

What makes God particularly worthy of praise?

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. It's great to be back with you. It's been five years since I've been with you. But I have been here before. I don't know if you remember or not. Maybe some of you remember.

It's great to be back with you after such a long period of time. Since it has been a long time, I guess let me just introduce myself. My name's Nathan. I am Australian. Let me get that out of the road to start with. So you're not sitting there wondering. I don't like you to sit there wondering if I'm New Zealander or not. I'd prefer just that you knew up front. Australian.

And yeah. But I've been staying in South Africa now for the last six years. I'm one of the lecturers down at the Bible College down the road, George Whitfield College. I teach Old Testament at the College. And I bring you greetings from the rest of the faculty at the college. So we're in Psalm 8 together this morning. If you'd like to turn back there in this Bible that I picked up from my seat there. It's page 484. I assume that's the same for everybody. I'm not sure. I think one of the things about moving to South Africa and Cape Town in particular that I've never quite gotten over is the mountains. If you're from Sydney, then Sydney also has some mountains. I'm sort of from, I'll say I'm from Sydney. It's not quite true. But if you're from Sydney, Sydney also has some mountains but they go down, not up. So you drive out to the mountains and you don't notice that you've gone uphill.

And then when you get to the spot with all the views, you're looking into valleys and you're standing on the top. You never quite get what you get here with the mountains. I think this is one of the most spectacular places in all of the earth that I've ever been. Sometimes I take my dog for a run along the beach early in the morning. I live in Musenburg and I don't want you to get the wrong idea. When I say run, he does most of the running. I live in Musenburg and he runs and I kind of try to run together down to St. James or Cook Bay. I think the best part about it is when you get there down at St. James or wherever you get, you get to a beach. I'm sure you know, I'm sure you're as familiar with it as I am. You get to St. James Beach and then you can sit there and if it's the right time of year, then you can watch the sunrise over the mountains on the other side of the bay.

I'm a bit disorientated, so I don't know if I'm pointing the right way. That way? Yeah. Sunrise over the mountains on the other side of the bay and it comes up over those mountains and then it reflects off the water and on a still morning, it's just astonishing.

[2 : 4 8] And I sit there and I listen to the gently rolling waves splashing against the shore and I look at the mountains across the other side and if I turn around, then these mountains look like they're on fire because the sun's shining right on them. I don't know if you've gotten up early enough to see that.

It's stunning. It's amazing. And I almost can't help myself. I find myself just beginning to praise God. I don't know if you've had that experience where you just see something so amazing and you just start kind of spontaneously, just out of awe, praising the God who put it there. And I think of that song when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze.

Then sings my soul, my saviour God, to thee how great thou art. And that's what comes to my mind. I expect that probably amongst everybody here, I'm not alone in the sentiment.

Have you ever stopped to wonder, if it's happened to you, have you ever stopped to wonder why that is? Why is it that we should see something so amazingly spectacular and just burst into spontaneous praise for it?

Or let me ask that question a little bit of a different way. What is it about this creation that makes God particularly praiseworthy? What is it about this creation that makes God particularly praiseworthy?

[4 : 15] Is it his raw power? Is it the fact that he could whip up a whirlwind if he wanted that would flatten Cape Town just like that? Is that what makes him praiseworthy? Is it his majestic beauty?

The fact that those sunsets look like they're painted onto the sky? Is that why we praise God? Is it the mechanical precision of how well this world just works? Like a masterful engineer, he's put it together.

And all of the bits kind of function. And we don't have to worry about everything suddenly deciding to float up into the sky. Because we know that's not going to happen. Everything kind of works together so that we can live here.

Why are we praising God? I don't very often stop to think those questions when I'm in the middle of things.

But that's kind of the question I want to ask this morning. It's an interesting question because at some point many years ago there was an Israelite psalmist, maybe David himself, who sat down to write a song about creation.

[5 : 18] And he was a lot like me, I think. He looked at his world. He probably didn't have a dog. But he looked at his world and he noticed how beautiful and wonderful and amazing his world was.

And his heart overflowed in praise for the God who made it. And he thought about what is it about this world that makes God particularly praiseworthy. And the reason it's so interesting is because his answer wasn't the same as the answer I would give.

And that's what initially fascinates me so much about this psalm. O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. When you have set your glory above the heavens.

Now, I could have written those words. I'm not quite that poetic with my words. But I could have. I can echo that sentiment. Those could be my words.

But his answer about what it is that makes God praiseworthy, that's not something I would have thought to say. And that's what makes this psalm so interesting and one of my favorite psalms.

[6 : 23] Verse 2 there. Have a look at what he says makes God praiseworthy. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise. Because of your enemies to silence the foe and the avenger.

From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise. Because of your enemies to silence the foe and the avenger. Now, I don't know about you. But to me, that's a little bit confusing. Is that confusing for you?

That's a little bit confusing for me. What on earth does it mean, actually, to ordain praise from the lips of children and infants?

Perhaps if you have a different version of the Bible, it might say established strength. It's not very... It's just a couple of different manuscripts. And we don't know which one is the original one.

But it's the same kind of point. What is it about the lips of children and infants? And why are there enemies and foes and avengers appearing all of a sudden? There are a whole bunch of words here in this verse that don't seem to go together.

[7 : 26] You've got praise and strength and foes and enemies and avengers and babies and infants and creation. What on earth is going on?

Actually, I think the principle behind what's going on in this particular verse isn't too difficult to understand. We even have an illustration of this verse from the New Testament itself.

You might remember the story when Jesus is clearing out the temple. And the authorities at the time were, of course, opposed to him. And so they got up and they objected.

Not everybody in the temple reacted that way, though. Not everybody objected to what he was doing. Matthew tells us in his gospel that the blind and the lame came to him and that he healed them. And that his miracles made the children who were around the temple start crying out, Hosanna to the Son of David.

So the story's in Matthew 21. You can go and look it up later if you'd like. And the authorities, of course, don't like what's going on at this point. They don't like that he's clearing the temple.

[8 : 30] They don't like that he's healing people. And they don't like that the children are all calling out, Hosanna to the Son of David. But so they tell everybody to sit down and be quiet. And Jesus rebukes them from the words of this psalm.

And he says to them, basically, look, don't you know that I've ordained praise from the mouths of children specifically to silence you? So in the context of Jesus' ministry, the foes and the avengers are the opponents of Jesus.

They're the Pharisees and the Sadducees who aren't on board with what Jesus is doing. Do you follow? In the context of this psalm, it's a little more broad than that. It will be anything that's opposed to God's creative purposes.

God has set his glory above the heavens. But not everybody is happy with what God does with the world. Some people cry out against it. And God silences them from the lips of children and infants.

The point is, I think, though, in all of creation, if you look around the world and you're wondering, what is it that best establishes the power and the praise of God?

[9 : 41] It's not what you think. You can look at the majesty of creation. You can look at the glory of the heavens, if you like. But God's power is not best demonstrated in the raging of the whirlwinds.

The prophet Nahum tells us, the Lord has his way in the whirlwind and the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. Yes, God has his way there. But the whirlwind doesn't praise God.

It's not the spectacular pastels of the sunsets that makes God particularly praiseworthy, that are painted on the sky. The Lord's name might be praised from the rising of the sun to the setting of the sun, according to Psalm 113.

But that's not what makes God particularly praiseworthy either. God's praise is established, it turns out, on the lips of children and infants.

And that's really surprising. That's really surprising. Why should that be? Why should that be true? This psalm began by drawing our eyes upward.

[10 : 46] You've set your glory above the heavens. But no sooner are we looking up there, than all of a sudden we're looking down again at a baby in a manger, in a crib. What is it about the baby that makes God praised?

And if you're asking that question, which of course you are now because I've put it into your head, if you're asking that question, then that's exactly the question that the psalm wants you to be asking as you move through it.

So let's keep that question in our mind and let's just work through the psalm. Verse 3. When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you've set in place, what is man that you're mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him?

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, what is man? Is anybody in the room a scientist? Sort of, yeah?

I come from a science background. Before I went to Bible college, I studied science. I didn't study astronomy, I have to confess, but near enough. One of the things you learn very quickly, if you do any serious study of science, is that the universe is a lot bigger than you think it is.

[12 : 09] In fact, the more you study, the bigger the universe seems to get. I thought it was big when somebody first told me that it takes about a month for the fastest spaceship that we've got to get just to the moon.

Or, to kind of... How long does it take between the time that you flick off a light switch and the time that the room goes dark? It's not instant, right?

But it's so quick that you can't notice. It's pretty fast. So think about how quick light moves then. It's pretty fast, right? But did you know if somebody was going to flick off the sun like a light switch, we wouldn't even know for eight minutes.

Because the light would take eight minutes to get... So the light that's hitting us now left the sun eight minutes ago. So if we flicked off the sun right now, there would still be light kind of in transit on its way to us from the sun, and we wouldn't know for eight minutes that the sun had been turned off.

Space is really big. Our universe is really enormous. That's actually a really tiny distance.

[13 : 22] That's actually quite a small distance. When we launched a spaceship back in the 1970s, that's been travelling since the 1970s. So that's 50 years ago.

It's been travelling at 17 kilometres every second since then, in the last 50 years. How far can you get at 17 kilometres per second in 50 years?

You can get quite a long way, right? Do you know how far it's got? It hasn't even... In fact, it has now. It's only just made it past the furthest away planet in our solar system. Just in our solar system.

Just now. Just a month or two ago. And in fact, light from the closest stars to us, the nearest stars to us, takes a full year to get here.

That's our closest stars in the heavens. Light travels, if you're interested, at 300 kilometres per second, approximately.

[14 : 23] And it takes a year to get here from our closest stars in the universe. And did you know that there are more stars just in our galaxy than there are people on Earth? And that there are more galaxies in our sky than we can count?

When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you've set in place, what is man that you're mindful of him? Let me show you a photo.

It won't look like much. I'm going to have it put up here. I hope it's going to come up. There we go. Okay. It just looks like a black... I'm aware it doesn't look like much.

This is actually a very famous photo. This photo is called now the pale blue dot. It's famous because it was taken from that spaceship that I was talking about a little while ago that's travelling away from us at 17 kilometres per second.

It was taken quite a while ago, back in the 90s, I think it was, as it passed... Let me get this right. As it passed the planet Saturn. And it's famous because if you look very, very carefully, if you look very carefully, you can just see on the right-hand side of the photo...

[15 : 38] Do you see there's some, like, rays of light coming down from the top of the photo? That's a good idea. There's, like, three of them. And on the right ray of light, about halfway down the ray of light there, you can see there's a little tiny speck that's brighter than the rest of the ray of light.

I don't know if you can't see it or if you can see it. It's okay if you can't. It's quite a small little speck. Can you see it at all? Yeah. It's famous because that's Earth. That's a picture of Earth taken from 6 billion kilometres away as the spaceship passed the planet Saturn.

And it's a famous image now because a philosopher named Carl Sagan reflected on it. And he looked at this picture and he said these words.

I'll read to you what he said about it. He said, that's here. That's home. That's us. On that pale blue dot is everyone you know, everyone you love, everyone you've ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives.

The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilisation, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, every hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and every sinner in the history of our species lived there on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

[17 : 31] Remember, oh man, from dust you are, and to dust you will return. When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you've put in place, what is man that you're mindful of him or the son of man that you care for him?

You can take that down. Why should it be? Why should it be that the praise of the God who hung the stars in the heavens is established on the lips of tiny little bundles of dust hurling through space on a slightly, but not much larger, bundle of dust?

And you know what? It's not just men, but babies and infants. It's the lowly of us. It's the weakest of us. It's those who are still closest to the bundle of dust from which we came, actually.

What is man that you're mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him, there in verse 4, is actually quite interesting in the original Hebrew text. It doesn't use man or son of man.

It actually says, what is Enosh that you're mindful of him or the son of Adam that you care for him? Hebrew actually doesn't have a word to mean mankind.

[18 : 55] So it uses various people from the opening chapters of Genesis to do the job instead as representatives of our race. These men, Enosh and Adam, who long ago returned to the dust compared to the heavens.

What is Adam? Well, surprisingly, it turns out the answer is everything.

Verse 5. You've made him a little lower than the heavenly beings but crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands.

You put everything under his feet, all the flocks and the herds and the beasts in the field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea and everything that swims along the paths of the sea. Adam isn't a heavenly being.

Adam is an earthly being. In fact, Adam in Hebrew, his name just means earthly. That's what Adam means. The Hebrew word for earth is Adama, earth. But even though he's an earthly being, God has crowned him in creation.

[20 : 05] You've given him dominion. You've made him ruler over the works of your hands. You've put all things under his feet. Do you notice the symmetry of that? Hands and feet. You've made him ruler over everything that you've made, over the works of your hands.

Everything that you've made, you've put under his feet. All the sheep and the oxen, all the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea and things that creep along the paths of the seas.

What does that list of animals remind you of? Is there another part of the Bible that that list of animals reminds you of? Noah and the ark? Okay, that's not what I'm thinking of.

There's somewhere else where that list is exactly those words. Sheep and oxen, beasts of the field, birds of the heaven, fish of the sea and creeping things along the paths of the seas. Right, the creation narrative back in Genesis 1.

These are actually precisely the words of the creation narrative back in Genesis 1. God said, you'll remember, let us make man in our image and after our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and the livestock and over all of the earth and over everything that creeps along the paths of the seas.

[21 : 15] It's a bit surprising then that this psalm answers its question the way that it does. What is man that you're mindful of? I kind of expect the psalmist to write, well, mankind is the image of God.

You've made man in your image. And that would be true, wouldn't it? But that's actually not what he does. The psalmist might have said, man is the image and likeness of God. But actually, rather than comparing us to God, he compares us to everything that God has made.

And he reflects that we're a part of it and special within it. What is man? Well, man has been made ruler over the works of God's hands and God has put everything under his feet.

What are the works of God's hands in this psalm? What does it include? Just have a look down there from the beginning. The answer's there in the text.

What has God done with his hands in this psalm? What has he made with his hands in this psalm? Yeah, everything, even the heavens.

[22 : 33] When I consider the heavens the work of your fingers, you've put the work of God's hands under the feet of man.

So we began by thinking about what is it about creation that makes us want to praise God or we asked it in a different way. What is it about creation that makes God particularly praiseworthy?

And the answer that this psalm gives us is actually really surprising. It's people. It's men. I don't mean men.

I mean men like the psalmist using the word. It's mankind. But it's not the big important ones of us. It's the babies, the infants, the Enoshes and the Adams who long ago returned back to the dust that they came from.

In a universe that's big beyond our wildest imaginations, God made a tiny little pile of dust. He said it's spinning around one of a million billion balls of fire and then on that tiny little ball of dust from that tiny little ball of dust he made Adam the man of dust and crowned him so that all of creation might praise God.

[23 : 57] So that through him God might ordain praise and he would lead creation in its praise of God.

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. Now that's the end of this psalm but there's a problem, isn't there?

And I suspect you know the problem just as well as I know the problem. the problem is that I don't.

The problem is that we don't. We don't do this. I'm not like this Adam in this psalm and actually neither are you like this Adam in this psalm.

I don't establish God's praise. I don't rule the birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea and the creeping things that creep along the paths of the seas. It's not at least in any meaningful sense of the word rule.

[24 : 59] Do you rule them? I don't think you do. I certainly don't rule the heavens. I can't even touch the moon let alone that spaceship.

In some sense there is some sense in which we rule the world. There is a sense in which we tame nature, mankind build cities, we make rockets that can get to the moon.

That's about as far as we've gotten though. And yes, we can make a robotic satellite that can take a picture of the earth from 6 billion kilometers away. There is a sense in which we are rulers of creation, but even in this very limited way, actually we don't rule very well, do we?

We don't rule very well. Not in a true rule, even in our greatest accomplishments, even in our most majestic feats of humanity. We haven't established the praise of God and we haven't led creation in praise of God.

Just the opposite actually, we don't see the praise of God in the glory of men, do we? We don't. We see, to pick up the words of Paul, creation subjected to futility and not even willingly.

[26 : 15] That's what we see. It's clear that if mankind was created in order to lead creation in praise of God, then we do actually a very poor job of it.

We haven't done well. Because of us, creation groans. Because of us, creation is bound to corruption. And because of us, we groan. And actually, as I read this psalm, it kind of mocks me.

It's showing me maybe what I could be, but that I'm not. I'm not like this. It's telling me about an Adam that I should have been, but that I can't be.

And so in my brokenness, in our brokenness, in our sin, and in our failing, actually, this psalm really isn't about us at all. But it is about a different Adam altogether.

And this is why I had that Hebrews passage read out a little bit earlier, as well as this psalm. The author of Hebrews also reflects on this psalm.

[27 : 22] He thinks about this psalm for himself. And he opens his letter to the Hebrews, as I'm sure you're aware, by comparing Jesus to angels and showing that he is superior to those heavenly beings.

Now, angels are heavenly beings. Man, Adam, is of the earth. But Jesus is superior to even those angels. But, as he continues into chapter 2, he notes that it's not to the angels that God gave the rule of creation.

He goes this way. Let me read it to you again, in case you've forgotten. It wasn't to the angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we're speaking. As it's been testified somewhere, what is man that you're mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him?

You know where that somewhere is now. The author of Hebrews apparently forgot where that was testified, but you know. You made him, for a little while, lower than the angels.

And you've crowned him with glory and honour by putting everything in subjection under his feet. Jesus, the son of God, through whom the stars and the planets were made, in whom the stars and the planets hold together, and without whom nothing was made that was made, actually became, for a little while, lower than the angels.

[28 : 47] And for a little while, this heavenly being returned to the dust, but for a reason. In putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside of his control.

At present, we don't yet see everything in subjection to him. We don't yet see everything in subjection to Jesus. We don't see the planets and the stars in subjection to man.

We don't see the earth ruled by a righteous man. We see corruption. We see wickedness. We see pain. We see death. And we see the universe groaning. That's what we see.

But, the author of Hebrews continues, we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

[29 : 58] For a little while, Jesus returned to the dust, so that in a little while, we might be made into the men and women that we were always supposed to have been.

For a little while, Jesus returned to the dust, so that in a little while, we were made into the men and women we were always supposed to have been.

The bundle of dust that was hanging on a Roman cross is the Adam that we couldn't be. But he's the Adam that has led all of creation in praise of its creator.

That's why I love this psalm. And that's what I think of as I sit down with my dog at St. James, absolutely exhausted from having almost run the whole way. Not even a little bit, I'm ashamed to say.

That's what I think of as I sit and I watch the sunset, the sunrise over the bay on those early mornings. because this psalm is about me and this psalm is about you too in a little while.

[31 : 20] Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. Shall we pray? Father, it's hard for us to even think about and comprehend your glory and your power.

This world that you've created is beyond our understanding. It's beyond the understanding even of the smartest of us. It's beyond our reach. And somehow in this seemingly infinitely sized universe, you love us.

We think of ourselves as just creatures of the dust suspended on a pale blue dot in a ray of sun.

And we think, well, why should it be that you love us? But you do. And not only do you love us, but you became one of us to redeem us and to make us again what we should have been all along.

Thank you. Amen.