

The psalmist's invitation to praise the Lord encompasses the heights and depths of all creation, every square inch, every microbe and galaxy. Everything and everyone is summoned to participate in a great concert of endless praise. We may not think of inanimate objects like planets and stars praising the Lord, but the psalmist understands all of creation from angels to insects existing in a state of praise. Every element in creation reflects their Creator. Their essence is to praise the Lord God Almighty. Second Temple worship resounds with the conviction that the God of Israel is the God of all wisdom and power. After seventy long years of captivity and exile, the people of God call the heavens above and earth below to praise Yahweh. Living between the Hallelujahs means living in the convergence of all things praising the Lord.

We inhabit a world where the entire cosmos is a testimony without words and a natural witness without effort. Everything, by virtue of being part of God's created order, reverberates with praise even though they may lack "voice and heart."¹ There is an inherent revelatory quality in all aspects of life. Creation is always beckoning for greater exploration, always inviting a deeper experience, always pointing beyond itself, and always bearing testimony not only to its many truths, but to the one and only singular truth.² The world is called into existence by the will and word of God. "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" (Hebrews 11:3).

The resounding praise of nature inspires believers to praise with their whole being. "Let not your tongue and voice alone praise God," admonishes Augustine, "but your conscience also, your life, your deeds. For now, when we are gathered together in the Church, we praise: when we go forth each to his own business, we seem to cease to praise God." Augustine acknowledged the intent of the psalmist when he encouraged constant praise – perpetual praise, like the stars and the mountains, "Let a person not cease to live well, and then be ever praising God."³

Nature-alone-materialism, "red in tooth and claw," envisions the silent desperation of the survival of the fittest, but the psalmist envisions a concert of orchestrated praise that no one can silence under the sovereign rule of God. The question is whether we have eyes to see and ears to hear? Jesus framed the perpetual challenge facing humanity by quoting from the prophet Isaiah: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand." He had in mind the good news of the gospel which he himself embodied in his own person and work. Isaiah's verdict was disturbing, "For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them." But Jesus' assessment was positive: "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Matthew 13:13-17; Isa 6:9-10).

¹ Augustine, Psalm 148, 674.

² Webster, Second Thoughts, 128.

³ Augustine, Psalm 148, 673.

The psalm's two panel diptych divides equally between heaven and earth. The symphony of praise is arranged symmetrically so as to affirm that all of creation serves as an agent of praise. This is creation in its fullness, not as an object to be worshiped, nor as a problem to be solved, nor as a threat to be endured, but as the grandest arena for God's glory. The artist and the scientist, the explorer and the farmer, are intuitively aware of this cosmic glory even if they do not know to *whom* to praise. "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, so that people are without excuse" (Rom 1:20).

It is surprising to learn that some of our most popular commentators on nature insist there is no one to thank for nature's glory. Life is an accident – the ultimate freak of nature. The universe depends on "luck." In the final analysis, there is no Creator, no Author, no Composer, no Lord. The preface to the epic of existence is "as fate would have it." "Luck" is offered as a major explanation for the origin of life and hope for the future. Richard Dawkins attributes both the origin of life and the origin of human consciousness to luck. "Once that initial stroke of luck has been granted," argues Dawkins, we're off and running with evolution.⁴ Bill Bryson concludes his masterful work on the science of life by saying how "awfully lucky" we are to be here—"doubly lucky" in fact, because we have the singular ability to appreciate the privilege of existence. He credits our survival to "a nearly endless string of good fortune." We are only at the beginning of this "one planet, one experiment" experience, but we will "require a good deal more than lucky breaks" to "make sure we never find the end."⁵

If luck is the best explanation for the origin of life and hope for the future; if love is little more than a biological drive to pass along our genes; if meaning is entirely self-created; then wonder is best described as a strange mood that comes over us at odd times. Meaning and wisdom are only illusions. In an uncreated world of nature alone, joy is an individual stroke of good luck. Present moment happiness is the key.⁶ Nobel laureate Francis Crick summed us up this way: "*You*, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."⁷

The psalmist's call to praise counters the materialist who believes that a great void of nothingness lucked out somehow and became a universe populated by human beings. "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps 14:1), but the psalmist commands everything in heaven above and earth below to praise the name of the Lord.

From Heaven Above

*Praise the Lord.
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights above.*

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 140-141.

⁵ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, 478.

⁶ Webster, *Second Thoughts*, 142-143.

⁷ Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, 3.

*Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars.
Praise him, you highest heavens
and you waters above the skies.
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for at his command they were created,
and he established them for ever and ever –
he issued a decree that will never pass away.*

Psalm 148:1-6

Augustine was right when he said no one praises apart from being pleased.⁸ Praise is always a response to God's action. The initiative belongs to God who is always creating-out-of-nothing and redeeming-out-of-mercy. The *imperative*, "Praise the Lord," points to its necessity not its compulsion. It becomes our duty only because it is our devotion. The psalmist encourages us to do what we want to do anyways. Praise is to the people of God what playing is to the athlete and the musician. Not to be able to do what our heart is set on contradicts the human spirit. True worship leads us out of the closed universe of our own making and into the large world of God's creation and redemption.

The psalmist insists that no one anytime, anywhere, praises the Lord *alone*. We are always in the realm of praise because everything made by the Lord reveals his glory. "The nature of each element reveals the glory of God."⁹ The psalmist had no idea of the vastness of the cosmos, nor of the energy of the sun, nor the power of the moon, but he knew that their business is to praise God! Science is incredibly important and the more we know the better, but the essence of the meaning and purpose of creation has been known from the beginning. Many people prefer scientism's "nature alone" reductionism, but it requires living in denial.

The praise range is extraordinary. It begins with angels and ends with old men and youngsters. A reference to angels sounds incredulous to the secular ear, but for all those who take the Bible seriously, angels are real. Angels are not flighty cherub-like creatures, but God's messengers on a mission, "sent to serve those who inherit salvation" (Heb 1:14). They worship God, reveal his will, and do his bidding. They play a strategic role in the drama of salvation history. When they announced the birth of the Messiah, they praised God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). Modern versions of spirituality believe in a "blinding abyss of undifferentiated spirituality," but reject angels.

Pulitzer Prize winning author and scientist Edward O. Wilson is as secular as they come. He writes, "Human existence may be simpler than we thought. There is no predestination, no unfathomed mystery of life. Demons and gods do not vie for our allegiance. Instead, we are self-made, independent, alone, and fragile, a biological species adapted to live in a biological

⁸ Augustine, Psalms 148, 674.

⁹ Ross, Psalms, 946.

world.”¹⁰ Yet surprisingly Wilson stretches credulity in a most interesting fashion when he encourages belief in extraterrestrial beings. He writes, “The meaning of human existence is best understood in perspective, by comparing our species with other conceivable life-forms and, by deduction, even those that might exist outside the Solar System.”¹¹ Although Wilson believes that God is an “idol of the mind” and faith is a product of “the biological evolution of human instinct,” he reasons that given the size and age of the universe there is a distinct possibility of extra-terrestrial beings. If one of the world’s most distinguished evolutionary biologist can speculate about aliens, believing that these “imagined but plausible aliens” are millions of years more advanced technologically and scientifically than we are, perhaps Christians should believe confidently in what the Bible says about angels praising the Lord.¹²

From Earth Below

*Praise the Lord from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
stormy winds that do his bidding,
you mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars,
wild animals and all cattle,
small creatures and flying birds,
kings of the earth and all nations,
you princes and all rulers on earth,
young men and women,
old men and children.
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.
And he has raised up for his people a horn,
the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart.
Praise the Lord.*

Psalm 148:7-14

From the far reaches of the universe to the unfathomable depths of the ocean, let everything praise the Lord. The psalmist takes in the whole panorama of nature, from stars to sea creatures, from lightning storms to fruit trees, and from whales to insects, before introducing the one species that can praise the Lord with heart and voice. He begins with kings and rulers and ends with old men and children. “In these few lines,” Kidner writes, “there emerges, quite incidentally and with unforced simplicity, the only potential bond between the extremes of mankind: a joyful preoccupation with God.”¹³ Humanity is the “crowning point of all creation” and the one thing

¹⁰ Wilson, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Kidner, *Psalms*, 488.

that all human beings were designed to do is to praise the Lord whether they be kings or toddlers.¹⁴ The psalm begins with angels and ends with children “as if to say that at these two extremes you will find the most direct and articulate praises of God.”¹⁵ Jesus’ birth was celebrated with a great company of angels, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). And Jesus entered Jerusalem on his way to the cross with children shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Matthew 21:9).¹⁶

The psalmist counters our celebrity culture and checks our propensity to idolize the rich and famous. He concludes with a resounding affirmation of praise to the Lord, “for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and heavens” (Ps 148:13). Praise to the Lord is our sure defense against bowing the knee to Caesar or any other person or object that encourages our veneration or adulation. His final thought brings the reason for praise into the realm of the Lord’s redemptive love: “He has raised up for his people a horn” (Ps 148:14). The psalmist may not have envisioned the Incarnate Son of God or the Suffering Servant, but he knew for sure that Yahweh would provide a strong deliverer for Israel.¹⁷ It remained to be seen how the Lord would fulfill this promise of deliverance. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, broke his silence with the Holy Spirit’s prophecy: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:68-69).

¹⁴ Ross, Psalms, 948.

¹⁵ Wilcock, Psalms, 282.

¹⁶ Wilcock, Psalms, 282.

¹⁷ Ross, Psalms, 948. Ross is reluctant to read this Psalm with a redemptive trajectory. “The word ‘horn’ refers to power. . . .But here there is no internal support for the meaning of raising up a king, or ultimately the Messiah. Rather, it likely refers to the Lord’s giving renewed strength and courage to Israel. . .” Kidner, Psalms, 488. Kidner sees the promise of a strong deliverer the climax of the psalm and of the gospel: ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people’ (Rev 21:3).”