

Bible Study on Psalm 8

“An Awesome God, An Awesome Responsibility”

(The text below is from my original translation in *Psalms for Children*,
published by Prospective Press, 2016)

O Lord, our God,
How awesome is your name in all the world!
Your glory goes way beyond the stars!

From the lips of babies and toddlers praise rings out,
Drowning out the voices of your enemies and non-believers.

When I look into the heavens at nighttime
and see the work of your fingers—
The moon and stars and planets that you set in orbit,
I wonder, “Who am I, little ol’ me?
What makes you think about me God?
Why do you love and care for me so much?”

Yet you have crowned me with glory and honor,
Put me in charge of your creation,
All the birds in the sky,
All the sheep, cows, and horses,
All the fish in the sea and the ponds,
Everything on earth is under my care!
Wow!
O Lord, Our God,
How awesome is your name in all the world.

Other Texts: Genesis 1:26-28, Leviticus 17, Deuteronomy 14, Romans 8:20-22

Main Idea: An awesome God has given us an awesome responsibility

Target Student: Adult

Author: Don Gordon

Other Sources: Richter, Sandra, *Stewards of Eden: What the Bible Says about the Environment and Why it Matters*, published by InterVarsity Press, 2020.

I. An Awesome God

Question: Reflect back on a feeling of awe you have experienced while in nature. What were you seeing or hearing which elicited a feeling of awe? Share your own experience while giving your students time to recall their own.

Over the course of my life, I've had the opportunity to explore new lands and revisit familiar ones. One of those explorations was to Haiti in the Caribbean Sea and where I could see the night sky without the hindrance of city lights. The stars in the sky are so brilliant from a Haiti mountain top you almost feel as if you could touch them. And yet, I know in my mind that the absolute closest star, the Alpha Centauri, is 4.3 light years away, or 25.3 trillion miles. This is the nearest star, not the farthest. So, if I could travel, the speed of light, or 186,000 miles per second, then I could arrive at this star in 4.3 years. What an awesome God to fling into space lights so far apart in distance, and yet close enough I have the sensation of touching them with the fingers of my imagination.

Then there was my first experience scanning the vastness of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. When I first stepped to the edge of the canyon and beheld the magnitude and majesty of that giant, indescribable crater puncturing God's earth I could only gasp in awe. There at Mather's Point, I stood before this geological monument to the God of the universe. The scientists tell me this scene took 5-6 million years to form. What an awesome God to take such meticulous time to reveal a glimpse of his glory for us, the crown of his creation.

And then there have been those times my family traveled down Highway 70 to Morehead City to see and touch the Atlantic Ocean. There the mysterious gravitational forces resonating back and forth between the moon and the earth keep the waves moving in and out, day after day, year after year, for literally billions of years with no stopping. Like everyone else, I enjoyed the sting of that first cold chill when your body is hit by the first wave. And then I would wait for just the right wave and try to ride the boogie board all the way to the shore. It's an incredible feeling to be beaten to a pulp by waves crashing into your body and yet feel relaxed at the same time. What an awesome God to create a world where the steadfastness of the tides can be predicted to the minute day after day.

I now teach at a private university in the mountains of North Carolina and I'm learning how an increasing number of students of coming to the university with no religious affiliation. They are called the "Nones" because of this lack

of connection to any faith tradition—Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. The Nones are the fastest growing religious demographic in the country. Some of them are agnostic, others are atheist and still others use the now trending phrase “spiritual, but not religious.” Despite this distance from religious life, there is one thing they almost all have in common: experiences of awe. They can’t put their finger on it, they don’t have religious language for it, they aren’t familiar with the religious categories like “revelation” or “epiphany,” but they have some sense that they have encountered something larger than themselves, something transcendent, something that is mysterious and beyond words. It could be

A brilliant starry evening in the mountains or a desert,
The convergence of Jupiter and Saturn,
The birth of a calf or goat or even puppies,
The birth of their own child,
Experiencing music that takes away their breath,
The death of a parent.
Wild flowers growing on the side of a rock.

(What are some of your experiences with awe?)

The Psalmist is giving expression to this universal experience we describe with the word “awe.” The Psalmist is identified as David, King of Israel, once nothing more than a shepherd boy. Where was David when he first penned or was inspired to write this psalm? I can imagine him on one of the Judean hillsides, outside tending the sheep, or perhaps just remembering those idyllic days of his youth. The sheep are safely penned for the evening. He lies down and crumples a cloak for a pillow and puts it on a rock. He crosses his arms and folds them behind his head and gazes into the night sky. There are no city lights. He scans the black night dotted with stars like pin pricks in a piece of paper. His thoughts go into the vault of Holy Scripture his people have carried with them and he recalls the first words of the book of Genesis:

Bereshit bara elohim eth hashamim w’eth h’arets.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

He is overwhelmed with the glory of God’s creation. He is awed by the thought of God speaking these brilliant lights into existence. He is humbled as he considers his place in such a vast universe. The compilers of the Hebrew psalter make this psalm number eight in their list but the very first song of praise in the text. It remains the only psalm totally directed to God in a form of prayer.

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name.....You have set your glory..... You have ordained praised. When I consider the work of your fingers. You. You. You. David is observing the sky but his heart is drawn into a personal conversation with God. He is contemplating the glory of God and offering this Almighty Creator a personal prayer, a hymn of praise. He begins and ends the hymn with the same refrain of praise: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” He is awed into a spontaneous song of worship. And thankfully, he pens the words that pour out of his heart, so they can become a means for us to praise this same Heavenly Creator.

Back in 1969, this psalm of praise was the first to reach the moon by way of Apollo 11. The Apollo 11 mission team had emblazoned messages onto a silicon disk from 73 nations, including a message from the Vatican. The Vatican’s message was simply this text from Psalm 8 as offer of praise to God in another tiny corner of his creation. It was a way to communicate to any other beings in the universe our belief in an awesome God.

II. An Awesome Responsibility

One of the interesting results of God’s revealing some awesome aspect of his nature throughout the Scriptures is that God doesn’t allow it to end there. Inevitably, when God reveals himself to humanity, he follows with a command of a charge. When God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush and even gave Moses a name, “I am who I am,” he then charged Moses to go to Pharaoh and deliver God’s people from bondage. When God gave a son to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, he then commanded them and all their descendants to obey all their commands forevermore. When Jesus called his disciples a new way of living, he told them to pick up their crosses daily and follow him. Anytime God shows up and reveals himself in a dramatic way through a bush, a son or a rescue, he is about to command some kind of responsibility.

In this Psalm, David moves from expressing awe to relating the awesome responsibility that has become his. The transition comes in verse 6: “*You made them [human beings] rulers over the works of your hands.*” My translation of this text for children was, “Put me in charge of your creation.” The Hebrew word is translated “rulers” or “put in charge” is *mashal*, which means “to rule over, have dominion over, reign.” The word was often used to describe how the kings of Israel were to “rule over” the people. Joseph was introduced to his brothers, in surprise fashion, as one who “ruled over” all Egypt. It’s clear then, the word conveys a great source of authority. Of course, God remains as the one

with absolute sovereignty and ultimate control in the destiny of his creation. He is the granter to kings and queens, their dominion over their subjects. In this case, God has authorized humanity to rule in his stead in practical day to day operations.

It reminds us of Gen 1:26 & 28, which uses a synonym, *radah*.

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them **have dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Gen 1:26)*

*And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and **have dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen 1:28)*

Sandra Richter, in *Stewards of Eden: What the Bible Says about the Environment and Why it Matters*, gives us insight into the meaning of being made in the image of God and how that connects to the idea of power and authority. Her expertise in Ancient Near East cultures, including Israel, allows us to see what could have been a common understanding of what it meant to have the image of a sovereign. The image bearers are made ambassadors for the king, given authority to speak and act in the sovereign power of the king. In the opening chapter of Genesis, God is laying out a blueprint for how his creation will operation. She says, "In essence, woman and man are the embodiment of God's sovereignty in the created order. Here, male and female are appointed as God's custodians, his stewards over a staggeringly complex and magnificent universe, because they are his royal representatives." The earth then, is not something for humankind to exploit for greedy purposes. It is the place to be caretakers for God and the generations of humans who follow.

Richter provides another analogy of God putting humans in charge of his creation. She described it as a suzerain and his vassal, a landowner and a land caretaker. It's as if God, the landowner, gives us a land grant and told to take care of it like he would take care of it like he was there. The bottom line is: All of this is God's property, but we are given temporal possession of it and commanded to care for it as God would care for it. We are accountable to God for how we take care of the earth.

Question: How does it feel to have that much power?

Practically speaking, what do you think this "dominion" requires of us?

III. A breakdown between our awesome experience and our awesome responsibility.

The Christian community knows, all too well, the transition from Genesis 1 to Genesis 3. Genesis 1 is the blueprint of creation. In it the characters and stage are developed. The backdrop is put in place. The setting is a beautiful creation governed by the movement of lights in the sky, the flow of waters through the lands, and the activity of creatures that creep, crawl and cascade across the earth.

Then Gen 3 happens. The tragic and all too familiar story of Adam and Eve choosing autonomy over accountability. Adam and Eve, typecast for all humans of every age choose to go their own way rather than follow God's instructions. They exploit the land rather than tend to it. They act in greed, taking fruit from the tree they were instructed to leave alone. It wasn't like they didn't have other options. They had plenty of food. But instead of living within the blueprint plans of God, they overextended into an arena to satisfy a short-term desire, rather than key their focus on the long-term plans God had for them. And because they sinned, chose autonomy over accountability, not only did they suffer. All creation suffered. Their autonomous actions had disastrous consequences for all of God's creation.

In his magnum opus, the Apostle Paul, connected Adam and Eve's sin to the ongoing sufferings of creation. On account of humanity's embrace of autonomy over accountability all creation was subjected to futility of frustration: "*For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.*" (Rom. 8:20) That is an interesting phrase the apostle used,frustration.

What underlines frustration? Why do we get frustrated? Usually, it is because we can't do what we want to do. We can't do what we used to do? Frustration is something that follows us around from birth to the grave. My two-year old grandson has a plastic cube with holes in it of varying shapes—circles, ovals, squares, rectangles, pentagons. There are plastic pieces that correspond to these holes and it's his job to put the right piece in the right hole. A circle looks a lot like an oval. A square is not that different from a rectangle. He has fun with this cube when he has success and can put the right piece in the right opening. Yet, he will get frustrated if one of the pieces isn't going in. This occurs when he has the wrong piece, trying to force it into a space that is just not going to work or when he has the right piece and hasn't positioned it in just the exact way. He's

frustrated because he knows these pieces are supposed to fit, but something just isn't right.

Frustration isn't for the young only. We get frustrated as we get older, don't we? Our arthritis prevents us from opening a jar of pickles. Our knees prevent us from running or playing tennis. The strength of the heart muscle means we can't hike mountains like we used to. Our memory fades and we can't remember where we laid our keys, or worse we can't remember a friend's name. We're frustrated because this isn't the way it's supposed to be.

The earth is frustrated because the way it is, isn't the way it is supposed to be. Did you know that creation has feelings? Not only has the earth been frustrated, the creation itself has been groaning. Paul wrote, "*We know the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time*" (Rom. 8:22). If you've ever delivered a baby or been present at the delivery, you can grasp the image Paul is presenting. The frustration has moved to pain, deep pain that causes the creature to moan and groan in travail. The word Paul uses translated as "groaning" actually utilized a prefix indicating the pain is shared by another. It's unclear if Paul is indicating that humankind and the earth are suffering together or if Paul is revealing that God is also groaning on account of the pain suffered by his creation. It wouldn't be the first time the Bible indicates that God has feelings. We remember, for example, how God regretted he made humanity in the first place prior to the flood story in Genesis (6:6 particularly). We can recall how God felt deep concern for the Hebrews when he witnessed their bondage in Egypt (Ex. 2:25). Their cries went up to him and he was moved with compassion to act on their behalf. It would not be out of character at all, for God to be groaning with his creation who is under duress.

IV. How is creation frustrated and groaning?

If creation is groaning, then what does that mean. How is creation groaning? What aspects of creation are suffering? Look back at Psalm 8:7 to see who humanity is responsible for: "*all the flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.*" In other words, we are responsible for caring for the domesticated and undomesticated animals, the fish in the sea and rivers, the birds that fly in the air and those that strut on the ground. We have been given the awesome responsibility to care for the animals the way God would approve.

One of the biggest problems we face in modern society is how disconnected we are from our food sources. Our knowledge is mostly confined to the cost of our meat products. We only know how much our bacon cost or what the price of pork chops are at the grocery store. And yet this is merely carrying out our roles as consumers, while neglecting our role of stewardship. Do we think about how the animals are treated in the pork, beef and poultry industries in our world, or are we only concerned about the final product, what makes its way to the food market and onto our dinner tables? Does it matter how the pigs are treated, as long as we have a good price for bacon? Does it matter how we treat the pigs since they are “only animals”?

We all remember the 10 Commandments. The fourth and longest commandment deals with the Sabbath, where humans are told to rest on the seventh day. Interestingly, it doesn't say anything about resting in order to worship that day. The only command is to rest. It was a human resource stipulation revealing the wisdom of God long before studies were made on the need for rest and rhythm in the human lifecycle. What is so often overlooked, however, is God's call for the animals to rest as well: *“On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor you son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals.” (Ex 20:8)*. God is commanding that the stewards of creation make sure the animals find rest as well. Animals have nervous systems that need rejuvenation in order to function well, just like humans. Here, we are peaking behind the curtain to learn that God cares for animals. God is an animal lover!

This is a more significant and far-reaching teaching in Scripture than we normally consider. Care for the animals was a precondition for building the ark, providing a space for the animals to escape the judgment just like Noah's family. Jesus himself revealed God's love and care for the creatures when he said in the Sermon on the Mount,

“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Mt 6:26).

Our interpretation of this text inevitable is anthropocentric, human-centered. It's clear what Jesus is teaching about us. Don't worry about tomorrow. But the underlying context is that God loves and cares for the birds of the air.

Perhaps the clearest demonstration of this is an odd law recorded in Deut. 14:21, *“Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk.”* Why? Milk from its mother is what gives a young goat life. The goat can't live without its mother's milk. There were no artificial means to feed a young goat in those days. The cruelest of acts would be to cook a young goat in the milk from its mother. The

nation of Israel was to be have a community that treated its domestic livestock with dignity. Yes, they would be slaughtered for sacrifice and food, but they would be allowed to live with dignity until the time of their sacrifice for humanity.

V. Factory Farming

In this context, let's think about the pork, poultry and beef industry created by humans. The text below is an extended excerpt from Sandra Richter's Stewards of Eden:

"America's most lucrative agricultural product is pigs. Confinement for these animate (and highly intelligent" creatures has been distilled into an exact science: twenty 230 pound animals per 7.5 foot square pen. The metal-barred pens in which America's 74.6 million pigs are presently housed may be found all over our country systematically mapped out within enormous metal frame structures—the most popular being the 40, 60, and now 122 foot-wide "wean-to-finish" buildings that confine these creatures from birth to slaughter. Here pigs live out their entire lives housed on concrete and metal-grated flooring in climate-controlled conditions, never actually exposed to the light of day."

Richter goes on to talk about the omnipresence of antibiotics fed to these animals because the conditions are so ripe for disease. Fertility drugs are administered to the sows so they produce more often and with more piglets per litter than is natural. When premature deaths occur the pigs are removed, ground up and served as feed to the other pigs. Can you see the application of Deut. 14:21: "*Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk*"?

This is disturbing information for most consumers to consider, which is why our instincts are to not think about the process and only think about the price of our meat produces. Similar stories could be told about the poultry and beef industries as well. Is there anything the average person can do. How can our faith in God and in recognition of our stewardship of the animals lead us to act?

One thing we can do is become informed shoppers. We can look for organic, grass-fed, animal welfare approved, certified humane fed and raised animal products. The market will respond to the actions of consumers. And if consumers become more informed buyers, as a means to live holy lives, we can come closer to the blueprint laid out in the Garden of Eden and spelled out in the nation of Israel.

Questions:

- *What is your reaction to what you have read about the pork industry?
- *What is the responsibility of the faith community to the pork industry?
- *Why do you think it's so hard for us to learn about this, much less do anything about it?

VI. From Awesome God to Awesome Responsibility

David has demonstrated awareness of an awesome God and an awesome responsibility. Our awesome God has given humans a weighty task. The call in the modern world is moving away from ignorant consumer to awestruck steward. Our amazing God has created a universe that is mind-blowing, we can't begin to get our minds, much less our hands around it. It is natural, inevitable that we praise God as we stand before his presence in awe.

And we can remind ourselves we have not been created to be mere consumers. We have been raised to be stewards, vassals in a land grant transaction where our duty is to God and all his creation and creatures. This will cost us a little more money as we vote with our pocketbooks for a more humane food production system. It cost the Israelites more money as well. They could have saved time and money by slaughtering their animals in their own pastures and kept all the meat for themselves. Instead, they took their flocks to the priest and sacrificed them at the city gates and offered part of their sacrifice to God through the priests as a means of acknowledging God as their Lord and Master. This was the tribute they brought to God, recognizing the land and their flocks were ultimately God's anyway. It cost them more, but it was a means to recognize God as their sovereign and their stewardship over the slaughter and use of their animals was a holy activity marking them as more than consumers. They were stewards called to rule with the compassion of a sovereign God.

Questions

1. Some argue that God intended for humans to be vegetarians, when the fall in Genesis 3 changed everything and precipitated a meat-eating diet. What are your thoughts about this?

2. Read Leviticus 17. What do these stipulations tell you about how Israel was to consider the slaughter of animals? Why do you think it matter where an animal was slaughtered for sacrifice?

Activities

1. Find a quiet setting away from the man-made lights of a city and spend some time gazing into the universe and contemplating the truths of Psalm 8

2. Do your own research into the beef, pork and poultry industry in your country. If you're in a small group, share your reflections on this with your group

3. Coordinate a trip for city-bound, under-privileged children and/or youth into a natural setting so they have a chance to experience the awe of God's creation. Let them hear Psalm 8 in this setting.

4. Make a commitment to become a more informed shopper, not merely a consumer of the cheapest priced products you can find.