

Chapter 3

The Glory of God

Objective: By the conclusion of this chapter, we will recognize the glory of God that is revealed in His works of creation and the unique glory He has bestowed on humanity.

David Was a Shepherd and Philosopher

As a young man, David spent a lot of time outdoors as the shepherd of his father's sheep. He had a lot of time to observe the things of nature — the grasses and flowers, the rock formations, the clouds in the sky. He thought about creation, he studied the stars. The features of nature that he observed became themes in many of the Psalms he wrote later in life.

Psalm 8 was written after David had observed and meditated on the physical creation of God. David recognized the glory of God which was revealed in the vastness of the universe and, more importantly, in the attention given by the Creator God to people.

Psalm 8 Emphasizes the Personal Relationship Between God and Mankind

The Psalm begins and ends with a statement that was very meaningful to Israel: “O LORD (Yahweh), our Lord.” Yahweh was the name of personal relationship by which God revealed Himself to Israel. The other form of “Lord” means “governor” or “ruler.” Think about this from the standpoint of an Israelite: Yahweh, the Creator God, the Covenant God and Redeemer God, is the Governor and King of Israel.

The Infinite God is Concerned About Puny People

David was astonished that God, who made everything in the vast universe, should notice the small, weak, and insignificant people who inhabited planet earth. The Psalm states that the LORD is “mindful of” mankind, “cares for” mankind, and made people to be “rulers” over other parts of the earthly creation such as the animals and birds and fish. Compared to the magnitude of the stars and heavens, individual people are indeed insignificant. However God has focused a remarkable amount of attention on people. He has crowned humanity “with glory and honor” (v5).

The Infinite God is Powerful and Majestic

The LORD's name is described as majestic. “How majestic is Your name in all the earth” Majesty radiates from all that God has done and continues to do on our planet. The word “majesty” is derived from the word “mighty” and in various contexts refers to victories achieved, to judgment, law, and rule. All aspects of the LORD's activity reveal the power and glory of His ability and reputation — hence His name and fame extends throughout the earth.

The Glory of the LORD is Not Limited to the Physical Universe

The theme and intention of this Psalm is easy to understand. However the meaning of some of the verses and phrases is not so easy. For example, what does it mean when it says, “You (Yahweh) have set Your glory above the heavens?” Does it mean that the LORD’s personal glory is greater than the glory of the heavens? This would be logical, because the Creator would be considered greater than the creation. By itself, this thought is remarkable because it indicates that God is greater than the vastness of the universe.

Perhaps the phrase means something much more relevant to humanity. Perhaps the phrase means that the most glorious part of the LORD’s creation is not the physical universe! So what is the part of creation that provides the most glory to God? The creation of people! Compared to all the things that exist as the result of the LORD’s creative work (see Genesis 1), it is people who are the most important. It is people that God is most concerned about. Note the comparison in verses 3 and 4. We are more important to Yahweh than the vastness of the universe!

The LORD Expects His People to Honor Him

Verse 2 is also difficult to understand. There are several possible ways to understand this verse. The first phrase seems obvious: “From the lips of children and infants You have ordained praise.” This could simply mean that the LORD enjoys the sounds of His human creation more than the physical universe; the cries and giggles of babies more than the stars. One commentator suggested that the glorious heavens cannot bear witness to the Creator in the same way as the smallest, weakest child.

The interpretation might seem a little more puzzling if we use the alternate reading: “From the lips of children and infants You have ordained strength.” It is even correct to translate: “ You have established (or built up) a bulwark (or wall) of protection.” This interpretation of the Hebrew words fits very nicely with the remainder of verse 2: “...Because of Your enemies, (in order) to silence the foe and the avenger.”

Praise Offered to God Represents Spiritual Victory and Life

We must ask ourselves, Who are these enemies? These foes? Who is the Avenger? An avenger is a person who strikes back in anger — a person who seeks revenge. Obviously, the enemies of God have powers which are much greater than those of children and infants, so does the LORD put children on the front lines of battle with earthly kings, evil angels, and Satan? Verse 2 indicates that the praise of children and infants is an effective method to silence the enemies of God.

Some commentators have suggested that the cry of the new born child indicates that life is renewed each generation; that the Accuser has not gained the ultimate victory even though he brought sin and death into the world. In other words, the Creator God is proving that the dark powers of death which stand against Him are silenced through new physical birth. This hypothesis states that new life is the LORD’s way to maintain His glory on earth because no enemy is able to keep the LORD’s glory from being revealed on earth.

Some commentators think that the words “children” and “infants” are metaphors for people. Compared to the physical and spiritual forces of the universe, people are weak and helpless, like very young children.

Do you recognize the problems of correct interpretation? We can only guess at the specific meaning of verse 2. We don't know exactly what was in David's mind when he wrote this Psalm. However, the general meaning is clear: people have the ability to speak praise and to silence the foe and avenger.

Two illustrations of Spiritual Victory

In order to understand the meaning of verse 2, we need to think about the story of Job. You will remember that the Accuser challenged God to an experiment. Job was an innocent victim in a contest. What was the result? The Accuser was silenced by the outcome because Job did not deny God. There is another example: Think about temptations faced by the follower of God. The Accuser is silenced and God is glorified when the believer does not give in to temptation.

God's Concern for Humanity is Beyond Our Comprehension

In verses 3 and 4 the Psalmist observed and reflected on the vastness of the universe. What he saw was beyond his comprehension. Yet even more incomprehensible to him was why the LORD focused so much attention on people. What was so special about mankind? Why did God create the human race? Why did God give so much attention to people?

God, who knows the end from the beginning, undoubtedly knew in advance all the problems people would cause — how disobedient they would be and how much suffering and death would come as the result. God the Father also understood that Jesus would have to come to earth and die as a sacrifice to redeem fallen people. (See I Peter 1: 18-20 to discover when Jesus was chosen to be the Redeemer!) Why did God create humanity since He knew in advance all the problems that people would cause? Why does God's goodness and patience continue to all people? Why didn't God wipe out the human race?

The point of verses 3 and 4 is that the mystery of the LORD's relationship with man is greater than the mystery of the universe. In verse 4, the verbs indicate that there is continuity in the LORD's care; that God goes on continually being mindful of, and continually caring for, man.

The LORD Created Both the Heavens and Mankind With the Characteristics He Wanted Them to Have

Let's go back to the phrase “Your heavens, the work of Your fingers.” The imagery here is of a sculptor who has fashioned the universe like a potter fashions clay. The heavens were the LORD's handiwork. In verse 5 we read that the LORD made mankind. He was the craftsman who shaped Adam and Eve into the characteristics He wanted them to have.

Verse 5 is the central verse of the Psalm. Structure is very important in Hebrew writings. We can understand this when we study the Psalms. Many of the Psalms are written in such a way that one of the verses “grabs” the attention of the reader. Verse 5 is that kind of verse.

Verse 5 states that the LORD “made people a little lower than the heavenly beings.” Does “heavenly beings” refer to angels? The Greek translation of the ancient Hebrew language interprets the phrase to mean angels. (Hebrews 2:5-9 follows that interpretation.) However, the Hebrew word translated “angels” is “elohim”, which is one of the names of God. The verse could be accurately translated “God made people a little lower than (or less than) God Himself!” Does this translation fit the context of Psalm 8? The answer is “yes”.

Humanity Was Created in God’s Own Image

From Genesis 1:26-28 we understand that the human race was created in God’s own image and likeness. The verse does not say that Adam and Eve were created to be equal with God, but they were given God-like characteristics. As a result, people are much higher in position than any other of God’s creatures. From God’s perspective, people are very, very important. Verse 4 described how people should see themselves in relationship to the awesome Creator God. Compared to the universe, they are puny and insignificant, but from the LORD’s perspective, people are of supreme importance. In fact, the New Testament indicates that people are more important than angels. The death of Jesus on the cross is a measure of how important people are.

The LORD Created People to Rule Over the Earth

The word “elohim” in verse 5 also fits in the context of the rest of verse 5. The LORD not only “made people a little lower than Himself,” but He also “crowned people with glory and honor.” Glory and honor are attributes of God (and kings). The LORD extends these attributes to mankind. He gives a kind of royal status to people! Note again Genesis 1: 26, 28. God, by divine decree, gave kingly status to mankind: People were created to rule! This is exactly what verses 6-8 say.

The verb tenses used in verses 5-6 are significant. “You made (past tense, completed action, once and for all time) him a little lower than God Himself and crown (present tense, done over and over) him with glory and honor. You make (present tense, done over and over) him ruler over the works of Your (the LORD’s) hands; You put (past tense, done once) everything under his feet.”

What conclusions can we come to? Mankind is the highest glory of the LORD’s creation, and man still has the responsibility to govern the earth. This does not mean that people are divine or equal with God. Even in their perfect state before their disobedience, Adam and Eve were only in the image and likeness of God. Man is an earthling. His abilities are limited, and especially so since he is now also a sinful creature. Nevertheless, he is also “celestial,” more glorious than the heavens.

Mankind Was Appointed to Be God's Steward Over the Earth

Mankind's position over the earthly creation was granted before the Fall (before Genesis 3), and it was not taken away from people after the fall either (see Genesis 9:1-3, 7). Mankind was God's appointed governor or ruler over all things earthly. People have the responsibility to be good stewards of God's earth, to maintain order, care for, keep things in a harmonious relationship for the good of all and everything. Both domestic and wild creatures are subject to the authority of mankind ("everything under his feet"). Unfortunately the chaos of the world today is an indication of how poorly people have fulfilled their mandate and destiny. Obviously, the glorious ones that David mentions (verse 5) are those who are in proper relationship with the LORD and are willing to acknowledge and praise God.

The Personal Relationship is Emphasized a Second Time

The Psalm ends as it began. "O LORD (Yahweh), our Lord (our governor, ruler). Only the people of the LORD know how to respond to the revelation of God's majesty. Only the LORD's people appreciate the position and status they have in God's eyes. The glory we have as the LORD's people exceeds the glory of the universe. When we think about this, we should be overwhelmed with awe, wonder, and praise.

In chapter 2 we discovered that the focus of God's activity is the human race and that the Bible is a record of God's efforts to redeem mankind. Psalm 8 is a specific passage which reinforces that theme.

Notes on Psalm 8

Verse 2 — Jesus quoted this verse in Matthew 21:16.

Verse 2 — Think about how God fights spiritual battles. See Luke 10: 3 and context. In these verses Jesus stated that His followers were like lambs among wolves. The pattern of Scripture is that God uses weak and helpless people to represent Him in our evil world.

Some commentators think that Psalm 8 is a Messianic Psalm; that it is a description of Jesus, the Messiah. The Psalm is not messianic in a narrow sense. However, it does have a messianic application because Jesus is fully God and fully man and He has fulfilled God's expectation of man in perfect obedience and holiness. The New Testament applies the glory of mankind to the Messiah. See Hebrews 2:6-9; I Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:22. Jesus has been "crowned with glory and honor" because of His responsiveness to the Father. Hebrews 1:3 Jesus is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being."