

A Little Lower than God

Psalm 8

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When I lived in Washington, D.C., one of my favorite places to visit was the National Air and Space Museum on the Mall. I loved to go and watch the IMAX films and look at the Wright brothers' airplane and the Apollo 11 that carried Neil Armstrong and his colleagues to the moon. But my favorite exhibit of all was tucked away on the second floor in a small, dark theatre, where you could go to discover the wonder of life in all its glory, from the smallest molecule to the vastness of the entire universe!

As the film started, the camera hovered just over Miami, focused on a group of sunbathers. Like a telescope in reverse, slowly the camera would pull back from the sunbathers. Suddenly, the whole of Miami Bay came into focus and then all of the United States. Within seconds, you had lost sight of the sunbathers and were looking at a picture of the whole planet. And this was long before Google Earth, my friends! But it gets even better. After a few more minutes, the picture (still focused on the spot where the sunbathers lay) brought the solar system and then the whole Milky Way galaxy into focus. In another few minutes, the galaxy had become just a tiny speck in the middle of all the other 99 million galaxies that make up the universe. The camera remained at that level for a few seconds as I watched in awe.

Then gradually, the camera started to hone in on the earth, the United States and finally back to Miami, with the sunbathers coming into full focus once more. But the camera didn't stop there. Instead it continued to magnify the picture, and after a few more minutes of probing, you had entered the skin of the sunbathers right down to the molecular level. It was amazing!

Whenever I had friends in town, I would take them to that little, dark theatre on the second floor of the National Air and Space Museum. Usually we were the only ones watching it, and we had the whole place to ourselves. The demonstration was a wonder to me and a powerful reminder of the awesomeness of God's creation! It would also leave me pondering my role in the vast world and whether it mattered at all.

Isn't this the same question posed by the psalmist in Psalm 8? Some say it is *the* question of our time.

O Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Actually, there is no question about whether we matter or whether God cares for us. The real question is *why*?

Why are you mindful of us, God? *Why* do you care for us?

For you have made us a little lower than God, and crowned us with glory and honor. You have given us dominion over the works of your hands; you

have put all things under our feet.

As overwhelming as our smallness is when compared to the vast universe, it is even more awesome that God should care for us and give to us such responsibility and power. I like the way one writer puts it: "The wonder of it all is that the God who formed the heavens and the earth, whose glory is shown in the silence of a sunset and the cry of an infant, who sustains all things..., actually has put [God's] trust in us to manage the resources of the earth wisely. We are small, certainly. We are weak and confused and selfish and destructive and often hateful. Yet we are the ones on whom God is banking for the care of the wonderful creation."¹

We do matter. And the National Air and Space Museum film confirms this. It begins and ends with a picture of sunbathers, placing them in the context of the universe at one end and then in the context of molecules at the other. The camera's focus always comes back to them. And our lives often reflect an understanding that the camera of the universe is always focused clearly on us.

During the last ten years, tests to measure human consumption of carbon-based energy have become widely known and talked about. Despite the arguments about whether the measurements are accurate and how we should respond, the discovery of how much energy it takes to drive our cars and planes, to grow and transport our food, and heat and cool our homes is mind boggling. It is hard to ignore all the ways we impact our world through our desire to have what we want when we want it at the price we want it.

In our world, convenience and instant gratification determine most of our lifestyle choices. Does it matter how animals are raised and slaughtered so long as we get the choicest cuts of meat? Does it matter how the crops are genetically manipulated so they can be available to us whenever we want them? Does it matter how much fuel is used to produce and transport the inexpensive clothing made in East Asia? Does it matter how our choices impact the lives of those who don't have the same choices we do – how trash is dumped in their neighborhood and how polluted runoff water is dumped in their streams and ponds?

The Psalm says it does matter. The Air and Space Museum film begins and ends with us because we directed and produced it. But the message of our sacred text is different. It begins and ends with God. In the beginning, God spoke, and everything came into being. In the end, God speaks again, saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."²

Likewise, the psalm also begins and ends with God. "O Lord, our sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Everything that is said about us and the whole of our story with God is bounded on both sides by this praise for God. The camera in our sacred texts is focused on God. We are a part of the story, but the focus always comes back to God. And therefore, what we know about ourselves as people of God can only be known in this context.

Without these boundaries, we easily forget that we are a creation of God and that our lives, as well as the rest of the created world, are a gift from God. Why God, are you mindful of us, do you care for us? Clearly it is not because of anything we have done. No, we are insignificant compared to the grandeur of God's creation. It can only be because of God's amazing grace that God cares for us.

Therefore, in gratitude, we join the psalmist with our hymns of praise. O Lord, our

sovereign, how majestic is *your* name in all the earth! And we are called to use our dominion over creation not just for our desires and needs, but to glorify and praise God.

This point is highlighted by the use of royal metaphors in the psalm. God is the sovereign, the king of kings, over all creation. Certainly this imagery is hierarchical and patriarchal, but its logic is effective. According to the Psalm, God is God, and we are just a little lower than God. We are entrusted with the power of dominion over creation as God would entrust power to a royal in ancient times, crowned with glory and honor, and set up as a king over all the other creatures.

Old Testament scholar James Mays puts it this way:

The picture is one familiar in the world of the psalmist, that of the installation of a vassal king by the ruler of an empire.... The vassal's authority is delegated; his rule occurs within the reign of his Lord, whose policy guides his [and our] decisions and whose purpose sets his [and our] goals.

The dominion here portrayed as the role of human beings is not self-serving justification to use their power against other creatures and creation as though no desire or needs but their own matter. It is instead a critique and conversion of that view, a claim that human dominance is to be undertaken as a vocation whose source and significance lies in the reign of God, maker of heaven and earth, who created all things and found them good.³

Our knowledge of this period tells us that the ideal king was not a tyrant, but one expected to rule for the sake of his subjects. Likewise, "Humankind is called by God to use the power given it in obedience to the reign of God and for the sake of all the other creatures whom its power affects."⁴

Does God care for us? Indeed God does. Do our choices matter? Indeed they do. Does our dominion of the earth and its resources reflect the glory of God?

In case we are prone to put ourselves first and to "think that the fate of the earth is completely in our hands...today's psalm brings us back to where we started."⁵ Not back to the sunbathers in Miami, but to God.

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Notes

1. William Long, *Longing for God: Prayer and the Rhythms of Life* (Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 190-95.
2. Revelation 22:13, NRSV.
3. James L. Mays, "What Is a Human Being? Reflections on Psalm 8," *Theology To-day* 50 (January 1993): 518.
4. Ibid.
5. Long.