

Psalm 148: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 148. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens. Praise him in the heights. Praise him all his angels. Praise him all his hosts. Praise him sun and moon. Praise him all you shining stars.

Praise him you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord. For he commanded, and they were created, and he established them for ever and ever. He gave a decree, and it shall not pass away. Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word, mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds, kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth, young men and maidens together, old men and children. Let them praise the name of the Lord. For his name alone is exalted.

His majesty is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people. Praise for all his saints. For the people of Israel who are near to him. Praise the Lord.

Psalm 148 summons the entirety of creation and all of its creatures in their vast and ordered array to gather together in the praise of the Lord. Its call to worship sounds from the highest heavens to the depths of the abyss. Its cosmic litany represents the whole world as a majestic convocation devoted to the glory of its maker. Verses 1 to 6 begin by charging the heavens, the highest heavens, celestial bodies and all angelic beings to praise the Lord. Recalling the first four days of the creation account in Genesis chapter 1, the psalmist declares the Lord's power in establishing the great boundaries of his creation. He established them forever and ever. He gave a decree and it shall not pass away. The Lord's creative purpose and might stand above all lesser heavenly powers that humans have worshipped. They come forth at his bidding and are fixed in the courses and the bounds that he has set for them. They are the works of his hands. They are subject to his will, reflecting and displaying his glory as their creator. The psalmist, as if some cosmic choir master, then moves from the heavens to the other great division of creation, summoning the earth and all of its creatures to join their voices to and to respond to the praise of heaven. Two mighty halves of creation's choir united in antiphonal worship of their common creator. At the gesture of the psalmist, as it were, the great bass voices of the sea, you great sea creatures and all deeps, enter the song, and then the soaring altos of the sky, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word. To be joined in their turn by the rich earthy baritones, mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars. The four divisions of the animal creation, beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds, are now brought into the swelling chorus. And finally the cosmic music rises to its height as the voices of humanity in its various divisions are introduced. Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth, young men and maidens together, old men and children. As humanity organized according to its various people groups and their respective kings, princes and judges, joins its voices to the choir.

A great wall of majestic praise rises up from the undivided creation, as if a wave about to break, to flood all with the glory of its creator. The lower voices of the young men unite with the higher voices of the maidens, the weighty and the seasoned voices of the elders with the fresh and unbroken voices of the youths. The rich yet ordered diversity of the creation and humanity finally achieve their elusive unity in this grand cosmic liturgy. All their divisions and alienation washed away in the overwhelming beauty of its common song. Humanity is structured according to distinct peoples and their respective polities, by sexual difference and by generational divides. The glorious cosmic worship described here highlights the beauty of this differentiation and unity. Each group has its own unique set of voices, whose distinct glory appears when heard in its fitting juxtaposition with others. Like the wider creation within the creational choir, humanity is not an undifferentiated and amorphous mass, but a glorious earthly host, structured and ordered both by and in fitting response to its creator. The vision of this psalm is a remarkable one, with much to teach us. It offers us an account of the creation and of humanity's place within it, that sharply contrasts with many of those that hold the greatest imaginative purchase in contemporary Western society. The unifying purpose of the entire cosmos, animate creatures and inanimate bodies alike, is the worship of the Lord, where William Paley imagined the world as if a finely designed timepiece, and more modern thinkers may regard it as a temporary emergence born of random fortuities, doomed to collapse under entropic forces in its time.

[5 : 29] The psalmist invites us to think of the world as if a mind-bogglingly vast liturgical assembly, transcending and traversing the vast reaches and divisions of time and space, gathering together the stars and their courses and the movement of subatomic particles. Creation is united in expressing the glory of its maker, the Lord, bound together in its beautiful and joyful witness to his greatness.

Within such a world, humanity is, as Alexander Schmemmann has observed, not primarily homo sapiens, not even the man who makes things, or the man who acts economically, or even the man who is acting politically, but the man who worships. Our knowledge, our creation, our economics and our politics are all subordinate to the greater end of the worship of the Lord. The place of kings, peoples, princes and judges in the psalmist's account also merits our attention. Whereas all of the other divisions of the creation and its creatures to which the psalmist appeals are naturally occurring divisions, these divisions are unique in being divisions established principally through human agency, divisions originating chiefly in humanity's formation of various distinctive polities and people groups.

It is a striking fact that such human political divisions are presented as standing in some continuity with the natural divisions of the wider creation. Humanity is not summoned to the worship of the Lord as an assemblage of detached individuals, nor even just according to the fundamentally natural divisions of sexes and generations, but has structured societies and polities. Even in the eschatological visions of Revelation, such human divisions continue to be granted significance. Humanity is not an undifferentiated mass, but an ordered multitude of nations, tribes, peoples and languages. The psalmist's juxtaposition of the order of creation within the order of human society valorizes the polity itself as a reality that can glorify the Lord. A well-structured human society can be some reflection of the divinely ordered society of the host of the heavens and the earth in their array. Just as the very being of the mountain, the abyss or the cedar bring glory to the Lord, so the very existence of good human society, the very activity of political order, can be a form of praise. In many respects, humanity stands at the pinnacle of the creation. In humanity, creation's praise reaches its greatest height. Yet there is something distinct about human society too, something that stands in contrast to the inanimate and lower creation. Human beings praise the Lord not only in the beauty of diverse being and operation according to divine command, but in self-conscious and loving declaration of his worth. In humanity, the wider voice of creation finds its truest and fullest expression, as typified by the psalmist himself. It is humanity that stands in the midst of the cosmic liturgical assembly and actively unites its voices. Furthermore, whereas the rest of the creation worships God primarily in the course of their naturally established operations, humanity's worship has an inescapably moral dimension. The exercise of human rule itself may be glorifying to God, as humanity was created in large part for this end. Yet the divine commands to which human rule answers are very different to those placed upon the fire, hail, snow, frost, and wind in verse 8. The appropriately worshipful response to the creator required of human rulers is found in justice, goodness, wisdom, prudence, and the establishment of peace. Within the psalmist's vision of creation, certain things come into clearer view. God is praised not only in the formal liturgical celebration, where the great unifying end of creation is rendered explicit, but also in the daily operation of human image bearing as we exercise dominion and represent and reflect God's rule in the earth, appropriately expressing the glory of what we were created to be.

A question to consider, where else in scripture do we get some sense of the way that the wider creation is involved in the worship of the Lord?