

The Majesty of God and the Identity of Man

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[0 : 00] Well friends, good afternoon and a very warm welcome to everybody here to our Wednesday lunchtime Bible talk at the Tron Church. Plenty of familiar faces, one or two a little bit less than familiar, in which case you're very, very welcome to be amongst us, but it's great to see so many familiar faces here.

We've gathered here to encourage each other, to listen to the words of the Lord, to sing his praise, to pray, and I trust to be built up in our faith and our discipleship.

Well let us bow our heads and join our hearts together in prayer. Though high above all praise, above all blessing high, who would not fear his holy name and praise and magnify?

Dear God, our Father, we acknowledge with joy and with a sense of wonder that you are raised up above everything because you are the maker of it all, the maker of the stars and the moon and the sun, the maker of the planets, the maker of the solar systems throughout the universe.

You are high above all praise. And it causes us to fear and to love and to rejoice in your holy name. We want to praise and magnify you, both in our hearts as well as in the words of our lips that we sing.

[1 : 28] We want to learn, dear Father, by your grace and goodness to magnify you more deeply and truly. So we pray that you will be graciously at work in our hearts, deep down inside us, where we know we are often a chaos of contrary thoughts.

We confess to you again our sinful impulses and our sinful thoughts, words and deeds. But we confess also that you are mighty to save us and you have given us a savior to give us a full assurance that as we trust him, we belong to you and our sins are not held against us in the divine account, but rather we are forgiven.

How wonderful to praise a God who is willing to forgive. And as we think about you again this afternoon, we pray that you will open our eyes afresh, that you'll give us ears to hear as those who are taught.

And we pray that you'll give us hearts to respond in love and with a fresh devotion to you so that we should live out the Christian life in our communities, in our homes, amongst our friends.

And we pray that our lives may therefore commend you and our Lord Jesus. And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

[2 : 49] Well, our reading this afternoon, as you'll see from the paper, is Psalm number 8. So perhaps you'd turn with me to that. You'll find it on page 450, 450, in our big hardback Bibles.

Psalm 8. And as the title tells us, this is a Psalm of David. Oh, Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of babes and infants, you have established strength because of your foes to still the enemy and the avenger.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands.

[4 : 04] You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

Oh, Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. Well, this is the word of the Lord himself through David and may it be a blessing to us now.

Now, I wonder if it seems odd to you that the church of God should be instructed by a murderer and an adulterer. Well, truth is often stranger than fiction and what we have before us here in the middle of the Bible is a book of Psalms, many of which were written by David, who was both a murderer and an adulterer.

And yet, as we know from 2 Samuel, his sin was forgiven by the Lord and the Lord made him into a prophet. He's described as a prophet by Peter the Apostle in Peter's great Pentecost sermon in Acts chapter 2.

We don't always think of him as a prophet, but that's the way he's described. And I've chosen four psalms written by this remarkable king and prophet David for our lunchtime talks during this month of May, Songs of David.

[5 : 25] So we'll start with this psalm number 8, which deals with the themes of God's majesty and man's identity. And I think we'll discover that there is a profound connection between those two themes.

The identity of human beings. Now, that's something which has been much under discussion in recent years. I don't know if you listen to Jeremy Vine's program on Radio 2 at lunchtime sometimes.

He's a very good broadcaster, a very interesting man, I think. And a few months ago, he was inviting various quite well-known people to speak for a few minutes on the question, what does it mean to be a human being?

What do you think it means to be a human being? That was his question. So the question is raised, is mankind just a naked ape, as Desmond Morris famously described us 40 or 50 years ago?

Is it our rationality that makes us human beings? Is it our capacity for love and relationship? And there are other questions, of course, that are being raised more recently and pressingly about our identity.

[6 : 32] Questions which have profound implications, both for politics and culture. For example, what does it mean to be British? What does it mean to be Scottish or English?

What does it mean to be male or female? Questions of this kind used to be answered with far more certainty in the 20th century than they are being answered in the 21st century.

There's a lot of disagreement and confusion these days. Now, when David wrote Psalm 8, of course he didn't have our 21st century questions and problems in mind.

But what he says here does speak strongly to us and will certainly help us to understand more clearly what it means to be a human being. David, remember, was the king of Israel.

And for that reason, he felt that he had a public duty, a public responsibility to help his people to know the Lord better. So he wasn't writing these songs just for his own private amusement or enjoyment.

[7 : 34] He was educating Israel. As a prophet of the Lord, he was teaching the Israelites to know the Lord better and more truly. So we'll take David's teaching here in this psalm under four headings.

First, this is all to do with the identity of man. First, man is purposefully created by God. Purposefully created by God.

The central question raised in the psalm comes there in verse 4. What is man? But you'll see that that question is placed firmly in the framework of an adoration of God's majesty.

So look at verse 1. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. And you'll see those words are repeated word for word in verse 9. So the psalm is topped and tailed by an outburst of wonder at the majesty of God's name.

It's as though David cannot ask what man is except in relation to God and God's majesty. Now to draw a parallel, to give a parallel example, imagine that you visit one of our big stately homes and you see a beautiful piece of furniture there, beautifully carved and polished, the very essence of elegance.

[8 : 50] Now you can't look at that beautiful piece of furniture without asking who made it and for whom was it made. If you don't try to relate the thing created to the one who created it, you're a nincompoop, aren't you?

You're never going to understand that piece of furniture or any piece of art properly if you don't relate it to its maker. That's just the same with human beings. And yet today, secular man, agnostic man, preening himself for his wisdom, tries to answer the question, what is man, without also asking who made man and for what purpose.

But David won't have that kind of nincompoopery for a moment. Everything he says here about man links mankind straight back to our maker and our maker's purpose.

So look at verse four. You, God, he says to the Lord, you, God, are mindful of man and you care for him. Verse five. You have made him.

You've crowned him with glory and honor. Verse six. You have given him dominion. You've put all things under his feet. The modern secular view of man wants to see man as self-dependent, self-made and self-determining.

[10 : 09] The Bible won't have that. The Bible sings glory to God in the highest. The modern world for the last two or three centuries has been singing glory to man in the highest.

And the 21st century modern world has become even more perverse because its song is glory to me in the highest. My individual preferences and wants will be the determining factor in my life.

I will not be governed by the norms of society and I certainly shan't be governed by the norms of the Bible. I shall be my own master. I shall be the captain of my own soul. But David says to God, you are mindful of me.

You care for me. You have decided the purpose of a man's life or a woman's life. So there's the first thing that David is teaching the people of God. The identity of man can only be seen properly in relation to the God who made us, whose name is majestic.

We're not independent beings. Our joy and our purpose is only discovered in relation to God. Now secondly, God is wonderfully kind towards man.

[11 : 21] And we see this in verses three and four. Look with me at verse three. I don't think it's over fanciful to picture David at this point up on the roof of his palace in Jerusalem late at night.

The weather has been warm and he's not been able to sleep. So in the small hours of the morning, he gets up, he goes up onto the roof and he looks up, upwards into the sky, up at the dazzling brilliance of the moon and the stars.

Now in those days, of course, there were no street lamps, there were no motorways, there was no light pollution. The stars would have made their full impact on David. So what does he say about them?

Well, first, he immediately acknowledges that they're God's handiwork. The heavens, he says, are the work of your fingers. The moon and the stars, which you have set in place.

David, of course, is deeply aware of the teaching of early Genesis. It would never enter his mind to think that this great dazzling array was the result of a random purposeless concurrence of atoms.

[12 : 27] But verses three and four are not primarily teaching the doctrine of creation. Their chief purpose here is to teach the doctrine of man.

These two verses, three and four, they're filled with a sense of wonder. And the thing that fills David with wonder is the contrast between such a vast creation and such a tiny human inhabitant of that creation.

Now David, of course, could not know back then in the way that we can know today just how vast the creation was. But he was well aware that what he could see was very big and that he himself was very small.

When I look at this hugeness, he is saying, what is man that you should remember him and care for him? Man is so tiny. But the fact that God is mindful of this tiny, frail creature and cares for him fills David with joy and wonder.

Now I'm sure you've noticed the interest expressed recently by some scientists and journalists and other commentators in society.

[13 : 36] The interest expressed in the possibility that there might be life somewhere out there in the universe. So when somebody sends up a space probe to Mars and it begins to relay all sorts of information back to Earth, people say maybe we'll find water on Mars.

And if there's water, maybe there'll be microbes or bacteria in the water. Now I'm not wanting to say for a moment that it's silly to ask whether there might be life somewhere out there in space.

It is an interesting question. But the fact remains that for all the expertise of our astrophysicists, there is no clear evidence of there being life anywhere in the universe except on our small planet Earth.

We have to conclude then that our planet is unique and special. We have to conclude that as God planned and made the whole universe with this planet Earth right there, he was not making some meaningless and empty vastness.

He was actually creating a home for his family on planet Earth. I don't know whether you've been to Sutherland up in the Northwest Highlands.

[14 : 45] I've been there sometimes. I love that county. But being up there, you can look out at the great, huge, empty landscape. It's a very empty landscape up there. And if you're standing on a bit of an eminence, you look out and you see nothing but rock and hill and bog for miles.

And yet there, tucked away in some little sheltered spot, you might see one cottage, a family home. Now isn't our planet rather like that in relation to the whole of the universe?

Here is a home for God's family in the midst of this vast array of stars and planets. The verbs there in verse 4 speak of God's tender care for us, that he is mindful of us.

That means we're never out of his thoughts. And he cares for us. He clothes us and feeds us. He puts into us a capacity for joy and delight. And he expresses his ultimate care for us in sending a savior so that we should be able to share God's home with him eternally.

Provided, of course, that we turn to that savior in repentance and trust. Man's identity, then, the sense of who we are and what we mean, it's given a great security and strength by knowing that God cares for us and is always thinking about us.

[16 : 05] He is indeed kind towards us. Then thirdly, man is the world's governor under God.

Now, this is what is described for us and very vividly in verses 5, 6, 7, and 8. Just look at that key phrase in verse 6. You have given him, man, dominion over the works of your hands.

You have given to man dominion. So it all comes from God. The works are the works of God's hands. And the authority or dominion exercised by man has been given to him by God.

So man is not self-authorizing or self-determining. It all stems from God's gift and God's purpose. But man is to exercise dominion.

His responsibility is to rule. And his dominion is over the works of God's hands. And you'll see David becomes very specific in verse 7.

[17 : 07] Again, you might like to picture him up on the roof of the palace at 3 o'clock in the morning when he would listen out and hear the lions roaring in the Jordan Valley. Israel was full of lions back in those days.

In fact, the last lion, I think, was shot in Syria in about 1850. There were lions all over the Middle East. So you would hear the wild beasts there. He would hear the sheep and the cattle lowing and bleating in the small holdings and backyards.

So do you see how he categorizes the dominion of man? Man is to rule, verse 7, first of all, the farm livestock. That's the sheep and the oxen.

And the wild animals, the beasts of the field. Thirdly, the birds. Man can eat pheasant, duck and partridge. And fourth, the fish of the sea.

And whatever passes along the paths of the seas. Haddock and herring. Lobster. Crab. He's not given leave here to rape and pillage the earth.

[18 : 03] Not at all. He's to care for it. He's to use its resources wisely and well. But in the context of modern debate, let's particularly notice in verse 6, the two words, dominion over.

There's a great divide being taught here. And it's taught in Genesis as well. Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. And the great divide is this. We have the lower orders of creation on one side of it.

And on the other side of the great divide, we have God and man. So on one side, there are the creatures that are ruled over. And on the other side, we have the rulers.

Now, this is an arrangement which is not popular with many modern natural historians or anthropologists. Because they want to say, mankind is just another mammal. We are a naked ape.

We're really no different from horses and dolphins and mice. They will say, look at the way we're made. We're so similar in our physical structure, our respiratory systems, our skeletons, our circulation, our digestion, and so on.

[19 : 08] All so similar. And look at the gorillas and the chimpanzees. We're just like them, except rather less hairy. Now, the effect of all this teaching, and you're well aware of it, the effect of this teaching is to reduce the status of mankind.

It diminishes our value. And at the same time, it artificially inflates the value of the animals and birds. And that means, for example, that we now have pet crematoriums.

There are some vet practices where the culture seems to be to treat the dogs, the cats, and the hamsters as almost more important than their owners. If you've taken your dog or cat or even hamster to the vet, you might have encountered that.

G.K. Chesterton, back in about 1920, said that a civilization that kills its children and worships its animals is ripe for disaster.

That's not a bad description of our nation, a nation which aborts its unborn babies in hundreds of thousands and arranges cremations for its hamsters.

[20 : 17] No. Verse 6. Verse 6 tells us that God has given man dominion and authority over the created order. In the words of Genesis 2, the dominion is intended to cultivate God's garden and to care for it responsibly.

This is part of our identity. But there's something else we must notice as well, fourthly. And that is, the identity of man reaches its full stature in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now this is not developed in so many words here, but it's very much developed in the New Testament. We won't turn this up just now, but there is an important passage in the epistle to the Hebrews, Hebrews chapter 2, in which the author of Hebrews quotes this very psalm, Psalm 8.

He quotes verses 4, 5, and 6 in full, and he says that these verses find their fulfillment in Jesus. In other words, they're a prophecy about Jesus.

And the author of Hebrews prefaces his quotation of these verses by saying that he is writing about the world to come. In other words, he's looking forward to the new creation where the kingly authority of Jesus will finally be seen in all its glory.

[21 : 34] Let me just trace this thought through as the author of Hebrews develops it in his letter. Look at verses 5 and 6 in our psalm. Yet you, that is God the Father, says the author of Hebrews, yet you have made him, Jesus, a little lower than the heavenly beings, a little lower than the angels.

Well, yes, indeed, he was made lower than the angels. He assumed the frail flesh of mortal man, and he did what had to be done on earth for our salvation. He had to become a man so as to die for us.

Only a man could die for the sins of men. But then verse 5, second half of the verse, God crowned him with glory and honor. God raised him gloriously from death and exalted him to the place of highest renown.

And what did God give him? Verse 6, dominion. Do you remember Jesus' own words at the end of Matthew's gospel? All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

And look now at the end of our verse 6. You have put all things under his feet, under Jesus' feet. That's a phrase that Paul the apostle picks up and uses in 1 Corinthians 15 when he's describing the consummation of all things.

[22 : 54] Paul writes, Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

For, and here Paul quotes from Psalm 8 again, God has put all things in subjection under his feet. Now friends, just think about this because it is glorious.

It's stupendous. It means that the destiny of man, the identity of man, is Jesus. To be a Christian is to be part of him, to be a member of his body.

And this means that all other identities that we might enjoy and think about are secondary. the fact that you might be a McDonald's by family or a joiner by trade or that you vote SNP or Tory or that you were brought up in Motherwell or that you support Partick Thistle.

These are the sort of identities that we cultivate. Those secondary identities, they all fade out of sight in comparison to the identity of a Christian to belong to Christ.

[24 : 01] If, of course, you are a Christian. But if you are a Christian, it means that the pattern of your existence and the meaning of your existence is set by the pattern of Jesus himself.

We follow in his footsteps. It's part of what it means to follow him, to be a follower of Christ. We follow the pattern of his life. And it's this. First of all, he became human.

You and I also became human beings some years ago. Then, Jesus lived on the earth as you and I are doing at this moment. And then, he died as you and I will unless the Lord returns in the meantime.

And then, having died, he was raised from death as we will be if we're Christians. And then, he was made glorious and given authority to reign over the new creation as you and I will be also.

Reigning. The book of Revelation in chapter 5 includes a song of praise to Jesus. Worthy are you for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe, language, people and nation.

[25 : 09] And you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God and they shall reign on the earth. Which means, of course, the new heavens and the new earth. So, if we have repented and trusted in Christ, our identity is Jesus.

Jesus himself. He is the one to whom we belong. He is the one who molds us. He is man. Pontius Pilate didn't fully understand what he was saying but he said towards the end of John's gospel, behold, the man.

Martin Luther called him the proper man which means mankind in its perfection unsullied by any taint of rebellion and sin. Jesus, the proper man, the Lord of all creation and the conqueror of death in whose victory we share.

So, friends, do you belong to him? Do you trust him? Are you a repentant believer? If you are, then all this belongs to you and knowing your identity as a redeemed human being, you will then be able to say with David, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.

Well, friends, let's bow our heads and we'll pray and thank the Lord God for these things. How we thank you, dear Heavenly Father, that in sending Jesus to earth, you sent the second man, the real man, the one who was able to live as man in a way that Adam could not, the one who went under temptation was able to resist entirely.

[26 : 59] And we thank you so much, dear Father, that our destiny, as we trust in you and repent and believe, is to be made like Jesus. We're part of him.

We're part of him now on earth. Already, we're able to enjoy eternal life. But we look forward to that glorious day when we shall be able to share his reign and rule in the new heavens and the new earth.

So please, dear Father, fill our hearts and minds afresh with hope and joy and peace as we think of these things and help us to live out our life, whatever our pressures and temptations.

We pray that you'll help us to live out our life on earth as we follow Jesus gladly and seek to represent him to the world. And we ask it for his dear name's sake.

Amen.