

David is not content “with simply giving thanks” for God’s good creation. Psalm 8 proves he is “enraptured by the contemplation of it.”¹ “This psalm is an unsurpassed example of what a hymn should be,” writes Derek Kidner, “celebrating as it does the glory and grace of God, rehearsing who He is and what He has done, and relating us and our world to Him; all with a masterly economy of words, and in a spirit of mingled joy and awe.”²

At the heart of this hymn of praise is a question, “What is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” The question, “What is man?” is asked in different ways. David’s slant in Psalm 144 is pessimistic: “O Lord, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow” (Psalm 144:3). When Job asks the question he is in agony over a significance he wishes he didn’t have: “What is man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention, that you examine him every morning and test him every moment?” (Job 7:17-18).

David asks and answers this critical question in an unusual way. Instead of lecturing us, he worships God. The psalm begins and ends with the refrain, “I AM [Yahweh / The Covenant Lord], our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” “This, short, exquisite lyric is simplicity itself – an expression of wonder at man and man’s place in Nature and therefore at God who appointed it. God is wonderful both as champion or ‘judge’ and as Creator.”³ The psalm is pure worship from start to finish. The psalmist accepts human reason as a divinely fashioned instrument for recognizing truth rather than a creative source of truth.⁴ He is convinced that our self-understanding is dependent on and driven by our understanding of God. “The Psalms were not prayed by people trying to understand themselves,” writes Eugene Peterson. “They are not the record of people searching for the meaning of life. They were prayed by people who understood that God had everything to do with them.”⁵

For a number of years Armandi Nicholi, professor of clinical psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, taught a popular course that compared Sigmund Freud and C. S. Lewis on the fundamental questions of God, man, life, and death. He always started the course with Socrates’ famous line: “the unexamined life is not worth living.” He went on to say,

“Within the university, students and professors scrutinize every possible aspect of our universe—from the billions of galaxies to subatomic particles, electrons, quarks—but they assiduously avoid examining their own lives. In the wider world, we keep hectically busy and fill every free moment of our day with some form of diversion—work, computers, television, movies, radio, magazines, newspapers, sports, alcohol, drugs, parties. Perhaps we distract ourselves because looking at our lives confronts us with our lack of meaning, our unhappiness, and our loneliness—and with the difficulty, the fragility, and the unbelievable brevity

¹ Calvin, *The Psalms*, 93.

² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 65-66.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*,

⁴ Carl Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol 1, 225.

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God*, 14.

of life.”⁶

David answers the critical question, “What is man?” from a God-centered perspective. Who we are depends on who God is and what God has done. All of God’s character and perfections are summed up in his name. “How majestic is your name in all the earth!” We see ourselves best when we live contentedly in the paradox of the greatness of God and the littleness of man (8:1-4) and when we understand humbly the sovereignty of God and the significance man (8:5-8).

The most telling line in Psalm 8 may be verse 2: “From the lips of children you have ordained praise to silence the foe and the avenger.” Before babies “are able to pronounce a single word” they “speak loudly and distinctly in commendation of God’s liberality towards the human race.”⁷ God has chosen to defend his majesty and glory through young children, infants and toddlers, pre-schoolers and first graders. This truth adds unexpected dimensions to the Genesis Creation account. Eugene Peterson reminds us, “Children are our first defense against the deadening and flattening effect of words that disconnect God and life.”⁸ God uses the weak and insignificant by human standards to confound his mighty enemies. The strategic value of this testimony points forward to the Incarnation when God himself was made in human weakness and assumed the very nature of a servant (Phil 2:7-8).

Psalm 8 recalls Jesus’ invitation, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:14-15). We remember the disciples asking Jesus, “Who, then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him and placed the child among them. And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me’” (Matt 18:1-5).

The psalmist’s message is consistent with Paul’s description of the church at Corinth, when he wrote, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. . .” (1 Cor 1:27). “From the lips of children you have ordained praise to silence the foe and the avenger” fits with Peter’s bottom-up profile of spiritual maturity, which he illustrates by highlighting faithful slaves and wives in difficult marriages.

The Greatness of God and the Littleness of Man

*Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory in the heavens.
Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.
When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,*

⁶ Armandi Nicholi, *The Question of God: C. S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud Debate God*, 6.

⁷ Calvin, *The Psalms*, 96.

⁸ Peterson, *The Pastor*, 241.

*what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them? Psalm 8:1-4*

The life of humankind revolves around the living God *who* is known by name. “The psalm celebrates the name of *I AM*; “*I AM*, how majestic is your name.”⁹ David begins with the majesty of God, “*how majestic and great is your name.*” In doing so he chooses the essential starting point. To quote Mark Steyn’s one-liner, “The ‘who’ is the best indicator of what-where-when-why.”¹⁰ David begins with the “who’ in order to explain the ‘what-where-when-why.’” Psalm 8 is a lyrical response to Genesis 1.

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:26-27).

We are not the product of a solitary God. We are the personal creation of the living God who is essentially social. At the core of our human identity is a capacity to relate to God and to one another like no other creature in creation, and this capacity is based on the being of God who is already a communion of persons. There is no impersonal *what* only a *three-in-one who*. In other words, there is no *what* before or independent of the *who*. This is how we take after God’s own image. We are relational beings and we were meant to be in relationship with the Lord God and with one another. John Stott expressed it well: “Our neighbor is neither a bodiless soul that we should love only his soul, nor a soulless body that we should care for its welfare alone, nor even a body-soul isolated from society. God created man, who is my neighbor, a body-soul-in-community.”¹¹

The psalmist is impressed with the greatness of God and the littleness of man. Whether it is a shepherd boy “sleeping out under the vast vaulted canopy of an oriental sky” or an astronomer peering through the Keck twin telescopes in Hawaii, or a molecular biologist examining a specimen under an Scanning Transmission Electron Holography Microscope, humility is in order. Against the largeness of the universe man naturally feels small. It is good for us to be awed at the greatness of God. Augustine declared the secret of spiritual growth with triple emphasis: “Humility! Humility! Humility!”

“Nothing is more becoming to man than humility,” writes John Stott, “and nothing is more unbecoming than arrogance. As great as the achievements of modern man are in science and technology, there is still an infinite greatness beyond him; and man remains a very frail, a very fragile, a very tiny creature. It’s good for us to be humbled before the great God of the universe.”¹²

“What we suffer from today,” G. K. Chesterton observed, “is humility in the wrong place.”

⁹ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 256.

¹⁰ Mark Steyn, *America Alone: The End of the World as We Know It* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2006), 4.

¹¹ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 29-30.

¹² John Stott, *Wheaton Alumni*, Nov. 1975, 5.

Humility has moved from ambition to conviction. “A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert--himself. The part he doubts is exactly the part he ought not to doubt--the Divine Reason.”¹³

The proponents of nature alone claim that their materialistic theory of man is not reductionistic. British physicist and biochemist Francis Crick, who was instrumental in discovering the molecular structure of DNA, had this to say about the human person: “The Astonishing Hypothesis is that ‘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”¹⁴ Crick insists that this mechanistic view of the human animal “has not diminished our sense of awe but increased it immeasurably. . . To say that our behavior is based on a vast, interacting assembly of neurons should not diminish our view of ourselves but enlarge it tremendously.”¹⁵

Richard Dawkins argues that the perceived need for God comes from our Darwinian instinct for survival. Children are dependent upon the advice of their parents for protection and well-being. From one generation to another what we need to know for survival is mixed up with useless superstitious fantasies. Sense and nonsense are passed down from one generation to another. We imagine there is a god because we have an ingrained psychological disposition to trust others and an inability to distinguish what is real from the unreal. Dawkins contends that the “useful programmability” and “gullibility” of a child’s brain accounts for god-talk being passed down from one generation to the next.¹⁶ Dawkins points to the moth to illustrate our human gullibility when it comes to believing in a god. The reason moths fly directly into the candle flame is because they are genetically hard-wired to use moon-light to fly a straight line. Artificial light is a relatively recent phenomenon and the number of moths killed by flying directly into the flame is rare compared to the number of moths guided by moon-light. For Dawkins god-talk makes about as much sense as a moth flying directly into the flames.

C. S. Lewis came to faith in Christ in his early thirties. If there was anyone who was not programmed to believe in God and did not deserve to be labeled gullible, it was Lewis. “The things I assert most vigorously,” wrote Lewis, “are those that I resisted long and accepted late.”¹⁷ He had concluded, “Christians are wrong, but all the rest are bores.” Nevertheless he was searching and the more he searched the more vulnerable he felt. He likened his eventual conversion to a chess match in which his “Adversary” broke down his defenses and outmaneuvered him. He concluded that no state of mind or body could satisfy his desires. He longed for something other, something outside of himself. “I did not yet ask,” explains Lewis, “*Who* is the desired? only *What* is it? But this brought me already into the region of awe, for I thus understood that in deepest solitude there is a road out of the self, a commerce with something which, by refusing to identify with any object of the senses, or anything whereof we have biological or social need, or anything imagined, or any state of our own minds, proclaims

¹³ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. New York: Image Books, 1959, 31.

¹⁴ Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (Simon and Schuster, 1994), 3.

¹⁵ Crick, *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 172.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 170.

itself sheerly objective.”¹⁸

Lewis recalls sitting on a bus going up Headington Hill in Oxford when he became very conscious of making a choice. He claims he was moved neither by desire or fear. Nor was he aware of any motive or necessity. He simply chose to be open, “to unbuckle, to loosen the rein.” As he said later, “Really, a young Atheist cannot guard his faith too carefully. Dangers lie in wait for him on every side. You must not do, you must not even try to do, the will of the Father unless you are prepared to ‘know the doctrine.’ “Remember,” Lewis admits, “I had always wanted, above all things, not to be ‘interfered with.’ I had wanted (mad wish) ‘to call my soul my own.’ But now he had gone well beyond intellectual calculations and debate. He was no longer negotiating a treaty with God. Since God is God, nothing less than “total surrender” was called for. “The demand was not even ‘All or nothing’ . . . Now the demand was simply ‘All.’” At the age of thirty-one, Lewis “gave in, and admitted that God was God.”¹⁹

Twelve years after his conversion to Christ C. S. Lewis preached a sermon entitled *The Weight of Glory* at Oxford University Church of St. Mary the Virgin. In this sermon he explored what it means for those in Christ to share in God’s glory. He exposed “the evil enchantment of worldliness” which has conditioned us to think that death ends all and that all that matters is what we find here on earth.

“Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent, inner voice; almost all our modern philosophies have been devised to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth. And yet it is a remarkable thing that such philosophies of Progress or Creative Evolution themselves bear reluctant witness to the truth that our real goal is elsewhere.”²⁰

We rub shoulders with people destined for heaven or hell. “All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”²¹

An astrophysicist can describe the earth as an insignificant speck of dust, a tiny planet, revolving around a mediocre star on the outskirts of the Milky Way. And the Milky Way is just one galaxy of millions of galaxies, each separated by about a million light years. Earth is to the cosmos what we are to the earth – an inexplicable anomaly. Against the vastness of the universe, David felt small. “I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous, your handmade sky-jewelry, Moon and stars mounted in their settings. Then I look at my micro-self and wonder, Why do you bother with us? Why take a second look our way?” (Ps 8:3-4, MSG). But David raises the question,

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 177.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 181-182.

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 7.

²¹ C. S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 18-19.

“What is man?” without a “tinge of pessimism; only astonishment that ‘you are mindful’ and ‘you care.’”²²

The Sovereignty of God and the Significance of the Person

*You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:
all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,
the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.
Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*
Psalm 8:5-9

The Bible offers a beautifully balanced estimate of the human person. When we are compared to creation we are tiny, but astonishingly when we are compared to God our significance grows. “Many of the earliest versions took the Hebrew word for ‘God’ or ‘gods’ to mean ‘angels’. . . The translation ‘angels’ may have been prompted by modesty, for it may have seemed rather extravagant to claim that mankind was only a little less than God. Nevertheless, the translation ‘God’ is almost certainly correct, and the words probably contain an allusion to the image of God in mankind within the created order.”²³ Elmer Martens writes, “If one were to imagine a scale of 1 to 10 with living creatures such as beasts as 1 and God as 10, then, so high is the writer’s estimation of humanity, he should have put him at 8 or 9. It is God, and not animals, who is man’s closest relative.”²⁴

Human significance is not measured in achievements. It is a gift bestowed by the grace of God. We are designated and endowed by God with privileges and responsibilities that we have not earned or merited. David used language reserved for kings and queens to describe human significance. Yahweh has “crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands.” C. S. Lewis commented on the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 that “the pressing of that huge, heavy crown on that small, young head is a symbol of the situation of all men. God has called humanity to be his vice-regent . . . on earth.”²⁵

Crowned with splendor and honor, God’s image-bearers are mandated to “rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen.1:26). God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen.1:28).

The New Testament quotes from Psalm 8 in such a way as to link the glory of God in the

²² Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 67.

²³ Peter Craigie, *Psalms*, 108,

²⁴ Elmer Martins, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 3rd ed. (North Richland Hills, TX: BIPAL Press, 1998), 202-3.

²⁵ Quoted in Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 269.

kingdom of nature with the glory of God in the kingdom of grace.²⁶ Taking his lead from Hebrews 2, Matthew Henry wrote, "It is certain that the greatest favor that was ever shown to the human race, and the greatest honor that ever was put upon the human nature, were exemplified in the incarnation and exaltation of the Lord Jesus; these far exceed the favors and honors done us by creation and providence, though they also are great and far more than we deserve."²⁷ The author of Hebrews quotes the LXX version of Psalm 2:4-6:

*What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?
You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor
and put everything under their feet. (Hebrews 2:6-8)*

Psalm 8 relates to the whole of mankind, but Hebrews finds its ultimate focus pre-eminently in him who is uniquely the Son of Man and in whom alone the sinfulness of mankind is healed.²⁸ F. F. Bruce writes, ". . . Ever since Jesus spoke of himself as the Son of Man, this expression has had for Christians a connotation beyond its etymological force, and it had this connotation for the writer of Hebrews."²⁹ Peter Craigie concluded, "In one sense, this is quite a new meaning, not evidently implicit in the psalm in its original meaning and context. And yet in another sense, it is a natural development of the thought of the psalm, for the dominion of which the psalmist spoke may have had theological reality, yet it did not always appear to have historical reality in the developing history of the human race. The historical reality, according to Paul and the author of the Epistle of Hebrews, is – and will be – fulfilled in the risen Christ."³⁰

God chose to invest humanity with the dignity and the personality of his own image and entrusted the human person with unique stewardship capabilities and responsibilities over creation. Jesus shows us how God intended human life to be lived. What the psalmist applied to humanity in general was now applied to Jesus specifically. Paul wrote, "For he 'has put everything under his feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ" (1 Cor. 15:27). "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church..." (Eph.1:22).

²⁶ Matthew Henry, *Psalms*, 45.

²⁷ Matthew Henry, *Psalms*, 48.

²⁸ The phrase, son of man, is used several different ways in the Bible. First of all it is used for all of humankind (Num.23:19; Job 25:6; Ps.80:17; Ps.144:3). Second, it was the title used by Ezekiel, God's prophet and a watchman for Israel, whose ministry parallels the prophetic ministry of the Messiah (used 92 times). Third, Daniel uses it in his prophecy to describe the Messiah, the Anointed One, the one who will rule and reign. "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence" (Dan.7:13). Fourth and most importantly, it was the title of choice used by Jesus. It was his favorite self-designation: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Mt.8:20). "...So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . . 'Get up, take your mat and go home'" (Mt.9:6). "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Mt.12:8) "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Mt.12:40). "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Mt.16:13). "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt.20:28).

²⁹ F. F. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 73.

³⁰ Craigie, *Psalms*, 110.

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