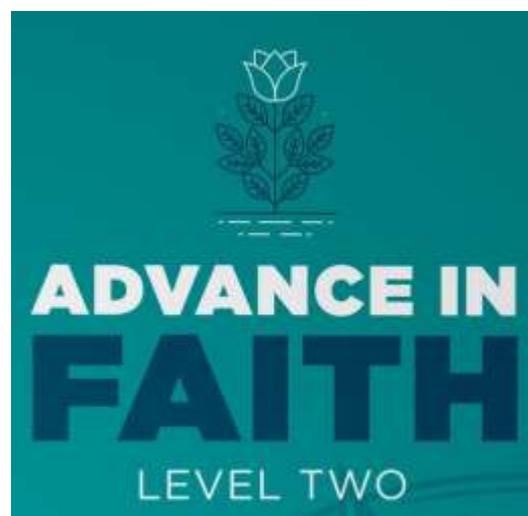


The Psalms: In Honour of our King

Week 3 —Messiah in the Psalms



Review

Getting to the heart of a Psalm is like peeling an onion: the deeper you go, the more layers you discover. At the core of every Psalm is the recognition of **YHWH is king**. God rules the nations, and he does that through his representative people.

Israel's Psalms are 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.

In OT times, God reigned through Israel as God's kingdom, led by David (in each generation). In NT times, the son of David restored the kingdom of God, and he expanded it to include the nations (God's original intention). Jesus is our "David," God's anointed ruler (Christ), God's king on earth.

That's why the Psalms take on a whole new meaning in light of Jesus. All the stories about God's rule on earth through his representative people find fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ (anointed king) our Lord (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 The Psalm opens with the words, “LORD, our Lord.” *LORD* in all-caps indicates the divine name (YHWH in Hebrew). Lord without all-caps is the Hebrew word *’ā-dôn(i)*, meaning a master or ruler.

YHWH had made a covenant with Israel that defined them as the nation under his rule. But his kingship is not limited to Israel. In the ancient world, someone’s **name** meant their reputation (honour), their character (inherent qualities), and their authority (decrees made in their name).

YHWH established not only Israel, but the whole earth, and even the heavens. So this is what Israel was saying in verse 1:

YHWH, we honour you as our sovereign (ruler over Israel).

How majestic is your regal authority! Your kingship extends beyond our borders—to the whole earth!

Your decrees have such weight (glory) that they stand (established) in the heavens!

According to the heading, the speaker is the king of Israel (“David”), and he’s meditating on the authority he represents.

He starts by addressing God as Israel’s king (established in Exodus).

Then he realizes that’s too small: even before Abraham, YHWH ruled the whole earth since it is his creation (established in Genesis 1–11).

Then he realizes that’s too small: the lights in the heavens stand there because YHWH decreed it (Genesis 1:14-19).

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 has 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.

But the way the king describes YHWH’s authority is interesting. God’s authority is not established by force. Earthly rulers establish their power by destroying their enemies (war), and keep their power through defensive fortifications (strongholds). By contrast, YHWH’s kingship is established in the voices of children, of infants who seek no revenge.

This is a motif in the Bible's narrative, e.g.:

- God took no vengeance on Cain; he protected him from vengeance (Genesis 4:15). When Cain's descendants formed a society based on revenge (4:24). God gave an infant (4:25), to establish a society that calls on his name (4:26).
- Pharaoh threatened even the infants (Exodus 1:15-22), but Moses survived Pharaoh's vengeance (3:15). Moses overturned Pharaoh's claims without weapons—a child-like voice speaking in YHWH's name (4:10-11).
- David was the youngest of this brothers, still child-like when God chose him and gave him his Spirit (1 Samuel 16:6-13).
- Solomon was “a little child” needing wisdom (1 Kings 3:7).
- Jeremiah was “but a youth,” but YHWH's words in his mouth tore down empires (Jeremiah 1:6-10).
- God subdues the predators, so “a little child will lead them” (Isaiah 11:6).

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 is enough to bring God's protective hand over his people, a powerful hand that no enemy can stand against.

To paraphrase Psalm 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 out to destroy us.

To summarise 8:1-3:

God's magnificent royal authority is established over his people, over the earth, in 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, you will have sensed the wonder the Psalmist expresses. 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 (signs that earth is under heaven's rule):

Genesis 1 ¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. ¹⁶ 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 decreed. They perfectly obey the laws of the Creator.

By contrast, humans don't obey the Creator's laws. When God issued decrees for the natural world, "It was so" (Genesis 1:6, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30). But when God issued a command for humans, it might not be so (Genesis 2:16-17).

Like the "enemies" of verse 2, humans oppose the Creator, try to take his authority for ourselves and then use that power violently against each other. The contrast between how the luminaries and the how humans behave became a topic of great interest in later Judaism.¹

Despite our insignificance in God's universe, and our unwillingness to live in as God designed us to, our sovereign still takes note of us and cares for us the way a great ruler would. That's what the Psalm is 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:

¹ For example, see 1 Enoch 72–82, known as the *Astronomical Book* or *Luminaries*.

*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*

There's a translation issue here. Some translations have the word *God* (NRSV, NLT), while others have *angels* (NIV, KJV). The Hebrew word is *Elohim*, the usual word for God. So why angels?

In favour of "angels":

- Elohim can refer to other gods (the gods of the nations). By extension, it can be used of other heavenly beings.²
- Two centuries before Christ, the Old Testament was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), and the translators used the Greek word *angelos* (angels).
- The New Testament (NT) quotes this verse, using the word angels (Hebrews 2:7).

In favour of "God":

- The NT quotation is not evidence of what the Hebrew text meant. The NT was written in Greek, so of course they used the translation available in their language at times.
- In Hebrew, *elohim* is translated "angels" only very rarely: 0.1% of the time (3 of 2596 uses, all in Job).
- Only later in Israel's history were they preoccupied with angels/demons. That fits the time of when the Septuagint was translated, not the time when the Psalm was written.
- The context has nothing to do with angels. The whole point of the Psalm is the place of humans in relation to God and creation, i.e. under God and over creation.

This Psalm is referring to the creational order established in Genesis 1:26-28. It uses the same keyword *dominion*, and the same categories of creature. What gives humans significance is their place **under God, over creation**. It has nothing to do with our status in relation to angels.

Verse 2 hinted at the problem with creation: humans are not managing it correctly. David has enemies precisely because humans are trying to take authority from God (instead of operating under God).

Verse 2 also says that it only takes a baby to acknowledge God, and that will bring down the enemies—precisely because God gave his authority to humans.

² Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015, 324

Please note that the mandate God gave us at creation did not include dominating other humans! At creation, God reserved for himself the right to rule over humans: our commission was 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!*

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.

Nevertheless, 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, because those who held power would not give it up.

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 Matthew 21:16 (Psalm 8:2); Hebrews 2:7-8 (Psalm 8:4-6); 1 Corinthians 15:27 (Psalm 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 for 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 *The dominion you gave to humans in the beginning, you regained in your resurrection. You hold all authority, to restore peace and order to your whole creation, every creature, everything!*

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.³

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

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

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.

This Psalm uses "I" rather than "we", so it's classified as *individual lament*. Individual laments usually consist of these elements:⁴

- a) Address to God, and cry for help – Psalm 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, or confession or protest of innocence) – 22:9
- f) Vow of praise – 22:22

Meaning for Israel

Whose voice are we hearing in the Psalm? Who is the "I"?
(Hint: the answer is in the title, above verse 1.)

Picture King David after a military defeat. The enemy has him pinned down, and is threatening to take over. Some of his men are dead, and others have been captured. He feels humiliated, as if he has failed everyone. He pours out his heart to God, processing the horror.

Read the Psalm from his 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).

⁴ 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.

The Psalm is about David, but it's not just him. The whole nation stands and falls in him.

That's true not only of the original King David. It's also true of each of his sons who reigned in their generations. "Of David" doesn't limit the Psalm to the original David; it means we should hear this as the voice of the king in each generation.

The "I" is therefore the king in each generation, and all the people who are in him. That's how Israel would have understood the Psalm.

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 king 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 Psalm 22:8:

Matt 27 ⁴¹ So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, ⁴² "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.

⁴³ **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 his arms, a crucified person's 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 Psalm 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 God 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).⁵

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.

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.

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

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.