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Our study today is going to be looking at the book of Psalms and the creation themes that we find in the book of Psalms, and in particular, we're going to be looking at Psalms 8, 19 and 24, to see what they have to say to us about God, about us as human beings, and about our responsibilities in relation to the world in which we live.

Psalm 8

For the director of music.

According to gittith. A psalm of David.

Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens.

Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

*When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,*

*which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?*

You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour.

*You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
you put everything under their feet:
all flocks and herds,*

*and the animals of the wild,
the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.*

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

Creation I would describe as a subtheme within within the Psalter, within the book of Psalms. I guess if we were to talk about the dominant themes of the book of Psalms, you have two images: the idea that the Lord reigns, Yahweh reigns, Yahweh Malakh in the Hebrew, and also the idea that his steadfast love endures forever. 'L'olam chasdo' in the Hebrew. These dual themes dominate the book of Psalms,

a God who reigns over the entire cosmos, and that reign, that rule is good. And the creation psalms that we're going to be looking at, they all speak in to that equation as a subset, reminding us that it is God who's Lord over all of the earth, and that his rule, his reign over the earth is good. And obviously these are principles that should be echoed in our actions as his people.

So firstly, just some thoughts on Psalm 8.

Psalm 8 is often described as a creation psalm. It's described as a psalm that speaks to God's majesty, reflected in creation. And we see that in the text of the psalm. The first and the last verses declare Lord, Our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! And for us that's perhaps unsurprising, we're so used to the idea of God's universal rule that we don't balk, we don't think twice when we come across this type of language in the Old Testament. And yet in the days and in the culture in which Psalm 8 was written, this would be quite a radical claim.

In the ancient world, gods were territorial so that the sun God, Ra, he reigned to the extent of Egypt's boundaries, or Ashur would reign to the extent of the kingdom of Assyria's rule. But gods were always geographic, whereas here we have this claim that somehow the whole of the created order speaks to God's character, to God's goodness. His majesty is reflected in all the earth. And that language of kingship, that language of rule continues through the psalm. You have set your glory in the heavens. So again, it's the language of majesty, it's the language of rule. And in some sense God's character and God's being is reflected in is reflected in the created order.

We then read in verse 2 the strange, slightly strange verse about the praise of children and infants being established, establishing a stronghold against God's enemies to silence the foe and the avenger. So some imagery from the ancient world here speaking about God's victory over chaos, about the fact that God in creation has established a good order, an order that's recognised even by those who are thought of as the simplest within our human realms so children and infants recognise God's design. Children and infants recognise God's victory. Children and infants recognise the good order that God has instilled within creation and then we've got these verses which focus on the vastness of the created order, the vastness of

the cosmos in which we live, and in some sense the smallness of mankind, the smallness of humanity as we encounter the vastness of creation.

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, the language that's used here is the language of artistry. When the psalmist speaks about the work of God's hands, it tends to be a reference to his great power and his great might. But here we see reference to the work of his fingers, reference to the the kind of the detail work that God has put into the created order. The artifice, the artistry, the unnecessary beauty of his creation. And of course, the psalmist is encouraging himself and us as readers to consider God's creation, to think about the incredible beauty that we see within the world.

But what's the human response to that? We see that in verse 4: What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? We can often feel small when confronted by the vastness of the created order.

I grew up in Glasgow, which obviously a major urban centre, and it was really only when I moved up to the Inverness area and moved up to the Highlands and we lived out in the sticks for the first few years here where it was dark, there was no light pollution and it was really only then that I came to see just the vastness, the array of stars above us, and that can sometimes make us feel small.

But the language used here is quite powerful. What is man that you are mindful of him? The Hebrew verb 'zakar' 'to remember', what is man that you remember him, human beings, the son of man, that you care for him?

The verb that's used there is 'paqad', visit and these two terms, to remember and to visit are closely associated with the Exodus, where God remembered his covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And he visited his people to provide them with release from bondage, release from slavery.

So these two verbs are kind of, they become theological catchphrases in that sense, which really point us to this idea that God, our God, the God whom

we worship is a God who intervenes. He intervenes in our human realities. And, of course, as we're thinking about creation care that's quite a key point, isn't it? Because we can often feel intimidated by the size of the task, we can often feel that our efforts are small, insignificant. They can seem meaningless in some ways.

And yet what we're reminded of here is that we worship and we pray to a God who comes alongside his people to help them in all of their times of need. And then we move on, the focus switches from God in his glory, in all of creation to humanity and our role within the created order. Verse 5, you have made him or you have made them a little lower than the angels, most of our translations say, and crowned them with glory and honour. The word that's used and translated as angels here in the NIV is the word 'Elohim', and most commonly that word simply refers to God. And in some senses that's the translation that makes the most sense of verse 5 of Psalm 8. You have made us a little lower than yourself. You have made us a little lower than God. And that's reflected in the language of the next line, crowned with glory and honour.

So just as God's glory is reflected within the created order, so we too have a role to play with regards to creation, and we see that in the following verses 6 to 8, you made them rulers over the works of your hands. You put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, the animals of the wild, the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

The language of rule here in verse 6 simply echoes the action and the activity of God in creation. So God, in establishing his order within creation, he establishes his rule, and that is a good, loving and caring rule. The same verb, 'mashal', is used here in terms of our human responsibilities and in terms of our engagement with ecology, in terms of our engagement with the created order around about us, that should be an engagement of care and keeping and sustaining just as God cares, keeps and sustains this earth.

And we finish with an echo of verse 1 and verse 9, Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth?

Psalm 19

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech,
they use no words; no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens
God has pitched a tent for the sun.
It is like a bridegroom
coming out of his chamber,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is deprived of its warmth.
The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord
are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm,
and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious
than gold, than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.
By them your servant is warned
in keeping them there is great reward.
But who can discern their own errors?
Forgive my hidden faults.
Keep your servant also from willful sins;
may they not rule over me.
Then I will be blameless, innocent
of great transgression.
May these words of my mouth
and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight, oh Lord,
my Rock and my Redeemer.*

So the second psalm that we are looking at is Psalm 19. Psalm 19's quite a fascinating psalm. It's a poem that breaks down into three parts and it starts in the first stanza with this very strong focus once again on

creation and this kind of theological perspective on our ecology.

And then the second stanza of the psalm, the second section of the psalm, focuses in on God's word and the kind of, just as we see great beauty in creation, so we see great beauty in the scriptures and how they speak to us today.

And then the third section of the psalm is a prayer of confession, a prayer that acknowledges our weakness, our sin, both known and unknown to us. But it's also a prayer which puts our trust in the Lord and in his great ability, in contrast to our own weakness and inability.

The three parts of the psalm continue in this kind of continuum, moving from consideration of creation to God's word, to our response, our spiritual response to both. The key aspect in terms of consideration of ecology and creation care, the key aspect is this idea that in some sense the world in which we live, the environment of which we are a part, proclaims God's character and it proclaims something of God's glory.

Look at these initial verses of Psalm 19.

*The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies
proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour
forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech; they use no words; no sound is
heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the
earth, their words to the ends of the world.*

You've got this really powerful image of the missional impact of creation as it reflects God's glory to all human beings across the globe. So there's some sense in which the way in which God has made the world of which we are a part, it reflects his character, it reflects his being. And therefore it has a missional impact. It testifies to who God is.

And of course, this has implications for us as we think about creation care, because, of course we want this world in which we live to reflect God's goodness, to reflect God's glory to reflect God's great power and artistry and beauty, the beauty of his character.

We want that reflected as fully as possible in this world in which we live. So there's this powerful connection

between the way in which the world is made, the way in which the world is, and how that that reflects God's glory. The movement into the second part of the psalm, so we move from this consideration of creation and the created order, to reflection on the beauty of God's word. And what we see here is these terms that that point just to the the rightness and the goodness and the beauty that comes from God's word.

And I think there's a relationship between these two stanzas. So God establishes his ways for us in his word, but he has also established his ways for us within creation.

Theologians often talk about the created order, that there are certain things that are inescapable, so the seasons will pass, whether we want them to or not. The sun will rise again tomorrow, whether we want it to or not. God has instilled his ways. He's instilled his order to some extent within within creation. And part of the task of humanity of course, is that just as we find truth, human fulfillment in following the ways of scripture, so also we we find true human fulfilment in in finding the right ways to live in this world, which God has given us as a good gift.

And then the third section of the psalm is this prayer of both confession and dependence, so the psalmist asks the rhetorical question:

*Who can discern his own errors? And then prays:
Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me.*

And then he finishes with this call, this cry, this profound desire that the words of his mouth and the meditations of his heart would be pleasing in God's sight. And then he calls upon the Lord who is his rock and his redeemer. And so there's a real voice of human weakness at the end of the psalm, I think this is often the way that we can feel when we think about climate change, we can feel quite powerless. But there is a reminder here that we pray to a God who is firm and established, the God who is our rock and who is our redeemer.

And so the psalmist here in his prayer calls upon God in all of his strength, and he calls for his redemptive action. And that action applies every bit as much to this world in which we live as it does to us as his people.

Psalm 24.

Of David. A psalm.

*The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it;
for he founded it on the seas and established
it on the waters.*

*Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord,
who may stand in his holy place?*

*The one who has clean hands and a pure heart
who does not trust in an idol or swear
by a false god.*

*They will receive blessing from the Lord
and vindication from God their Saviour.*

*Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face,*

God of Jacob.

*Lift up your heads,
you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors
that the King of glory may come in.*

Who is this King of glory?

*The Lord strong and mighty,
the Lord mighty in battle.*

*Lift up your heads, you gates,
lift them up, you ancient doors, that
the King of glory may come in.*

*Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty—
he is the King of glory.*

The third psalm that we're thinking about is Psalm 24, a psalm which connects the ideas of ecology and ethics, but also the idea of ecology and anthropology. This psalm profoundly links our care for the environment with our care for people. The very first verse of this psalm makes that absolutely clear. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. The earth is Yahweh's and everything in it.

And then the second line, the second line of the parallelism, explains to us that the psalmist has in mind that the whole earth belongs to the Lord, the whole world belongs to the Lord. And in some sense, so does the whole of humanity, all who live in it. And of course, verse 1 of Psalm 24 makes a very profound link between creation care and care for other human beings within this world.

So the earth belongs to the Lord is a very all-encompassing phrase here. He reminds us as readers,

it reminds us as Christians that this earth is not ours. We have been given it to steward, we have been given it to look after. But it belongs to the Lord and it belongs to him alone. It is his, and we have responsibilities to him in order to care for this world.

But this first verse in Psalm 24 also reminds us of the link between creation care and care for people. Just as we're told that the earth, the world belongs to the Lord so we're reminded that all who live in it belong to him. And therefore, as his people, we have a very profound responsibility to care for the world, because this is an expression of our care for others.

And this is why Tearfund has been so involved in campaigning against climate change, why Tearfund has been so involved in the drive to encourage churches to care for the environment. Because very early on, Tearfund recognised that climate change was adversely affecting the poorest communities of this world in which we live. And therefore we have a responsibility with regard to creation care, because we have a responsibility to care for humanity.

The second aspect of this psalm draws a link between approach, entering into God's presence, and ethics:

Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god.

And of course, the idea of ethical purity as the necessary requirement for approach to a holy God has always been problematic for us as human beings.

In the Old Testament, this meant that God's people had to make sacrifices and offerings to him to be able to approach his holy presence. Living this side of the cross, we acknowledge that Jesus has made that sacrifice for us once and for all, but that sacrifice is necessary for us to be able to come into his presence, to draw near to him. But we have that assurance of sins forgiven, and therefore we can draw near. We can approach him in prayer. And of course, that's vital as we consider the

ecological task, as we consider our responsibilities with regard to climate change and campaigning against climate change. Because we're reminded here in the third part of the psalm that we draw near and we approach a God who is mighty, a God who is strong, a God who is able to get things done that we could never get done in our own strength.

Just look at some of the language that we encounter towards the end of Psalm 24.

Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is he, this king of glory? The Lord Almighty— he is the King of glory.

And we see this strong emphasis on divine strength, God's great power, note the language of strength and might. Mighty in battle. The Lord Almighty. That phrase, the Lord Almighty, at the very end of Psalm 24 in the King James version that was translated as the Lord of Hosts. The idea being that God is the Lord who commands heavenly armies. And of course the reminder to us as his people is that he is the God who is able to get things done because he is the Lord who is mighty in battle. He is the Lord who commands the heavenly hosts.

And I sometimes feel that when confronted with the vastness of our responsibility with regard to climate care, when we consider the vastness of the task of reversing climate change, we can sometimes feel powerless. We can sometimes feel that it's more than we could ever do. It's more than we could ever take on. And of course, the truth of the matter is that that is absolutely true. It is more than we could ever do. And yet we're reminded here in Psalm 24 that we that we pray to the Lord of hosts. We pray to the one who is mighty in battle, and therefore, as Christians, as people of prayer, we are never powerless because we pray to the one who is able to get things done. Amen.

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