

C. The Eighth Psalm – The Consummate Triumph of Yahweh’s Son-King

The eighth psalm makes a critical contribution to the *regal* theme that itself is central to the Psalter as the marrow of Israel’s liturgy of worship. As seen, the concept of sonship was fundamental to Israel’s sense of self-identity and relationship with God. And this sonship was a regal sonship; Israel was a *royal nation* chosen and consecrated by Yahweh to live out the regal and priestly human vocation for a faithful, compelling testimony to the world. By its faithfulness to its calling as regal image-son, Israel would fulfill its Abrahamic vocation of bringing Yahweh’s blessing to all mankind by disclosing Him to them. Hence the nature and orientation of God’s covenant with Israel: His covenant – His *Torah* – defined and prescribed the nation’s sonship, with a view to the truth that a son is *of* his father, so that one sees the father when he sees a son who is faithful to his sonship. Thus the Gentile world would observe and rightly perceive the Creator-Father when Israel was faithful to the covenant – faithful as covenant *son*.

It is not surprising, then, that the themes of kingship and sonship are tightly interwoven in the Psalter as it informed and directed Israel’s worship, and especially so in the psalms penned by David. Psalm 8 is one such psalm, and it is at the same time deeply personal and meditative, and profoundly grand and visionary. It is a psalm that finds David in a moment of quiet contemplation, as he reflected on the puzzling paradox that is *man*. Viewed in himself as a creature, and considered alongside the unfathomable scale and majesty of God’s creation, man appears small, weak and utterly insignificant. And yet the One who created him has insisted that His human creature is the *most* consequential of all His creation. This is the paradox David pondered in this song of praise, which provides a high point in the Psalter’s treatment of human sonship and its destiny in the unique Image-Son, the son Yahweh pledged to David.

1. The psalm is ascribed to David and is dedicated to “the overseer,” which likely refers to the person leading the musicians or the singers (or both). The ascription also includes the phrase “*upon the gittith*,” which many believe identifies the primary instrument David intended to accompany the psalm. Two other psalms (81, 84) are introduced with the same phrase, and because all three are laudatory songs, some have suggested that this instrument must have produced an especially joyous, loud or lively sound.
2. The psalm itself is notably bounded by an exclamation of praise specifically lauding the *majesty* of Israel’s God in relation to His creation. David declared this to be a glorious majesty that fills all the earth and extends beyond the lofty realm of the heavenly bodies (ref. vv. 1, 9). Yahweh’s splendid majesty fills His creation and is attested by it, and David noted that it finds expression in His manifest power – power that, even in its weakest conceivable form, still vanquishes all adversaries, however formidable (v. 2).
3. But David particularly had in mind God’s majesty displayed and operative in man. If the inscrutable splendor of the inanimate heavens proclaims the glory of God (Psalm 19:1-6), this is all the more the case with the *human* creature. And yet, this truth isn’t self-evident in the way that it is with the heavens. Yes, human beings have unique significance that sets them above other creatures, and they cannot escape the fact that they are lords of the earth. Only human beings are able to determine – for good or for ill – the condition of the earth and its inhabitants. Environmentalists don’t look to animals to address the planet’s challenges. And yet, humans are puny and powerless relative to the cosmos.

4. The words of the song suggest that David penned it at night, perhaps while he was lying on the ground quietly gazing up at the heavens. For he mentioned only celestial bodies associated with the night sky, conspicuously omitting the sun from his musings (v. 3). But whatever the specific circumstance, David found himself overwhelmed by the vastness and incomprehensibility of the heavenly realm, and that made him sharply aware of the smallness and apparent irrelevance of man in the scheme of God's majestic creation. Hence his dilemma and question: "What is man that you take thought of him, and the son of man, that you care for him?"

a. Many have noted the expression, "son of man," and immediately connected this statement with Jesus. Thus they find David making a prophetic reference to Him, and so interpret this passage as directly messianic. The entire psalm is indeed messianic, but not in that way. David wasn't making an allusion to Jesus when he spoke of the "son of man," but was using the phrase in its Israelite sense. The expression, *son of*, indicates essential likeness; a son shares the essence of the one who begat him. Thus "son of worthlessness" indicates a person who is manifestly a worthless person (cf. Deuteronomy 13:13; Judges 19:22; 1 Samuel 2:12). So "son of man" emphasizes one's *humanness*, and the Old Testament uses the expression when something about the reality of being human is in the forefront.

- God characteristically referred to Ezekiel that way, and Daniel also used the expression to identify Yahweh's coming triumphal king. He did so, however, not as a messianic title (no such title existed), but as explaining how that individual appeared in his vision (Daniel 7:9-13).

- It's true that Jesus commonly referred to Himself as the *Son of Man*, and He clearly did so with a view to His messianic vocation. That is why people automatically associate the expression with Him as God's Messiah. But He referred to Himself this way to underscore to those around Him that His messianic mission was centered in His existence as *truly human* – a son of Adam living an authentically human life in loving devotion to His Creator-Father. Jesus was son of man in that He was the truly human One.

b. Here, David used the phrase "son of man" in parallel with the word "man" for the sake of poetic emphasis (cf. 80:17, 144:3; Job 25:6; Isaiah 51:12, 56:2). Verse 4 is constructed as *synthetic parallelism* in which two statements build on each other for the sake of a pronounced or climactic effect: "What is frail and mortal man that You would even notice him, or a son of man (offspring of Adam, fashioned from the dust of the ground) that You would actively engage Yourself with him?"

- David employed the Hebrew noun *enosh* in referring to man, rather than the more generic *adam*. This term emphasizes the frailty and transience of man as a mortal creature, a creature whose existence is like a vapor, present for a moment and then gone in an instant. Here, David's intent was to punctuate the vast distinction between the unchanging, seemingly eternal cosmos and God's human creation. Considered alongside the heavenly bodies, man appears utterly temporal and insignificant.

- Flowing out of the designation of man as *enosh*, the parallel expression *son of man* carries two important and related connotations. First, it points to human beings as sharing the essence and existence of the first man. *Adam* was so named because he was formed from *adamah* – the material substance of the earth; Adam and all of his offspring are *earthy, natural, soulish* (1 Corinthians 15:45-49). But this points to the second connotation of “son of man,” which is that David recognized human beings as *derivative* creatures. Adam himself was derived from the earth, and every person since shares that same material source, but as coming to them through human parents. *All people since Adam, then, are doubly derived.*
 - c. This connotation of man as derived is especially poignant in David’s contemplation, for he was considering man alongside the *cosmos*. The cosmos (including the earth) is presented in Genesis as the substance of God’s original *ex nihilo* creation; man and the earth’s other living creatures were formed after it and from its material. *Not only is man derivative (and therefore arguably less essential and important), he is frail and mortal and lacks the enduring fixity that marks the cosmos.* How is it, then, that God would take active notice of man, when he is but a fleeting speck in His grand creation? Certainly the vast universe does its unending cosmic dance, interacting with itself and its forces, but with no awareness of the human creature or impact from him; how can man possibly have any role in this scheme and God’s purposes for His creation?
5. This, then, was David’s contemplation, and he answered his own quandary as God answered it – by pointing to the structure and order He built into the creation, and the unique and critical role He ordained His human creature to play in it (vv. 5-8). For all his frailty, transience and seeming insignificance, man is the crowning pinnacle of God’s creation, because he alone bears the divine image and likeness with the intent that he should be image-son. Even angels cannot claim this superlative distinction.
- a. This helps illumine the meaning of verse 2, which has puzzled many readers, especially as it appears unrelated to the rest of the psalm. *But David was using this poetic imagery to punctuate the profound truth that human weakness is precisely the instrument God has ordained to establish His power in His creation and vanquish His adversaries.* If the human creature is weak and frail, those qualities are most pronounced in newborn and suckling children. And yet out of their sucking and crying mouths – mouths that cannot articulate even the most basic words, God has “established strength.” He has chosen to disclose and establish His triumphal power over all opposition through utter human weakness and dependence. This dynamic wasn’t at all part of Israel’s expectation of Yahweh’s messianic deliverer, but the day would come when His prophetic word uttered here by David would prove astonishingly true. In that day, Yahweh would establish Himself as King over all, not by conquering His adversaries with the sword, but by stripping them of their usurped power by His humiliation in self-giving love (cf. Isaiah 53 with Matthew 27:33-44; Luke 23:33-41 and John 12:23-32 with Luke 24:25-26). *Yahweh’s messianic servant, the son of Abraham and David, would secure His all-encompassing kingdom as **enosh** and a **son of man**.*

- b. David didn't explain all of this, but he clearly recognized the Lord's eternal determination to establish and execute His rule over His creation through man, His image-bearer created to be regal image-son. Thus David addressed his own question of human significance by drawing from the Genesis creation account. In that account, the created order is depicted as a *kingdom* comprised of realms of lordship (heavens, air, sea, land, day, night) ruled by specific creaturely lords (celestial bodies, birds, fish, land animals). And over all the creaturely lords, God appointed a lord of lords, the creature man created in His own image and likeness to "*rule over the works of His hands*" (cf. Genesis 1 with Psalm 8:6).
- This is the reason that man is uniquely and profoundly significant, indeed preeminent within God's vast and inscrutable cosmos.
 - Yet this preeminence is veiled within, and even eclipsed by, frailty, impotence and mortality. *Man as David knew him bears little resemblance to the creature God described in the sacred text.* And yet, David believed Yahweh, and sang His praise for having ordained His great and everlasting triumph to be realized through *enosh*, the *son of adam*.
6. This underscores the second point of tension raised by the psalm: The human creature that exists in the world is but a faint shadow of the glorious being God said He was creating. But this implies one of two things: *either God's design for man has utterly failed, or man is yet destined to become the image-son and ruler God created him to be.* David didn't speak to that dilemma, but he clearly believed that his God – the God whose majesty is over all His works – would prevail to see His purposes realized. Indeed, his closing doxology leaves no doubt concerning this.
- a. David's consideration of man (vv. 5-8) shows that he understood that the divine majesty displayed in the creation (v. 1) attains its fullness in man as image-lord. Thus he was convinced that the creature who is *enosh* is destined for, and will finally attain, the glorious status for which God created him. The vision that David articulated from the creation account would surely come to pass.
- b. Thus David assigned two distinct focal points to the doxology that begins and ends his psalm. The focus of the opening one is the *created order*, while the focus of the second one is creation's *consummation*. When David concluded his song with the exclamation, "*O Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!*," he was affirming that the portrait of man he had just sketched was not an empty dream or cruel joke. He knew man to be a tragic caricature of that depiction, a mere vapor marred by corruption and weakness. Yet he also understood that this was the very circumstance through which Yahweh would achieve His triumph and see man become the image-son He created him to be.

This, then, is the very essence of the psalm's messianic fragrance; it lauds the God who, in a mysterious way not yet disclosed to human minds, would "*establish strength through the mouths of suckling babes*"; He would use human frailty and mortality to triumph on man's behalf, then setting him over the works of His hands (cf. Hebrews 2:5-10).