has been placed in the *heavens*. In the Biblical framework, earth is our space and heaven in God's space. They did not distinguish between the atmosphere (e.g. birds of the heavens), space (e.g. stars of the heavens), and God's domain (e.g. heaven is your throne). Verse 3 helps us know that the Psalmist is talking about the heavenly lights (stars, sun, moon), so we could translate 8:1b:

*You have set markers of your magnificence in place in the sky.*

**8:2** Even though YHWH's authority is majestic in the whole earth and stamped in the stars, he has **enemies**—people who refuse his authority. From Israel's perspective, the enemies of Israel are the enemies of God. The heavenly ruler as decreed Abraham's descendants to be his representative nation and he has decreed that Canaan be their land. Despite YHWH's obvious power over heaven and earth, other nations attack them to wipe them out and take their land.

How foolish these enemies of Israel are: by making YHWH their enemy, they seal their fate. God's authority to rule is not threatened by some foreign king and his army: even a little child giving honour to God the great ruler is enough to bring God's protective hand over his people, a powerful hand that no enemy can stand against. We paraphrase 8:2:

*The acknowledgement of your authority by a child or infant is all it takes to establish your strength against your enemies, to silence those who are itching for a fight.*

To summarise 8:1-3: God's magnificent royal authority is established over the earth, over the heavens, and in his children.

### **Human insignificance (8:3-4)**

**8:3** If you have ever stood outside on a dark night, away from city lights, and you will sense the wonder expressed by this Psalmist. He had no telescope: the wonder is even deeper than he understood.

In Hebrew thought, the luminaries (sun, moon, and stars) were set in place to rule creation:

Gen 1 <sup>14</sup> And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, <sup>15</sup> and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. <sup>16</sup> And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.

Life on earth is ordered by the rhythms of days, weeks, months, seasons, and years. Each birthday acknowledges the sun ruling our

lives. The great lights rule the animals as well, as creatures wake and sleep and nest and spawn and hibernate and migrate. The luminaries rule our lives in the sense that they operate with the regularity and precision that divides our lives into days, weeks, months, and years.

**8:4** Compared to the magnificence and perfect regularity of the heavens, what are humans? We see ourselves as insignificant dots on the surface of a ball spinning around one star of a galaxy somewhere in space-time. Why does God even notice us?

Though they did not know those astronomical details at the time the Psalm was written, the question of verse 4 seems even more powerfully relevant now:

*What is a human that you even notice him (in your vast realm),  
the human descendant that you (as his ruler) provide for him?*

In part, the question raises the contrast between how humans behave and how the luminaries behave. The sun, moon, and stars operate like clockwork—rising and setting every day, tracking across the sky, just as the Creator ordained. They perfectly obey the laws of the Creator.

By contrast, humans don't do a very good job of obeying the Creator's laws. We get off-track. Like the "enemies" of verse 2, we oppose the Creator and try to take his authority for ourselves and enforce our power violently against others. The contrast between the behaviour of the luminaries and the behaviour of humans became a topic of great interest in later Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

Despite our insignificance in God's universe, and our unwillingness to live in the way God designed us to, the heavenly ruler still takes note of us and cares of us in the way a great ruler should do. And that's what the Psalm is really celebrating: YHWH, our majestic Lord.

### **Human significance (8:5-8)**

In Genesis 1, God not only gave authority for the luminaries to rule over day and night: he also gave dominion over creation to humans. He designed humans to be the visible image on earth of the invisible creator in heaven (Genesis 1:26-28).

That means that, in relation to the creation, humans are one step below God himself: under God, and over creation! That's significance!

And that is precisely what Psalm 8:5-6 declares:

*You made him [the human] a little lower than God  
crowning him with glory and honour.  
You gave him dominion over all the creatures you made,  
placing all things under his feet*

Some translations read *angels* or *heavenly beings* instead of *God*. It is however the normal Hebrew word for God—*elohim*, used 2596 times in the Old Testament. It is sometimes translated gods (e.g. the gods of other nations). By extension, it can include other heavenly beings, but that is quite rare and makes no sense of the current context.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> For example the *Astronomical Book* (also called *Luminaries*) occupies eleven chapters of 1 Enoch (72–82).

<sup>2</sup> When Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew text into Greek (the Septuagint) a couple of centuries before Christ, they translated *elohim* as "angels." The significance that God gave to humans was so great that it sounded presumptuous.

whole point is that the Creator placed the whole world under human beings, so in relation to creation humans are one step below God.

There is no question that the Psalmist has Genesis 1:26-28 in mind here: he not only uses the word dominion, but uses the same categories of creature (in verses 7-8). Humans are significant because they are the agents of God's reign over creation.

Once again, the problem is that God's creation is not operating as it should, because humans are not managing it correctly. We have already seen a reference to God's enemies back in verse 2. These were people who ignored God's decrees and tried to dominate his people and take their land.

The mandate God gave us at creation did not include dominating other humans! God has reserved for himself the right to rule over humans, and we are to rule over the animals with the same care that God provides for us. We are not God: we are (and should remain) *a little lower than God!*

There is at least the question here of what the world would look like if humans were fulfilling their role as perfectly as the luminaries do.

By the way, we should mention that

### **The majestic heavenly ruler (8:9)**

The Psalm concludes as it began, with a declaration of praise to YHWH our ruler. But now the declaration means so much more. The luminaries rule over creation, keeping perfect time just as God declared. Humans rule imperfectly, not always bringing honour to the great ruler who entrusted us with responsibility over his creation.

Yet, our great monarch knows what he is doing. He doesn't make mistakes. He must have some way to get this errant creation back on track again. He is the great ruler, and all the earth will ultimately make that declaration.

### **Meaning in the light of Jesus**

The most amazing moment in all of history was when God stepped out of his own realm, into the world of humans and animals. If you want to discover what God is like, look at Jesus. Just as importantly, if you want to discover what a human is like, look at Jesus!

Jesus came face to face with God's enemies (8:2). Pilate and Herod represented Rome, the powers that continued to crush God's people after the exile. But evil rule came not only through those foreigners: the high priest and the rulers of Israel were determined to put him to death. Jesus did not fight back against them: that's not how he regained the power God had entrusted to humans.

So what we see in Jesus is this: the Lord, our Lord, the majestic ruler of heaven and earth, was made a little lower than who he really was—born as a human, as one of his own creatures (8:5). Instead of being honoured as the majestic ruler of creation, he was dishonoured, rejected, humiliated, judged as unfit to live, crucified in utter shame, so that those who held power would not lose their power.

That's when God stepped in to undo the injustice of human rule on earth. God raised him from the dead, giving him a name above every

name, all authority in heaven and on earth. Just as God entrusted the whole world to humans in the beginning, he has now restored the whole creation into the management of Jesus the human (son of man).

Jesus is the one who undoes the mess humans have made of God's creation, and brings it back under the reign of God. That is how the New Testament writers understood Psalm 8 in the light of Jesus. See Matt 21:16 (Psa 8:2); Heb 2:8 (Psa 8:4-6); 1 Cor 15:27 (Psa 8:6).

The gospel (good news) is the announcement that Jesus is Lord—that the whole creation has been restored under his care. Jesus is the person in whom the human and divine come together: he is fully God and fully human. Through him, everything God entrusted to humans is restored to God.

Let's read Psalm 8 again, recognising Jesus as both the Creator and the human who restores God's rule:

*1 Lord Jesus, our ruler, how majestic is your name throughout all the earth! Your glory is exalted above the heavens!*

*2 As defenceless as an infant, you stood before the enemies of God and declared their demise. A word from your mouth was more powerful than a sword.*

*3 When I look at your heavens where your will is perfectly done, what is the human that you remember him, the human descendant that you care of him?*

*4 Yet, you became the human descendant (the Son of Man)!*

*You stepped down from your position as God to reach us.*

*In doing so, you have demonstrated what kind of ruler you are: crowned with glory and honour.*

*6-8 That dominion you gave to humans in the beginning, you have now received in your resurrection. You hold all authority, to restore peace and order to your whole creation, every creature, every thing!*

*9 Lord Jesus, our ruler, how majestic is your name throughout all the earth! Your glory is exalted above the heavens!*

By the way, this is how the church has always understood Psalm 8. It has been traditionally associated with Ascension Day.<sup>3</sup>

Discuss.

### **Meaning for us**

When I look at photographs from the Hubble telescope that capture amazing little segments of the sky, and I try to wrap my head around the vastness of the universe in space and time, I feel so insignificant—just a flyspeck in space, just a clock-tick in time. Who am I? What am I here for? What am I meant to do in my brief life?

Then I hear the narrative of Scripture imparting significance to us. We are the creatures God designed to reflect his character and to manage his world. Even though humans abuse the power God gave us and dominate each other instead of caring for and managing his creation, God knows what he is doing. He has stepped into history in

<sup>3</sup> Peter C Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 2nd ed., vol. 19, Word Biblical Commentary (Nelson, 2004), 106.

the person of Jesus to save us from ourselves, to restore God's reign through humans in his world.

We who are in Christ therefore have the responsibility to care for his creation, in the same way our ruler has cared for us. This is God's plan to restore his world through Jesus. The purpose of my life is to say, "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth."

## Psalm 22

### Genre and Structure

Psalm 22 is a lament—a justice complaint. Things are not working the way they should in God's world.

It is an **individual lament**, since it uses *I*, not *we*. According to the title, the individual is David. That makes it not so much a personal struggle as the struggle of the king on behalf of his people.

Individual laments usually consist of these elements:<sup>4</sup>

- a) An address to God, and cry for help – Psa 22:1
- b) Stylized (poetic) description of the crisis – 22:12
- c) Affirmation of trust – 22:4
- d) Series of petitions or wishes – 22:19
- e) Additional argument (appeal to God's care, rejoicing over enemies, confession or protest of innocence) – 22:9
- f) Vow of praise – 22:22

### Meaning for Israel

Picture King David (or any other king) after a military defeat. The enemy has him pinned down and is threatening to take over. Some of his men have been killed, and others captured. He is humiliated, as if he has failed everyone. He turns to God to deal with this horror.

Read the Psalm from this perspective:

- 22:1-2 David's isolation and devastation.
- 22:3-4 Affirmation that God still reigns.
- 22:6-8 The disconnect between God's rule and David's failure.
- 22:9-10 Affirmation that God knew what he was doing when he put David in charge.
- 22:11 Desperate cry for help.
- 22:12-18 The horror of his impossible situation.
- 22:19-21 Plea.
- 22:22-31 Promise to recount God's faithfulness so that God's name is honoured when he saves (instead of dishonoured as now).

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<sup>4</sup> William Sanford La Sor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 1996), 437.

**Meaning in the light of Jesus**

Do you recognise any of these phrases from the life of Jesus?

On the cross, Jesus used the opening words of Psalm 22 (Mark 15:34). This does not mean that David predicted what Jesus would say. It is not prophecy in that sense: it is far deeper than that.

It is rather that when God came into our world to deal with the enemies of his reign, he was apparently defeated. He was arrested, tried, condemned, tortured, and hanged on a cross—publicly humiliated before his foes! To all on-lookers, God had forsaken Jesus of Nazareth who was now a failed messiah—a pretend messiah who did not liberate God’s people but was defeated by his enemies. Jesus genuinely felt this shame, rejection, defeat, and horror. As he waited for death to take him, he cried out using the words of the familiar Psalm, the words written when a king of God’s people knew defeat. It was completely appropriate to him.

At the same time, we are told that Jesus trusted the Father to sort out this mess. Despite his own utter humiliation, Jesus believed that God still ran the world just as David wrote in 22:3-5.

Jesus was despised and rejected, treated inhumanely, like a worm and not a man. The crowd around him literally did mock him with words just like Psa 22:8:

Matt 27 <sup>41</sup> So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, <sup>42</sup> “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. <sup>43</sup> **He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him.** For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’ ”

As David described his own anguish, he has done so under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—using words that seem more apt for Jesus’ crucifixion than for David’s sufferings:

22:14 All my bones are out of joint ...	Hanging from your arms, your bones literally went out of joint.
22:15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd	The dry mouth came from gasping for every breath. Compare John 19:28 and Psa 69:21.
22:15 You lay me in the dust of death	This literally happened to Jesus.
22:16 They pierce my hands and feet	David felt pinned down by his enemies, but how could you better describe crucifixion?

It’s not that David was predicting Jesus’s words and sufferings. It’s that David, as king, took on the sufferings of Israel and cried out to God. Although he survived on this occasion, that didn’t resolve the sufferings on the world. Jesus, the Son of David, therefore came and faced the same sufferings and injustice from those who reject God’s rule. Unlike David, Jesus was not saved from death: he died. But God saved him from death through resurrection!

Consequently, the Psalm from verse 22 onwards describes the changes that occur because of the resurrection:

22:22-24 Jesus is raised from death, and elevated as ruler of all.

22:25-26 The assembly of God's people are rescued through him.

22:27-31 The whole earth is set right when it comes under the authority of the resurrected rightful king.

In other words, the cross and resurrection of the Messiah is the place where God deals with the problem of evil, the injustice in his realm. Jesus—the anointed king descended from David—experienced the sufferings of the world that was in rebellion against God, allowed them to do their worst to him, and rose up as the victor over death, having conquered evil and defeated injustice.

### **Meaning for us**

There is no promise that, if you are following God, life will be rosy. Like King David, Jesus did not suffer because he had done wrong, but because of the injustice in the world—because the world was not running right. We now know how God will solve this: ultimately every knee will bow and every tongue will acknowledge Jesus as the rightful ruler of God's world. Right now, that's not how things are. Unjust rulers continue to inflict injury on God's people. It's happening today in the Middle East, in Africa, in many places. In more subtle ways, it also happens in Australia: people take advantage of those who do right. We suffer.

But we don't suffer in vain. When we suffer for doing right, we are representing the gospel—the good news of God setting the world right through Jesus. When you feel abused and abandoned in that struggle, do cry out to God: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Do tell him all about the pain and the injustice. Do affirm that you will continue to trust him, even to death if necessary. Do rejoice that this is how God establishes the Lordship of Christ: the world coming under his authority.

The sufferer of Ps 22 is a human being, experiencing the terror of mortality in the absence of God and the presence of enemies. In the suffering of Jesus, we perceive God, in Jesus, entering into and participating in the terror of mortality; he identifies with the suffering and the dying. Because God, in Jesus, has engaged in that desolation, he can offer comfort to those of us who walk now where the psalmist walked. But there is also a remarkable difference between the experience of the suffering psalmist and that of Jesus. The psalm concludes with praise because the sufferer escaped death; Jesus died. Yet the latter half of the psalm (vv 22–32) may also be read from a messianic perspective. The transition at v 22 is now understood not in deliverance *from* death, as was the case for the psalmist, but in deliverance *through* death, achieved in the resurrection. And it is that deliverance which is the ground of praise, both for the sufferer (vv 23–27) and for the “great congregation” (vv 28–32).<sup>5</sup>

As a follower of Jesus, use this Psalm to find your way through the sufferings and injustice of life, by voicing both the pain and the hope.

<sup>5</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 2nd ed. Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2004), 202–203.

## Conclusion

How different were these two Psalms! Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise in response to creation. Psalm 22 is a lament from Israel's king, struggling with injustice and threatened with death.

These Psalms were meaningful for Israel's worship and struggles. They are also meaningful—perhaps even more so—in light of Jesus. Jesus is the ruler of creation—the human to whom all earthly authority has been given. He is the Son of Man in whom the authority of heaven is restored on earth (Psalm 8).

But the story of how he became king comes into focus in Psalm 22. He became the rejected human: facing death at the hands of human rulers, he cried, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” He was surrounded by evil, condemned by the rulers of the world, with nails through his hands and feet. He sunk down into death. Only then did God step in to raise him up in resurrection, defeating evil and re-establishing his reign.

In Christ, we have both—the restoration of creation through the Son of Man, and suffering at the hands of evil, trusting our lives to the one who raises the dead.

Jesus is Lord of creation, but he became Lord in the most unusual way. That is the way we follow.

## Memory verse

### **Psalm 8:6 (NIV)**

You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet.

## Take home exercise

Set aside some time for prayerful meditation on your own role in life, in response to Psalm 8:

- Do you ever feel insignificant, in the big scheme of things? (Psa 8:1-4)  
Do you ever wonder what you are here for, what difference you can make?
- How do you respond to the notion that our human significance comes from the vocation God gave us, to care of his creation? (Psa 8:5-9) What opportunities do you have to represent God's care for animals or for the significant people in your world?
- Are there other desires that God has placed in your heart?  
How would you begin to step out towards those things?
- Are you willing to face the cost of being involved as a servant of God in other people's lives? Consider the cost that King David paid, and the cost that Jesus paid, as expressed in Psalm 22. In what ways do you need to put your life on the line (“take up your cross”) for God's purposes to be fulfilled through you?

In preparation for next week, read Psalms 45 and 89.