

"God Created Wonderful Things"

Printed Text: Psalms 104:1-13

Background Scripture: Psalms 104

Devotional Reading: Psalms 104:31-35

Psalm 104:1-13

¹ Praise the Lord, my soul. Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty. ² The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters. He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind. ⁴ He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants. ⁵ He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved. ⁶ You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. ⁷ But at your rebuke the waters fled, at the sound of your thunder they took to flight; ⁸ they flowed over the mountains, they went down into the valleys, to the place you assigned for them. ⁹ You set a boundary they cannot cross; never again will they cover the earth. ¹⁰ He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. ¹¹ They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. ¹² The birds of the sky nest by the waters; they sing among the branches. ¹³ He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.

TODAY'S AIM

- **Facts:** to perceive the greatness of God by noting His demonstration of it through natural phenomena.
- **Principle:** to teach that God is worthy of our worship for who He is and what He does.
- **Application:** to encourage students to enhance their worship by looking for signs of God's power in the natural world.

Introduction

Worship is a marvelous privilege, isn't it? Participating in various styles of worship can enrich our Christian experience. Sadly, however, Christians have been known to quarrel over worship styles. Someone may go so far as to label a certain worship style as "worldly."

Too often lost in this kind of bickering is the realization that God's people frequently have borrowed stylistically from the surrounding culture. For example, some of your church's youth may go to Christian summer camp and sing Christian lyrics that are set to the music of familiar secular compositions. The songs of the church frequently echo the songs of the marketplace. We fool ourselves if we think otherwise.

We also fool ourselves if we think the form and style of our own worship should transplant easily into faraway cultures. Most of us instinctively realize that the music of organ and piano translates poorly into the rhythm instruments and reed pipes of African and Amazonian jungles. It is admittedly difficult for many of us to accept the similar task of remolding a worship style of the 1950s into the multimedia experience of Western pop culture. Perhaps some biblical perspective would help a little!

Lesson Background

Our text for today is Psalm 104, a beautiful recapitulation of the creation. Although we cannot consider the entire psalm today, take some time this week to read it through while keeping your finger in Genesis 1. The parallels are obvious, and the writer's intent may be to set Genesis 1 to music. If so, then Psalm 104 is an interpretative celebration of Genesis 1.

The original concept for the psalm, though, apparently came from a pagan source. Within Egyptian mythology of the fourteenth century B.C. is found Pharaoh Akhenaton's Great Hymn to the Sun, a hymn to a fictitious sun god. The fact that the pagan sun hymn came first means that the writer of Psalm 104 would be the borrower. Yet the two are not identical! Their conclusions, the focus of their tribute, and Psalm 104's dependence on Genesis 1 assured the ancient Hebrew that there would be no confusion between the two compositions.

Obviously, the writer of Psalm 104 wanted to communicate something. Don't all writers want to do that? So perhaps he decided to borrow from the Egyptian sun hymn because his culture was already familiar with it. In the process the psalmist changed that hymn's glorification of the sun (a part of the creation) into a glorification of the true God (the creator). We should not find this procedure surprising. The apostle Paul, for his part, was able to use pagan thoughts and philosophy in his sermons and letters to uphold Christ (see Acts 17:28; 1 Corinthians 15:33; and Titus 1:12).

Wonders of the Air (v. 1-4)

The psalmist gives a charge to himself to bless the Lord. God has blessed his people in many ways. Many people believe that it is impossible to bless someone who already owns everything. After all, what can we ever give to the Lord.

Throughout the Bible and even today, God desires a relationship with mankind. We bless the Lord through our worship. Though we cannot add to His greatness or provide Him with the things He lacks, we can honor Him by having a relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. When we glorify Him, we bless him. Here, the word "bless" means "praise." God desires the praises of His people, praise that springs from their innermost heart and being.

The phrases bless the Lord and "praise the Lord" appear dozens of times throughout the Bible. The majority of the occurrences are in the psalms. God is worthy of all honor and respect, and we should give Him just that every chance we get. After all, God has been so good to us. He even sent Jesus to die for our sins so that we all can have a personal relationship with Him. When we think about this, we shouldn't be able to hold back our praise. It should naturally spring out.

1. How is it that we are able to bless God? (v. 1)

As we look towards the heavens, we can't help but be impressed with God's greatness. Whether it's the sunrise early in the morning, the sunset in the evening, or the wondrous stars at night, they give a glimpse of God's majesty. Words are inadequate for describing such majesty, but the psalmist makes a great effort in trying to give us an idea of God's majesty. The heavens are like the glorious clothing that a king might wear, clothing that speaks eloquently of the ruler's greatness.

When God created the world, He declared, "*Let there be light*" (Gen 1:3). Throughout scripture, light is a potent symbol of God's power and holiness (cf. Isa. 9:2; John 1:5-9; 8:12; 1 Tim 6:15-16; 1 John 1:5). When we observe the brightness of the heavens, it is like seeing the divine light that surrounds God and hides Him from our view.

The metaphor in the first part of verse 2 dealt with clothing. The second part deals with a building. Here, the heavens are like God's dwelling place. God is said to dwell in the heavens (123:1), although He is in fact above the heavens and the earth (113:5-6). But the heavens present an illusion of God's glorious dwelling place, and this vastness is like a gigantic "*garment*" (104:2), or tent cover, under which His glory is displayed. The term "garment" is the same one used to denote the curtains of the tabernacle (cf. Exo. 26:1-13). This was the place where God dwelt among His people.

2. What metaphors did God use to describe the greatness of the heavens? (v. 2)

Many commentators have noted the parallels between this psalm and the Creation account in Genesis 1. "We will not be far wrong if we think of Psalm 104 as a poetic reflection on the more factual account in Genesis" (Psalms, Baker). After creating light, God next made the firmament that rests above the curtain beneath (Ps. 104:2; cf. Gen. 1:6-8). How amazing that God could "spread the vast canopy...as easily as a man pitches a tent" (Phillips, Exploring the Psalms, Loizeaux).

The first part of verse 3 continues the metaphor of a building. The psalmist now referred to the "beams" of God's habitation, a term that reminds us of solidity and strength, lest we think of the imagery of tent curtains point to an insubstantial or precarious creation.

In Genesis 1, the firmament that God made divided the waters. It is on "the waters which were above the firmament" (v. 7) that God placed the beams of His habitation. There are various ideas as to what these "waters" were. These "waters" could be the clouds, where evaporated water becomes rain.

The heavens are awe-inspiring in themselves, but the psalmist makes it clear that they do God's bidding. It is He who rules the winds and the clouds as they manifest His power and execute His judgment. "His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form, And dark is His path on the wings of the storm" (Grant). Like the psalmist, we should take great joy in the Creator. God's power is something that we should have great delight in.

3. How does our text parallel Genesis 1?

The reference to angels in verse 4 appears odd at glance. Up to this point, the psalmist refers to the natural world. Now the psalmist refers to the spiritual beings. The word translated "messengers" could also be translated "angels," and the word "spirits" can be rendered "winds." This verse could thus be continuing the thought of the preceding verse about the forces of nature serving God. This seems to better fit the overall theme of the psalm.

The author of Hebrews referred to this verse in his discussion of Christ's superiority over the angels (Heb 1:7; cf. v. 14; Ps. 103:20-22). Maybe the uniting thought here is that "the Lord is surrounded by His servants, whether they be created like the angels or be powers inherent in His created order (winds, lightning)" (VanGemen, in Gaebel, ed., The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Zondervan).

4. Why does the book of Hebrews refer to Psalm 104:4?

Wonders of the Earth (v. 5-9)

God's greatness is demonstrated by the fact that He could create this imposing planet that will endure for as long as He sees fit. The earth is subject to change, but the earth was built to last.

As we all know, the earth is the only planet in the universe that can sustain life. No other planet can sustain life of any kind. The earth is the perfect distance from the sun. It rotates at exactly the right speed.

The atmosphere in the earth is perfect for life. This is no accident. God paid attention to every detail when He designed this planet. This defeats theories like Big Bang and evolution.

5. How does the earth reflect the greatness of God (v. 5)?

When it comes to God, nothing happens by accident. God has a purpose for making things happen or allowing things to happen. We can always be certain that God is in control.

This verse refers to the point where God had covered the earth with water (cf. Gen 1:9). Even the peaks of the earth's highest mountains were covered with water. Then God commanded the waters to move and uncover certain parts of the earth at exactly the right time (Psa. 104:7).

God does not act on a whim. He had a plan for where the waters should be and where the dry land should appear. The Apostle Paul stood before the intellectuals of Athens and told them that God had appointed the boundaries for man's habitation (Acts 17:22-26). This was a thousand years after the psalmist wrote this psalm. God knew where man needed to be and what man needed. He placed the waters and dry land in the appropriate places.

6. Why did God place water in certain places? Was this a random act, or was there a purpose in their placement? (v. 9)

Let's look at verse 9 of this psalm. It tells us that the waters "turn not again to cover the earth." This seems like the promise God gave Noah after He flooded the earth to punish sinful mankind (cf. Gen 9:11). However, this does not fit with the entire context of this psalm. It is really a poetic expression of Genesis 1. The boundaries of the sea are a basic principle of creation that has always remained in force. The Flood was an exception. It was like a Second Creation, a starting over, after which the sea's boundaries were put back in place, not to be violated again.

7. Why does the lesson text more likely refer to God's original creation than to the Flood?

Wonders of Life (v. 10-13)

This section paints a beautiful picture of God's care for His creatures: "Thy bountiful care what tongue can recite?...It seems streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,/ And sweetly distills in the dew and the rain" (Grant). This refers to how God uses water to care for His creatures.

The psalmist understands that God's concern extends beyond man. God also provides for the animal kingdom with water. "Every beast of the field" (v. 11) refers not only to domesticate animals, but to wild animals as well. Mankind tends to have difficulty in providing for wild animals, but God provides for them very well.

It is a shame that a lot of animals have become extinct at man's hands. Greed has terminated many species of animals. Even though God has given man dominion over animals, He does not want mankind to abuse them. He expects us to take good care of them. There are many animals on the endangered list. It is up to mankind to ensure that another species does not enter the extinct list.

8. Why do you think God cares about birds and animals? Does that tell us anything about how we should care for these creatures?

The psalmist called attention to the singing of the birds. We must not forget that we are dealing with a psalm of praise. The birds sing in joy because God created so well. John Wesley declared, "The music of birds was the first song of thanksgiving which was offered from the earth, before man was formed"

(quoted in Spurgeon). And the sound of birds singing is a great comfort to us, calling to mind the beauty of all that God has made. The world can be a nasty place at times, but the sound of birds is an enduring reminder of God's presence.

9. Why does the psalmist mention the singing of the birds? (v. 12)

God is said to have built his "chambers" in the sky above (cf. v. 3), and it is from there that He sends the rain. The rain falls upon the "hills," or mountains, and the streams that begin there proceed to serve the needs of God's creatures.

The "*fruit of his works*" (v. 13), then, could refer to the water that comes from the rain God sends. Or it could be a broader reference to the vegetation that grows as a result of the rain and provides food for man and beast. The latter view is more likely in light of what follows in verses 14 and 15, which could be understood as an elaboration of this phrase. The word "satisfied" suggests the goodness and bounty of God. As we look on and think on what God has done, let's join the psalmist in praise.

Conclusion

Science and faith should not be at loggerheads. Both are means of exploring God's relationship with His creation, especially His relationship with us. Unfortunately, though, they do conflict at times. When that conflict occurs, both Christians and non-Christians can make the same mistake in deferring to ever-changing science over never-changing Scripture.

Certainly, committed Christians can and do disagree over the specifics of the creation. What cannot be avoided, though, is the clear foundation laid by those simple words from Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Any explanation of the origins of the heaven and the earth that omits the presence of the creator is fatally flawed at the outset; it has no value.

As our text today makes quite clear, the implications of removing God from creation are far-reaching. The very God praised by the psalmist is the creator God, the God who laid the foundations of the earth, the God of eternity past. If God is not the creator of the heaven and the earth, then very real questions about who He is--and indeed if He is--must be asked. Also, we note that the Bible does not recognize a god who is part of creation; rather, any god that is part of the creation is an idol that has its origins in human thought.

But what about those disagreements between science and Scripture? When such conflict arises, wise students will step back and ask themselves some questions. First, is this truly a disagreement, or is it merely two perspectives of the same issue? The Bible is not a scientific textbook. We can affirm its accuracy while at the same time acknowledging that occasionally the Bible uses figures of speech and poetic imagery to make a point.

Second, is the issue at hand a matter of fact or one of speculation on the part of science? The nuclear "cold fusion" claims of the year 1989 is an example of a scientific mistake. That is not to say that all scientists, or even those particular scientists, deliberately mislead or misinform people. They are human, though, and as well as occasionally being wrong, they suffer from the very human desire to prove themselves. That can lead to excesses, mistakes, and overreaching. (To be fair we should also ask whether an issue at hand is a matter of fact or speculation on the part of the person who is reading Scripture.)

Scripture and science should be understood together. When they disagree, though, the biblical worldview must take precedence. Science, after all, is humanity's attempt to understand creation--created beings analyzing creation. Scripture, however, is God's perspective. It is the creator speaking directly to us.

Given our limited perspective, we should kneel before the one who made Heaven and earth! Only with His guidance can we understand the creation and our role within it.

Prayer

Lord, forgive us for those times when we have let the "wisdom of the wise" pull us away from the wisdom of the ages. Forgive us for those times when we have let the credentials of universities distract us from the creator of the universe. As we consider the earth, the seas, and all contained within them, remind us again of Your hand behind the scenes. Thank You for leaving Your fingerprints all over creation. May the psalmist's joy be ours. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7).