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Psalm 8: To the Choirmaster: according to The Gittith, A Psalm of David

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Psalm 8
To the Choirmaster: according to The Gittith
A Psalm of David
(RSV) (Revised Common Lectionary)

David instructs his choirmaster to sing this Psalm according to a musical setting with the name “*The Gittith*.” The same setting was to be used in the singing of Psalms 81 and 84.

Psalm 8 has the distinction of being the only psalm in the Psalter to be composed completely as a direct address to God. It is framed by identical words in the expression of adoration and praise (verse 1a and verse 9).

V. 1a

^{1a} O LORD, our Lord (Sovereign),
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!

The Psalm is addressed to the LORD, that is, to Yahweh, the God who elected Israel as His own. David here confesses that this God is the one whom we also acknowledge as our Lord, that is, as our Ruler, our Master, our Sovereign. The sense is something like this: You, O LORD, have chosen us to be your People; and far from resenting such a unilateral conscription, we rejoice in it and delight to call you our Sovereign.

Vv. 1b-2

^{1b} Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted
(NIV: **You have set your glory above the heavens.**)
² by the mouths of babes and infants,
thou hast founded a bulwark (fortress) **because of thy foes,**
(NIV: **From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise**)
to still the enemy and the avenger.
(NIV: **because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.**)

This verse is capable of several translations, and it is therefore difficult to interpret. I have given two basic options, the one in the larger print from the Revised Standard Version, the other in the smaller print from the New International Version. The RSV would seem to mean something like this: “Your glory, O LORD, is chanted all the way up to heaven by the babes and nursing infants. In addition, O LORD, you have erected a fortress against your enemies.” There is then the strong suggestion that the defense against the enemies of God is the singing of the children.

Where the RSV translates “chanted” the NIV translates “set.” Where the RSV translates “bulwark” the NIV, following the Septuagint, translates “praise.” Hence the sense of the NIV is something like this: “You, O LORD, have set your glory above the heavens; yet you have ordained that on earth even children and nursing infants are to sing your praise. Thus in the face of *your* enemies (and therefore also of *our* enemies), O God, there is a defense, namely, the singing of your praise.”

There are two things the devil and his crew cannot stand: (a) they cannot stand it if you laugh at them; and (b) they cannot stand it when, despite the worst that they can do, you sing the praises of the very God whom they are trying to get at through you.

Perhaps we should in this case give the nod to the NIV translation. If you look at Matthew 21:14ff, you will find a story from early in Holy Week, perhaps even on Palm Sunday. Jesus is engaged in his wonder-full work of restoration, giving sight to the blind and repairing the crippled limbs of the lame. And the children are singing hosannas to the son of David from Psalm 118, in imitation of what they had just heard from adults in verse 9. The chief priests and scribes object to the implication that Jesus is the son of David. Jesus then quotes this verse from the Septuagint, as it is in the NIV. Thereby Jesus does two things: (a) he accepts the praise which the children offer him as the son of David, and (b) he also thereby points to a deeper dimension of the meaning of Psalm 8. Jesus is a fitting object of the praise which is directed toward the LORD in this Psalm. When you sing the praises of Jesus you in no way compromise your worship of the LORD, the God revealed in the Old Testament.

There is a running contrast in this Psalm between heaven and earth. The glory of God is set above the heavens, way beyond the reach of Man. Yet the Name of the LORD fills the earth with majesty (verse 1). This is reminiscent of Exodus 33:18-20, a passage in which Moses speaks to God and God replies:

Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."

God is infinite, we are finite; God is vast, we are tiny; God is eternal, we are temporal; God is the almighty Creator, we are the human creatures whom he has made. The glory of God is above the heavens, yet his Name is on earth. What God is "in himself" we are incapable of knowing and experiencing. We must live by that of himself which God is pleased to reveal to us. What he has revealed of himself is his name. Or conversely, the name of God is that which he is pleased to reveal to us. And he has revealed to us the name "Yahweh," the LORD, who created the heavens and the earth, who called Abraham and Sarah to be the forebears of a great nation, who through Moses called Israel unto himself in the Exodus from Egypt and at Mount Sinai, and who finally sent his Son to be born of a Virgin, to suffer and to die for us, and to rise again. That is an outline of the content of what in this Exodus passage the LORD calls his graciousness and his mercy. But, we shall never be able to see the face of God. Nor do we need to. We need not repeat the mistake of Adam and Eve, who wanted to be like God. That is to be an enemy, a foe of God. Where the enemies of God rebel against him, declaring their independence from God, those who acknowledge the LORD as Lord have a defense against them, for we sing the praises of the Sovereign LORD.

Vv. 3-4

- ³ When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
⁴ what is man that thou are mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?**

David looks to "thy" heavens, with the moon and the stars which Yahweh has made, and is overwhelmed. The vastness of outer space makes him feel insignificant indeed. And the vastness that he discerns is still not yet the Creator; it is the work of the Creator's fingers. When we pray this Psalm, we have knowledge of a universe that is enormously greater than the one David could know. But even the inconceivably vast universe we today know – so far – is still only the work of God's fingers! No wonder David speaks as he does; we feel the same way.

What is Man? What is the Human Being? It is a question asked again in Psalm 144:3-4: “O LORD, what is Man that thou dost regard him, or the son of man that thou dost think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow.” And again when it is asked it refers not just to the Chosen People of Israel, but to The Generic Human Being whom God has created. It is a question framed in the knowledge that we are but tiny and insignificant before God. What is it about Man that God should care about and for him?

Of course the Bible is not going to answer the question the way we might today. In the first place, he does not concede that we are merely cosmic dust. Human beings do have a dignity that we might call the Humanum. But the Psalmist does not look for evidence of innate human superiority over other creatures, nor does he appeal to any rational and moral excellence in Man. The reason God cares for and about us, even and especially when we feel lost in space, lies rather in the way God has designed us and called us. And that status is described in the following verses.

Vv. 5-8

⁵ Yet thou hast made him little less than God,

(Hebrews 2:7: **Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels**)

and dost crown him with glory and honor.

(Hebrews 2:7: **Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor**)

**⁶ Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;
thou hast put all things under his feet,**

(Hebrews 2:8a: **putting everything in subjection under his feet.**)

**⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,**

**⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the sea.**

However insignificant a human being might feel, the message of the Bible is that God has made Man, that he has conferred upon Man glory and honor, and that he has given Man dominion over all things.

The Psalm is speaking about Man, the Human Being prior to any qualifying adjective, before we think of gender, of race, of nationality, of religion. The Human Being, all human beings together, any particular human being, bears the stamp of this divine calling: you are crowned with glory and honor. David is thinking here of Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, “Let us make Man in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created Man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

His glory above the heavens (verse 1b) God shares with the Human Being. The Sovereign Creator shares His power and love for his good creation with – Man! God has made the Human Being just a little less than himself, a status that Genesis calls the Image of God, giving us stewardship responsibility over all the other creatures. That is why the LORD is mindful of Man and cares about for Man; God has given Man a special place and calling in his creation. “The human race is Yahweh’s plenipotentiary, his stand-in.” -- Jon Levenson

But there is a world of difference between exercising dominion harmoniously as a united humanity and imposing competing domination as a fragmented humanity, between ruling as God's vicegerent and ruining what has been entrusted with our vice, between subordination to the divine purpose for creation and subjection to human sinfulness. David looks at it from the viewpoint of God's ordinance, from the angle of what God has called us to be and do. The New Testament, specifically the epistle to the Hebrews, looks at this matter from the point of view of how we human beings have miserably compromised God's good creation and how we have not been good stewards of our calling to be a "little less than God" – under God. Two things are especially remarkable about how the author of Hebrews understands this passage.

First, what the Psalm says about Man, Hebrews ascribes to Jesus. Man is created in the image of God, says Genesis 1:26. Hebrews 1:3 says that the Jesus is the image of God, reflecting the glory of God and bearing the very stamp of the divine nature. That is wonderfully ambiguous! On the one hand, that means that when you look at Jesus, you see the very divine heart of God as he reveals it to us; "he who has seen me," says Jesus, "has seen the Father" (John 14:9). On the other hand, that means that when you look at Jesus, you see what a genuine human being looks like, a human being with the image of God intact and restored. What God intended in the beginning is now on display in Jesus, the perfect Human Being, perfect as human because he so perfectly mirrors God. What is Man? David answers the question with reference to the honor and glory which God conferred upon Man at the beginning, and the high calling which that entailed. Hebrews answers that question by pointing us to The Man, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Redeemed Humanity in Person; hence it is important to be "in Christ," because there you are -- in hope -- the person you were designed by God to be.

And that brings us to the second point. Where David said that God had made Man a little less than God, Hebrews says that The Man was made for a little while lower than the angels. Hebrews is speaking of the fact that the pre-incarnate Son of God came to earth and for a little while was "subordinate to the Father in humanity," to use the modern translation of the Athanasian Creed, before he re-ascended to take his rightful place in the Godhead. Hebrews takes it to be a not-yet-fully-realized promise of God, when the Psalm says, "Thou hast given him (Man) dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet." The epistle goes on to say in 2:8b-9:

Now in subjecting all things to him (Man, the Human Being), God left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him (Man, the Human Being); but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

The Creator's intention for the Human Being at the beginning, however badly compromised by our fall into sin, is converted into a promise made to all of humanity because of the appearance and ministry of Jesus as The Man. Although we do not yet see all things subject to Humanity, we do see Jesus, The Man in glory above all things. And he is the down-payment for all of humanity to follow into that honor and glory. The promise of the Beginning is fulfilled in the End, through him, with him, in him.

V. 9

**⁹O LORD, our Lord (Sovereign),
how majestic is thy name in all the earth!**

The Psalm ends with the same words of adoration and praise with which they began.

This Psalm was appointed by the Revised Common Lectionary for Trinity Sunday. Presumably that is so because of the repeated reference to the Name of God. Whom the Old Testament calls Yahweh is revealed further in the New Testament as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who are present to us by the Holy Spirit.

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 8:

Almighty Lord, amid the grandeur of your creation you sought us out, and by the coming of your Son you adorned us with glory and honor, raising us in him above the heavens. Enable us so to care for the earth that all creation may radiate the splendor of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Nugget

Some U.S. “Father Facts” from the National Fatherhood Initiative (with Fathers’ Day coming up soon):

1. An estimated 24.7 million children (36.3%) live absent their biological father.
2. There are almost 17 million children (25%) living with single mothers.
3. 1 ¼ million births in 1995 (32%) were out of wedlock.
4. Nearly 4 out of 10 first marriages end in divorce, 60% of divorcing couples have children, and over 1 million children each year experience the divorce of their parents.
5. 1 out of 6 children is a stepchild.
6. There are nearly 1.9 million single fathers with children under 18.
7. 4 out of 10 cohabiting couples have children present, and of children born to cohabiting couples only 4 out of 10 will see their parents marry. Those who do marry will experience a 50% higher divorce rate.
8. 26% of absent father live in a different state than their children.
9. About 40% of the children who live fatherless households haven’t seen their fathers in at least a year, while 50% of children who don’t live with their fathers have never stepped foot in their father’s home.
10. Children who live absent their biological fathers, on average, are more likely to be poor; experience educational, health, emotional, and psychological problems; be victims of child abuse; and engage in criminal behavior (as compared with) their peers who live with their married, biological mother and father.

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