

Psalm 104 is a fitting *response* to Psalm 103. Creation follows redemption. The greatness of God in creation is best understood in the light of the goodness of God in salvation. Without the Redeemer it is impossible to truly worship the Creator. These two psalms begin and end with doxology, “Praise the Lord, my soul” (Ps 103:1, 22; 104:1, 35). In Psalm 103 the benefits of salvation are celebrated and in Psalm 104 the works of creation are extolled. The relationship between Creator and creature depends on the relationship between Father and child – “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Ps 103:13). Karl Barth claimed that we can only know the God of Creation by knowing the God of Redemption.

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. When we approach the truth which the Christian Church confesses in the word ‘Creator’, then everything depends on our realizing that we find ourselves here, as well, confronted by the mystery of faith, in respect of which knowledge is real solely through God’s revelation We are not nearer to believing in God the Creator, than we are to believing that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. . . . It is impossible to separate the knowledge of God the Creator and of His work from the knowledge of God’s dealings with man. Only when we keep before us what the triune God has done for us in Jesus Christ can we realize what is involved in God the Creator and His work.”¹

The salvation psalm (Ps 103) is a necessary precursor to the creation psalm (Ps 104), but it should be emphasized that Psalm 104 is an *essential* response to Psalm 103. The gospel of King Jesus is not an other-worldly religious ideal that separates the believer from the real world of weather and geology, biology and agriculture, water and animal husbandry. The beauty of the gospel is its impact on all of creation from what we put up in space to the air quality coming out of our smoke stacks. The psalmist makes sure we don’t write off creation as a theatrical stage – a mere facade for the drama of redemption.

The notion that God created the cosmos like a well-made Swiss watch and then left it running on its own is attributed to Cambridge educated William Paley, an English pastor and abolitionist, who in 1802 wrote *Natural Theology*. Paley made a case for the teleological argument for the existence of God. The design of the universe, he reasoned, proved that there was a Designer, an intelligent Creator. He began his apologetic discourse with an analogy: “In crossing a heath I hit my foot on a stone, and if I were asked how that stone came to be there, I might answer that for all I knew it had laid there forever. . . . But suppose I had found a watch on the ground, and I was asked how that watch happened to be in that place. . . .” For Paley the watch was analogous to creation’s intricate systems such as the human eye or an animal’s skeletal structure of muscles, ligaments, and bones. Paley’s reasoned and reverential worship of nature’s Maker is consistent with Psalm 104, but mocked by nature alone evolutionists. His watchmaker analogy was co-opted by nineteenth century Deists who argued that God set everything in motion and then let the

¹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 50,52.

forces of nature take over. Deism they argued was compatible with Darwinian evolution.

I imagine a three way conversation between the psalmist, Karl Barth, and William Palley, affirming the apostle Paul's conviction: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Rom 1:20). I picture the trio inspired by their faithful Creator to continue to do good (1 Pet 4:19) and exhorting one another to "Praise the Lord," singing in unison Psalm 104 as a hymn of praise to their Redeemer and Creator.

*Lord of the Universe, Hope of the World*²

Praise the Lord, my soul.

*Lord my God, you are very great;
you are clothed with splendor and majesty.
The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment;
he stretches out the heavens like a tent
and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters.
He makes winds his messengers,
flames of fire his servants.*

Psalm 104:1-4

The prelude to this hymn of praise establishes the greatness of the Lord God. The psalmist uses metaphor to describe the dynamic relationship between the Lord and his creation. Far from being a rival power, nature in all of its splendor and majesty is worn like a royal robe, a garment of light, thrown over the shoulders as the Lord stretches out the heavens like a tent. In a few poetic lines the psalmist refutes the Egyptian hymn to Aten, the sun god, and declares Yahweh's transcendence over the Baal myth.³

The imagery of dazzling light recalls the Genesis account, "And God said, 'Let there be light'" (Gen 1:3), and the description in Hebrews of the Son as "the radiance of God's glory" (Heb 1:3) and the apostle John's vision of one like the Son of Man whose "face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance" (Rev 1:16). The psalmist paints a picture filled with light and energy and motion. There is nothing static about this introduction to the Lord of the universe. The dynamic is captured in Walter Chalmers Smith's hymn, "Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise."

In light inaccessible hid from our eyes – verse 1
Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light – verse 2
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee! – verse 4

The author of Hebrews quotes from the Greek translation (LXX) of Psalm 104:4, "He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire," in order to distinguish the Son who is "the

² Margaret Clarkson's hymn title.

³ Allen, Psalms, 28-29; Ross, Psalms, 245.

radiance of God's glory and exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb 1:3), from angelic beings. In either case, whether the Lord is using wind and fire to carry out his purposes or angels, the Lord transcends and commands everything in creation.⁴ "His sovereignty is unfathomable: he is surrounded by his servants, for everything he has made in the heavens and on earth stands ready to do his will, to be his messengers and the agents of carrying out his will."⁵ The second stanza of Robert Grant's "O Worship the King" draws from Psalm 104:

O tell of his might and sing of his grace,
Whose robe is the light, whose canopy is space.
His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,
And dark is His path on the wings of the storm.

Creation's Maker and Sustainer

*He set the earth on its foundations;
it can never be moved.
You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
But at your rebuke the waters fled,
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;
they flowed over the mountains,
they went down into the valleys,
to the place you assigned for them.
You set a boundary they cannot cross;
never again will they cover the earth.
He makes springs pour water into the ravines;
it flows between the mountains.
They give water to all the beasts of the field;
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
The birds of the sky nest by the waters;
they sing among the branches.
He waters the mountains from the upper chambers;
the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.
He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to cultivate –
bringing forth food from the earth:
wine that gladdens human hearts,
oil to make their faces shine,
and bread that sustains their hearts.
The trees of the Lord are well watered,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
There the birds make their nests;*

⁴ Cyril Okorocho, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 708.

⁵ Ross, *Psalms*, 249.

*the stork has its home in the junipers.
The high mountains belong to the wild goats;
the crags are a refuge for the hyrax.
He made the moon to mark the seasons,
and the sun knows when to go down.
You bring darkness, it becomes night,
and all the beasts of the forest prowl.
The lions roar for their prey
and seek their food from God.
The sun rises, and they steal away;
they return and lie down in their dens.
Then the people go out to their work,
to their labor until evening.*

Psalm 104:5-23

The poet leaves plenty of room for the scientist to maneuver. He makes no attempt to explain the what, where, when, and how. His aim is worship. He is more interested in showing the character of the one who creates and sustains nature than he is in the science behind natural phenomenon. Far from discouraging the scientist in her endeavors, the psalmist's artistic and emotive metaphors serve to inspire. Like a builder God sets the earth on its foundations. Like a mother covering her children with a blanket, God spreads out the oceans. Like a farmer he provides grass for cattle. God is at the center of how the universe works, not as *deus ex machina* or God at the point of our ignorance, but the Lord whose character is found in nature's order, in the wild donkey's quenched thirst, and in the mountain goat's craggy castle.

The rhyme and reason behind all of this is divine providence, not blind chance and fate. The Creator's wisdom and beauty is manifest everywhere. Springs of water, singing birds, and seasons marked by the journey of the moon, are all evidence of God's sustaining grace. Like a good host God has thought of everything, wine and bread to gladden human hearts and the balm of Gilead for health. From sun up to sun down the Lord shows he cares for his creation. Nocturnal animals hunt for food and at daybreak people go out to work. The order and rhythm of creation inspires the psalmist's commentary on Genesis. He agrees: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:31).

Echoes of Psalm 104 occur throughout the Jesus' ministry. God's large scale handiwork is made manifest on a smaller more intimate scale when Jesus "rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!'" (Mark 4:39; see Ps 104:7). It is there as well, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, when Jesus changed the water to wine and then on the far side of the sea of Galilee when he fed the more than five thousand (John 2:1-12; 6:1-13; see Ps 104:15). In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them," we are reminded of the psalm (Matthew 6:26; Ps 104:12). Psalm 104 is reflected in the life and ministry of Jesus and prepares us for the theology articulated by the apostle Paul (Col 1:15-17). Four lines from Margaret Clarkson's hymn shape our imagination in the truth of Christ: "Lord of the limitless reaches of space // Lord

of the infinite eons of time // Send out your light to the ends of the earth! // How your creation cries out for release!”⁶

God's Creation Care

*How many are your works, Lord!
In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number –
living things both large and small.
There the ships go to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.
All creatures look to you
to give them their food at the proper time.
When you give it to them,
they gather it up;
when you open your hand,
they are satisfied with good things.
When you hide your face,
they are terrified;
When you take away their breath,
they die and return to the dust.
When you send your Spirit,
they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.*

Psalm 104:24-30

In the Bible the sea is often described as a fearful threat but here it is a picture of the Lord's vast and amazing creativity. The earth and sea are teeming with life. Leviathan, the mythic sea monster, is pictured as a playful whale frolicking in the ocean. Cargo laden ships are navigating sea routes. And God is sovereign over all, earth and sea and every living creature. The psalmist sees the world as called into existence by the will and word of God. The author of Hebrews will echo his conviction: “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (Heb 11:3).

All of creation is dependent on the Lord's care and provision. The complex food chain is pictured in God's open handed provision and the gift of life and breath depends upon the Lord turning his face towards his creatures. Life is unsustainable apart from the active and personal involvement of the Lord. “To modern ears it all sounds naive,” writes John Stott, “But the truth behind the figures stands. . . .No Christian can have a mechanistic view of nature. The universe is not a machine which operates by inflexible laws, nor has God made laws to which he is himself now a slave.”⁷

⁶ Margaret Clarkson, *Lord of the Universe, Hope of the World*. Hope Publishing, 1978.

⁷ Stott, *Favorite Psalms*, 101.

“Every living thing is an elaboration on a single original plan,” writes Bill Bryson. “It cannot be said too often: all life is one. That is, and I suspect will forever prove to be, the most profound true statement there is.”⁸ The unity of nature is miraculous. We are awed that human beings are so closely related to fruits and vegetables and that over 60 percent of human genes are the same as those in fruit flies. The scientific view of the human person is inevitably and understandably reductionistic, breaking down the person into component parts, reading DNA, mapping genomes, and discovering proteomes. But all evidence in this vast universe bears the fingerprint of its Creator and Sustainer. All things are sustained moment by moment by this powerful word (Heb 1:3).

Life is Sacramental

*May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works –
he who looks at the earth, and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
I will sing to the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
May my meditation be pleasing to him,
as I rejoice in the Lord.
But may sinners vanish from the earth
and the wicked be no more.
Praise the Lord, my soul.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 104:31-35

The psalmist ends where he began by extolling the glory of God. His poetic meditation on creation has only served to enhance for himself and his readers the transcendence and majesty of God. His reverential fear at the awesome power of God has only deepened. He vows to glorify God as long as he lives and he prays that his meditation and reflection on life will be pleasing to him. There is a sacramental cast to life. The psalmist is life-affirming, rather than life-rejecting. He is focused on “life’s positive riches,” reveling in the beauty, truth, and love derived from the Divine Nature.⁹

The psalmist’s focus is on the dynamic beauty and energy of God’s creation, but he is not naive when it comes to “nature red in tooth and claw.” Lions roar for the prey and earthquakes happen (Ps 104:21, 32), but the psalmist prefers to marvel and embrace the wonders of creation and worship his Creator.¹⁰ Only one short sober sentence brings us back to Psalm 103 and our great need for redemption: “But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more” (Ps 104:35). The psalmist acknowledges our fallen human condition, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

⁸ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, 415.

⁹ Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, 173.

¹⁰ Allen, *Psalms*, 34.

A deeply disturbing apocalyptic narrative streams live across our imagination and threatens to compete with the inspiration of Psalm 104. The psalmist's ratio of positive to negative is instructive, but with the realities of nuclear proliferation, global warming, internet-deception campaigns, and terrorism, it is a tough competition. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has set the Doomsday Clock, the marker of how close humanity is to a civilization-threatening catastrophe, at two minutes to midnight.¹¹ Jesus' Prayer Book is honest with what threatens ourselves and our planet. To pray the psalms is to become well acquainted with human frailty, depravity, and mortality. But in the midst of all that hard news, the ratio of grace supercedes doom and gloom. The psalmist inspires our self-exhortation, "Praise the Lord, my soul. Praise the Lord."

¹¹ <https://thebulletin.org/2018-doomsday-clock-statement>