

God's Glory & Human Dignity

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[0 : 0 0] This was a hard week, and I know if you're like me, you're probably feeling pretty exhausted and discouraged right now. For me, among all of the things, all of the challenges, one of the hardest things personally to watch was the moment that President Trump cleared out protesters to make his way to stand in front of St. John's Church and hold up a Bible and have his picture taken.

And to me, this looked like a decision to blatantly use the Bible as a prop for a political, and I was scandalized by that.

And I was deeply frustrated with Christian leaders who praised him for that. And yet, you know, as Christians, when we look at something like that, and as I've prayed about that this week, I've remembered Jesus' words of not focusing so much on the speck in someone else's eye that we neglect the plank in our own.

And as I've thought and prayed more about that, I've come to a pretty difficult realization. And that is one of the biggest problems in our church right now.

And I think, therefore, one of the biggest problems in our society right now is that far too many Christians take the exact same approach to the Bible. We want to hold the Bible up as a kind of symbol, as something that we value, as something even that we defend.

[1 : 2 3] And yet, at the very same time, some of us are simply ignorant of what it actually says, and others willfully choose to ignore the parts that they don't like.

And so, like it or not, as I prayed about it this week, I realized that that photograph of President Trump holding up the Bible in front of that church is in some ways an icon of American Christianity.

And, you know, I was talking to a friend of mine who's a black pastor here in D.C., and I was just offering my support and encouragement and asking him what we as a church could do to support him and his church during these incredibly difficult times.

And his response really caught me off guard. He said, tell your people this, whatever else you do, dig into the Word of God as deeply and as faithfully as you can.

And he said, the only reason we've ever made any progress is because of God's Word. And the only hope we have of seeing any real change or making any more progress in the future will be because of God's Word.

[2 : 2 7] He said, so dig into the Word as deeply and faithfully as you can. And I would never claim to be the arbiter of scriptural truth or the sole accurate interpretator, giving the sole accurate interpretation of the Bible.

But what I would say is that we as a community need to make a commitment to one another. And that is that no matter how things play out over the next few weeks, months, years, that rather than our politics, rather than the 24-hour news cycle, rather than social media, that it would be God's Word that most shapes how we respond, how we conduct ourselves, how we speak, how we act.

And so with that in mind, we're going to spend the next two months as a church community looking at the Psalms. Because if you've ever spent any time in the Psalms, you know this, that there is nothing that can happen, no experience that we might face to which the Psalms do not speak.

The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible, Jesus' prayer book, and they cover the entire spectrum of human experience and emotion. And so we're going to allow the Psalms to guide us through these incredibly tumultuous waters.

And we're going to begin this morning by looking together at Psalm 8, which I hope you will agree, as we look at it more closely, is highly relevant to a lot of the things that are on our minds and hearts right now.

[3 : 51] So first we're going to look at what this Psalm is saying, and then we're going to look a little bit at what it means for us in this particular cultural moment. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and in particular, we thank you for using someone like David to write such a beautiful Psalm.

And we pray that we would not just appreciate this for its literary beauty, but that you would use it surgically in us to open up our hearts, to reveal to us our need for you.

And then we pray that you would use this Psalm to bring us face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, what does Psalm 8 actually say when we look at it?

And one of the first things you notice if you read through it is that this Psalm begins and ends in exactly the same way, with exactly the same words. It says, It begins and ends in praise.

And really, the entire Psalm is a Psalm of praise to God. And this right here would be worth its own sermon, because what it shows us is that all of life, all of existence, all of the universe begins and ends with the praise of God.

[5 : 09] That's the entire reason that all of this is here. It's for God's glory. And yet, in the heart of the Psalm, David poses a question. And this is a deep philosophical question.

In fact, I think it's maybe the most foundational question for human identity in society we can possibly ask. It shapes everything about how we organize ourselves as a society, how we think about politics, economics.

It shapes everything. He says, That's the question.

Now, I know that many of you, like us, have been trying to homeschool your kids.

And I've got a suggestion for a homeschooling activity. Turns out, most models of the solar system are not built to scale. So if you want an activity to do with your kids, and kids, if you're listening, listen up.

[6 : 06] You can build a model of the solar system to scale. It's going to be a little different than some of the other models that you may have seen before. The first thing I want you to do, with your parents' permission, is I want you to go to the freezer and get a bag of frozen peas.

I know it's in there. And get out a pea. That's going to be Earth. And I want you to take Earth over, and I want you to put Earth on your kitchen table. Just somewhere on your kitchen table, or it won't be disturbed. That's Earth.

Now we need a point of reference, and so we're going to put Jupiter down. And so I want you to go get another pea, bring it back, and I want you to start at your kitchen table. And then I want you to just start walking, just in any direction, and you're going to need to walk about 1,000 feet.

And once you've walked 1,000 feet, put the pea down on the ground. Now you know the scale distance between Earth, which is a little green pea, and Jupiter, about 1,000 feet away.

Now we want to go to the kind of edge of our solar system. So I want you to go get another pea, and this is going to represent Pluto. And I want you to start again at your kitchen table, but this time you're going to have to walk just in any given direction about 1.5 miles.

[7 : 0 6] So just walk 1.5 miles down the road, down the sidewalk, with your parents' permission, and set the pea down there. And that's going to be Pluto. And that's really kind of the size of our solar system. And then you may be wondering, how close to scale would the next closest star be?

So let's go get another pea. That's going to represent that star. I want you to start at your kitchen table and just pick a direction. I want you to walk about 10,000 miles. It doesn't have to be exact, but roughly 10,000 miles.

And then set the pea down there. That's how far it is from Earth to the next closest star, if we want to keep all this to scale. And if you think about the size of our solar system that way, and if you think about the size of the distance between our solar system and the next closest solar system, and then you take into consideration the fact that the estimates tell us that there are roughly 200 billion stars in our galaxy alone.

200 billion stars in our galaxy alone. And then if you take into consideration the fact that there are somewhere between 200 billion and 2 trillion galaxies in the observable universe.

And then you take into consideration that we're only able to observe a part of the universe. And that the actual universe is much bigger and getting bigger all the time. Then you can begin to appreciate the vastness of the universe that we live in.

[8 : 3 0] And so David's question is all the more relevant to us because we have a much better understanding than David did of what the universe actually is. When we look at the sun and the moon and the stars, what are we actually contemplating?

Well, it's something of such infinite, extraordinary vastness that no human mind can comprehend it. And so David's question is a good one. When we think about all of this, when we take all of this into consideration, how in the world could God care about human beings?

How in the world could we have any significance in a world like that? And the answer comes in verses 5 through 8. Now, if you know Scripture, you know that these words point us directly back to the very first chapter in the Bible, Genesis chapter 1, in particular verse 26 and following, where it says that God has created human beings in His image.

In His image. Now, in the ancient world, there were a number of cultures and societies that believed in the idea that God's image bearer could be on earth.

And in every case, that would refer to the king or the emperor. So you had a king or an emperor, and in many cultures in the ancient world, they believed that their king, their supreme ruler, was the image, the representation of their God on earth.

[10 : 1 0] But no one anywhere, no one believed what we see in Genesis 1 reflected in Psalm 8. Because this is telling us something very different.

It's telling us that every single human being, from the poorest peasant to the most exalted emperor, every single human being bears the image and the likeness of the God who made them.

Every single human being is crowned with the glory of the God who made them. They bear the image of God on earth. In other words, when God looks out at everything He's made, when God looks at the oceans and the land teeming with life of every kind and variety that He's made, when God looks at the sunsets, when God looks at the Alps, when God looks at the solar system and the galaxies whirling through space, when God takes all of this into account and looks at everything that He's made, His favorite thing, His masterpiece is you and me.

You're His masterpiece. You're God's favorite thing that He has made. Because you're the only thing in existence that uniquely bears His image and bears His glory in the world.

And that's what makes human beings unique. It says that human beings are God's masterpiece. So this is what Psalm 8 is saying. Now, what does that mean?

[11 : 49] And we could go on and on and on about the implications of this, but I just want to draw our attention to three. First, this radically shapes the way we see ourselves.

It radically shapes how we see ourselves. Because, you know, the way we see ourselves, whether we like it or not, has a lot to do with how other people treat us. If people tend to treat us well in life, we tend to feel good about ourselves.

If people don't, we tend to have negative self-perceptions. And, you know, growing up for me, it was interesting. In elementary school, I had a pretty good go of it. I had some friends and felt decently liked by people and my teachers.

And so my sense of myself was that I was a pretty worthwhile person. But everything changed in middle school. My brother and I had to go to a different middle school.

And it was a school where a lot of other kids had known each other for years. And we came in and didn't know anybody. And then to make matters worse, I developed this condition, this eczema on my hands.

[12 : 52] And so they would be really cracked and dry. And it looked pretty bad. My hands looked all flaky. And so one of the kids in sixth grade immediately started a rumor that this was a communicable disease, that if anybody touched me, they would get it as well.

And so that rumor stuck. And so for the next three years, I was more or less an outcast. I never really fit in. I was left out.

I wasn't invited to anything. And there was this running joke that I had this communicable disease and that nobody should touch me or play sports with me or anything like that. And it was amazing to see how my self-image began to change.

It was amazing to see how my confidence just sort of like evaporated. And, you know, if you've experienced this, if you've ever had someone, whether it's kids at school or a parent or a teacher or maybe a romantic partner, if you've ever had anyone treat you like you have no worth, if they do it for long enough, you start to believe them.

And it's really hard to find evidence to the contrary. And, you know, the self-esteem movement comes along. I grew up during the self-esteem movement. And the self-esteem movement says, well, you know what?

[14 : 11] You're special and you're unique and you're awesome. And you just need to love yourself more. You just need to love yourself. And that's where your sense of worth is going to come from. And, you know, I just got to say, that has never worked for me.

It just never worked. You know, you say, why should I love myself? Why? And what's so interesting is that in a secularized society, there is really no answer to that question.

In a secularized society, there is really no objective reason to love yourself at all. If we're just all accidents in a meaningless universe, if we just sort of accidentally arrived here and life has no higher purpose or meaning whatsoever, and the best we can hope for is to maybe pass some of our DNA along so that some future version of ourself can live out their pointless life, what reason is there to care about any of this?

But I think deep down, deep down, we know in our guts that that is not true. I think that most human beings have some deep, innate sense that life does matter, that there is a purpose to this, and that there is a reason that we are important or significant, even though we are such tiny specks in such a vast universe.

And Psalm 8 comes along, and Psalm 8 says, You're right. You do matter. You are significant. In fact, you're God's masterpiece.

[15 : 45] And because you are God's masterpiece, you have an intrinsic, irrefutable worth. It's just who you are. And it's irrefutable.

It can never be taken away. So no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter how you're living your life right now, even if you completely reject the idea of God out of hand, it doesn't matter.

You have inherent, irrefutable worth, simply because you're a human being, simply because you were made by God to bear His image, and you are His masterpiece.

So this truth, if it sinks down into your heart, radically shifts how you see yourself. This truth also radically transforms how we see other people, how we see the people all around us in our lives.

And to take the most relevant example right now, just consider the example of race and how we see people who look different than we do. You know, the modern conception of race, as most of us grew up understanding it, actually emerged during the Enlightenment.

[16 : 55] It's a fairly recent idea, historically speaking. You see, in the Enlightenment, there was a kind of massive paradox in the heart of the Enlightenment. Because on the one hand, you had all of these people, all of these cultural elites, and all of these thought leaders who are out there promoting ideas of human freedom and individual rights, and you have nations being founded and formed with these ideas.

And yet, at the very same time, many of the people who were espousing those ideas owned slaves. And they supported the extermination of native populations in the name of colonization.

And so there's this paradox at the heart of all of this. And the question then arises, well, how do you resolve that paradox? Well, a very elegant solution is to develop a hierarchy based on physical appearance.

Get a little pseudoscience to back that up. And then you can use that hierarchy to justify the oppression of certain people groups by other people groups.

You can even argue, as many people did, that it's in the best interest of those inferior people groups to be under the dominance of the more superior people groups.

[18 : 06] And, of course, we now know that that has no scientific basis whatsoever. But the problem is those ideas captured imaginations. They captured imaginations, and they remain all the way into our present day in very subtle ways.

And so everyone I know, if you ask them, everyone I know believes that racism is a scourge on society and needs to be utterly eradicated. I don't know anybody who does that. I know there are people out there who might disagree with that, but I personally don't know anybody who would disagree with that.

And yet what we need to understand is these post-Enlightenment ideas are very sticky, and they're very subtle, and they remain embedded in our culture, and they have influenced numerous policies over the years that continue to dramatically shape lives today.

And it's true that Christians have been complicit in this. Absolutely. It's true. But again, going back to what we said at the beginning, if we actually dig into Scripture, and if we actually understand what it says, and if we refuse to ignore the parts that we don't like, we realize that Christianity actually has a core theological reason to combat racism on every level.

In fact, I think more than almost any other philosophy or religion or worldview that I'm familiar with, Christianity has a core reason why we should combat racism at every level. And Psalm 8 shows us that reason.

[19 : 31] Here's the real problem with racism. Racism is heresy. It's heresy. It's a heretical doctrine.

It's what you might think of as a heretical anthropology. It's a false doctrine of what it means to be a human being. Human societies have always devised ways to rank order certain people as having more rights or being more significant or more valid than other people groups.

And it seems when you look at history that we're very good at doing this. Skin color is one such way we create these kind of caste systems. Pre- or postnatal is another way that we have made these divisions.

Cognitive ability. Wealth. Level of education. Age. Level of attractiveness. In all of these ways, sometimes sort of formal and official and other times just sort of an informal cultural set of assumptions, we are very good at creating these kind of caste systems of value and significance based on these different factors.

And what we need to understand is caste systems based on any of these things are a slap in God's face. They're a slap in the face to the God who made us. Because God looks at every single human individual and says, That's my masterpiece.

[21 : 01] She bears my image. He's crowned with my glory. That's my masterpiece. How dare you? How dare you create a caste system that diminishes the significance of this human being?

And I think that this is the single most important idea in all of Western civilization. It's the single most important idea in all of Western civilization.

So this radically shapes how we see ourselves. It radically shapes how we see other people. A third and final implication that I want to talk about briefly is that this radically transforms the way we see our enemies.

The way we see our enemies. In Stalinist Russia, around 1937 to 1938, there was what was called the Great Purge or the Great Terror.

And essentially Stalin had come to power and he perceived that he had many people out there who might be his enemies, who might oppose him, who might stand, pose some threat to his political power.

[22 : 07] And so they rounded up and they executed roughly 750,000 people. And then they imprisoned many more in labor camps. And you hear about something like this happening.

You know, 750,000 people. How could that possibly happen? How could the public have been okay with that? Well, the government created a category. Former persons.

Category of former persons. And they applied this category very broadly and very liberally to anyone standing in their way. And what you realize if you look at it is that this is a very intentional way to ensure that the empathy of the public wouldn't be a problem.

Nobody cared when these people were imprisoned or executed because they're not people. They're former people. They're not like me.

They're not like you. They're not people. Now, this is an extreme example, but it's one that we should take note of. Because I think that in many ways, the same kind of thinking happens in our society all of the time.

[23 : 16] I think the tendency in all of us is that when we see someone who we perceive to be our enemy, our opponent, somebody who stands against the things that we value, it's very easy to begin seeing them as less than human.

It's very easy to see them in an increasingly reductionistic way and to see them as increasingly subhuman. And we tend to group people together and create mental categories of people.

And so we say, oh, I know people like you. I know your type. I know the kind of person that you are. And what we're saying is you're not actually an individual. You're a manifestation of a category, and I already know everything I need to know about that category.

And that's essentially dehumanizing. And so we start thinking in categories. We say, well, all black people or brown people are like this.

All white people are like this. All the protesters are doing this. All police officers are like this. You've seen all around D.C. the ACAB that's been spray painted on everything.

[24 : 25] All Trump supporters are like this. All liberals are like this. And we begin to think in these generalized categories. And what happens is we stop seeing people as individual human beings.

And we start seeing them as categories. And that is how things get so polarized. Because we begin to see our opponents, those with whom we disagree, as monsters, as subhuman, as beings who don't have the same rights or the same common sense that we have.

Again, Psalm 8 says you simply cannot do that. Psalm 8 says that each individual is irreducibly complex. And each individual is unimaginably, unfathomably valuable.

And each individual bears the image of God in the world. Is crowned with God's glory. And so what this means is that we have to resist the urge to dehumanize and categorize people.

No matter how much we disagree with them. No matter how much we don't like what they stand for. We have to be relentlessly curious. We have to be relentlessly curious to continue seeing each person as an individual.

[25 : 41] And to give them every opportunity to surprise us. You would be amazed at how often, if you have a posture of relentless curiosity, you would be amazed at how often people will surprise and delight you by defying your expectations.

So these are just some of the implications of Psalm 8. And how Psalm 8 and this truth at the heart of Psalm 8, that we are God's masterpiece, transforms how we think about ourselves, how we think about other people, and how we think about our enemies.

And this is why the gospel is such good news. Because as we talk about the fact that we are God's masterpiece, we also know that so much in our lives falls well short of that title.

And the problem of sin, the problem of our rebellion against God, the problem with the fact that we choose to worship other things in place of God, things like sex or money or power or influence or any of the other things that we worship, the problem with that is that it defaces the masterpiece.

It blurs the image of God in us. And in a way, sin is the most dehumanizing thing of all. And there are four times that Psalm 8 is quoted in the New Testament.

[27 : 01] One is by Jesus himself, and the other three show up in Hebrews 2, 1 Corinthians 15, and Ephesians 1. And in those three places in the New Testament, every single time, in Hebrews, 1 Corinthians, and in Ephesians, every time it's quoted, it's not referring to us.

It's referring to Jesus Christ. It's referring to the fact that Jesus Christ shows us what a true human being looks like. Jesus Christ is the ultimate human being.

He shows us everything a human being should be, what a true image of God looks like in the world, how a true image of God loves and cares for people. And what we realize is that if we want to know how fully human we are, we have to compare ourselves to Jesus Christ.

But because we're God's masterpiece, and because God loves us so much, Jesus was willing to give His life to save and restore our humanity. He was willing to become in every way like us, so that we might become in every way like Him.

That's the truth and the hope of the gospel. There's a beautiful sermon that Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached on Psalm 8, in which he says this, and I'll end with these words.

[28 : 19] Of all the silly, sentimental teachings which have ever characterized any generation, the denial of human sin is one of the worst. Yet man is not made to dwell in the valleys of sin and evil.

Man is made for that which is high and noble. When I see how we fight vicious wars and destroy human life on bloody battlefields, I find myself saying, man is not made for that.

When I see how we live our lives in selfishness and hate, again I say, man is not made for that. When I see how often we throw away the precious lives that God has given us, again I find myself saying, man is not made for that.

My friends, man is made for the stars, created for eternity, born for the everlasting. Man is a child of the Almighty God, born for His everlasting fellowship.

Amen.