

Autumn Communion- Rev John Lachie Macleod

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[0:00] Well, we can turn for a little time to Psalm number 8, a psalm that is described by many scholars as one of the perfect examples of a true song of praise in the way that it lifts our minds so majestically to stretch our understanding of God.

Our understanding of self, our understanding of our humanity, our understanding of who we are and what we are. I know in the traditions of communion seasons, we used to move from the day of humiliation, fasting and prayer into days of self-examination and encouragement.

At least that was the intention and often was the experience. But sometimes when we think about coming to the Lord's table, many of us can feel anything but encouraged.

And the awareness of our fallenness and brokenness and sinfulness can often be a deterrent to us coming to the table. And sometimes our vision of what we are is bigger than our vision of who God is.

And Psalm 8 is an excellent balance for us because it gives a very realistic picture of the true condition of humanity, whilst at the same time magnifying for us the reality of God's power, majesty, presence, but also his mercy, grace and covenant love.

[1:44] That as we come to examine ourselves, that we may recognize that though as we often hear in some of the modern Christian songs, that though our sins are many, his mercy is greater than the accumulation of our sinfulness.

His majesty is greater than the depth of our despair and disgrace. And I pray that as we look at this psalm tonight, it might help us have that balanced perspective, that whilst it is correct and indeed biblical to examine ourselves and to search our hearts, we are encouraged through the Word of God to see not just our own failings and our faults, but to see the mercy, to see the grace, to see the forgiveness that is offered to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To be amazed at the glory of God when we consider his works of redemption in the light of what he has done within his own creation.

God is presented to us in this psalm in such a powerful way that it naturally makes us feel small and insignificant. It's amazing how often you can read, even in non-spiritual writings, people who have some kind of encounter within nature, and they say, you know, that as I stood by the edge of this ocean or on this mountaintop, I suddenly felt so small within myself.

Or indeed recently when we saw the power of nature and the disasters in Nepal, people were often commenting, wow, it just makes you feel so small.

[3:30] And the psalmist in Psalm 8 does bring us to a place where he enables us to see, yes, we should recognize that we are so small.

But the miracle of grace is that the God of all glory has entered into this smallness and entered into this apparent insignificance to reveal to us the greatest thing a human heart could ever discover, that God truly did so love the world.

He gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting light. We are to recognize that whilst we may feel low and small in the sight of who God is, we are to be encouraged and blessed in the light of what God has done.

So as we open up this psalm, we begin by focusing where the song takes us to revel in and rejoice in the preeminence of God's glory.

Our Lord, O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth. There is a natural and spiritual bursting forth of praise as he recognizes the wonder of the God that he is singing to.

[5:00] That as he pauses to contemplate on the greatness of his God, there is this spiritual revelation and impetus that acknowledges the wonderful preeminence of God's glory over everything.

That there isn't a wonderful sunset that is somehow better than the glory of God. There isn't a majestic mountain range anywhere on the earth that in any way detracts from the glory of God. Your glory, O Lord, throughout the earth is greater than anything you have created. As majestic as that is and as wonderful as that is.

You, Lord, and your Bible should have capital letters, Our Lord in lowercase, as he recognizes this is what makes God's glory so powerful and so preeminent.

Many a culture will create an image of a great and mighty deity. But in the God of the Bible, in the God of the scriptures that we learn of and that we turn to, we don't just have the revelation of a great God.

[6:12] We have a revelation of a great God who comes near to his people. Who comes near to those he calls and chooses and loves.

He is Lord in capitals. He is Lord in lowercase. He is Yahweh and Adonai. He is the sovereign, authoritative, ruling God.

And he is the personal, approachable, covenant-keeping God. This is the surpassing preeminence of his glory. Where our God is beyond comparison with all the religions and deities of the world. Even in the day that we live, where we're being told in certain quarters that the God we worship is the same as the God of other religions. This is live stream, so I'll save myself a prison sentence and not go too far with the illustration.

But you know where this is going. You say, oh, we worship the same God. No, we don't. Because you might have an image of a God who is great, but we have a God who is not only great, but a God who is near.

[7:18] And a God who came into humanity. And a God who entered into our world. We have greatness, but we have closeness. We have majesty, but we have intimacy.

We have the God of power and of mind-blowing greatness in terms of his existence.

But we have a God who was born in Bethlehem. We have a God who grew as a child. Who was nurtured by a mother. Who was counseled by a father. Who experienced friendship.

Experienced hardship. Who experienced the realities of life. And lived in the midst of this sin-sick world. Yet extended mercy to it.

Oh Lord, our God. How majestic is your name in all the earth. As we recognize you are supreme. And you are powerful.

[8:15] And you are glorious. And you are authoritative. These are the truths that underpin our hope in a world of chaos. These are the truths that underpin our hope in the light of all that is going on in the world.

That is beyond human control. And it seems to defy all manner of peaceful intervention. The knowledge that our God reigns over history. That's something that gives us peace to sleep at night. But we also recognize that whilst we trust and believe in the God who has such power and authority. We recognize that that same God moves by his spirit in this world.

A spirit that came into the world after the Son of God had died and paid the price for our sins. God comes personally and moves powerfully to speak to human hearts and to draw human beings.

He's our Lord. Adonai. He is the one who comes close. He is the one who is faithful. He is Yahweh. He is glorious and powerful.

[9:20] You have set your glory above the heavens or in all the earth and the heavens. We recognize that God has purposefully set creation to testify to the truth of our Creator.

And we see that he is a God who is to be recognized throughout the earth. Paul recognizes this in his letter to the Romans. That this is one of the two, in a sense, the two undeniable witnesses that every human being has to make them aware of the reality of God's existence.

The reality of the testimony of creation and the challenge of the reality of a human conscience.

These things, every human being born has to give account for, to where that witness leads them and guides them if they don't hear in any other way of the power and majesty of God.

But as he is setting that forth here, it is important that he is recognizing that it is our God who has set his glory throughout the earth.

In other words, even in a day of Israel's covenant relationship with God, their song of celebration is acknowledging that their God is not just a local tribal deity, as we find in many of the world.

[10:45] We know if we study history and we study anthropology and the way that human beings have behaved through the years, we find, again, testimony to the fact that we were created to

worship, that if cultures don't worship the true God, they will create their own gods, small g.

We find people always telling us the months of our calendar relate often to the names of Roman gods. And other things that carry into our culture are still testimony to the fact of the kind of gods that the Greeks worshipped, where they saw aspects of creation and said, well, that's such a powerful aspect of creation.

There must be some kind of divine force associated with it. So we have a God of thunder and a God of rain and a God of sunshine. But the Bible says, no, the true God is a God who is above all these things.

He's created all these things, but he's not limited in one region of his existence. Our God is such a mighty God. He's not a local God. He's not like you go to some cultures and they have little roadside temples and roadside deities, as if there's a God just for this region.

No, the psalmist is declaring to the people in his own day, in his own generation, and to every person that would ever set their eyes on these blessed words of Scripture, our God is the true God.

[12 : 13] Our God is the only God. And I know our world finds that arrogance. I know our world dislikes the exclusivity of these kind of claims. But friends, the only reason we dare to make such claims is because they are ultimately true.

Because God has declared them of himself. That he is not just some tribal identity in Israel. He has always been and will always be the God of all glory. The God of all eternity. The God of all power. The God of all majesty.

And yet, as we say, this great, vast, powerful, authoritative, eternal God delights in the small and out of the mouth of babes and infants.

You have established strength for, in some translations, brought forth praise. It's the fact that is so mystifying in the wonder of understanding the Bible.

[13 : 19] It's that while people tend to have a natural understanding of our God, and then they must busy themselves to capture his attention. That's why we have these atrocious acts in some religions.

And they think that somehow by doing this atrocious act, they're honoring their God and they'll go into an eternity. They're doing something to try and capture God's attention.

What the wonder of this psalm is saying to us, you know, your God is greater than you can ever imagine. But here's what's amazing. You don't have to capture his attention. You have it.

He knows the babes and the infants of this world were ordained and created to bring forth praise to him. He enjoys.

He takes delight. In his glory being praised through children and infants. And it is amazing, isn't it, often, that things that can be naturally hard to understand can be spiritually revealed even to a child.

[14 : 26] That there are things that people wrestle with, and yet children can know God. Children can love God. Children can serve God with a real faith.

I was just sharing with Avon Manuel today, being asked by a child six or seven years old on a communion Sunday morning, can I take communion? And imagining the apoplexy that would create in our elders, I decided, well, we better delay this for a little while anyway.

And I asked, I said, you know, you need to understand what's happening in communion before you can take communion. To which I got the response, well, yes, we share bread because it reminds us that Jesus gave his body for us.

And then there's wine in the cup that speaks to us about his blood that was shed at Calvary. And I sat there and said, what do I do now? And I said, well, you obviously understand what's in the communion.

I said, but, you know, you really have to know what it means before you partake of it. And he turned to say, well, it means that Jesus came and died for me. That Jesus paid the price for my sins.

[15 : 36] God delights in the praise of infants and children. God delights when your heart can say in its simplicity, you know, I know I'm far from perfect, but I know Jesus died for me.

God delights when a human heart can recognize that they know their imperfections, they know their sins and their weaknesses, but they're not going to try and get God's attention and they're not going to try and pay back for all their sins.

They're going to come in their weakness and brokenness and say, Jesus, forgive me. Lord, have mercy. Lord, help. God delights in the praise of the innocent trust, in the praise of the simple

childlike faith.

God delights in that childlike conviction regarding who he is and what he has done. We know that Jesus quoted this psalm on his way into Jerusalem and what the church calendar calls Palm Sunday, as the crowd shouted, Hosanna, and it angered the Pharisees.

And they were so intent, oh, tell these children to be quiet. Jesus, won't you tell them to be quiet?

And Jesus, of course, said if they would be quiet, the very rocks would cry out.

[16 : 57] But why were they so angry? Well, if they would be angry because they knew that by quoting these words, Jesus was acknowledging that he was God, accepting the praise and the songs of the infants and children, and that for those who recognized him as God and praised him as God, there was protection and security, there was blessing, there was honor.

And here we have this wonderful preeminent glory displayed to us of our God, the God who is inviting you to trust in him, the God who is inviting you to profess him, the God who is asking you to put the destiny of your eternal soul into his care and into his keeping, and to acknowledge that publicly by joining with brothers and sisters here on earth to proclaim together the death of Christ one more time before he comes.

This is his glory. This is his delight. This is his praise. This is his praise.

The opening verses raise up for us the wonder of God's glory, and the fact that he is so majestic and powerful, yet he is covenant committed and he draws near.

And then in verses 3 to the end of verse 8, there is this acknowledgement of the wonder of humanity's existence and purpose, that as again he says, when I look at the wonders of your creation, there is this part of me that just pauses and thinks, what are we?

[19 : 18] And again, it's one of the questions that humanity for all its advancement in education and research and technology, there are still questions that remain unanswered in these realms.

What are we if we're not creatures made by a living God for his glory? What is our purpose and what is our existence for?

If we don't come to know that we exist for the glory of God and we've been created to enjoy him and to glorify him forever.

And the psalmist is having that kind of experience that I've mentioned already, whereby in reflection upon the greatness of creation, he wonders at his own smallness and his own apparent insignificance.

There is nothing so amazing as a starry sky, as we used to be able to see them before all our streetlights and everything else. And it's captivating and the wonder of it all that God has set these things in place, the things that we marvel at and people spend millions trying to explore and all the rest of it, and yet so wonderfully described here as the work of God's fingers.

[20 : 36] The moon and stars that have been set in place. What is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him? As his mind returns to earth, he is astonished in the light of the greatness of all this universe, that God has given special attention to humankind.

It's astonishing. We've been created from the dust of the earth. The Bible teaches us that. And yet, that doesn't demean us.

It actually speaks to our special place and the wonder of this creation. He recognizes the loneliness of where we have come from, which seems so small and insignificant, in contrast to the vastness and wonder of the universe.

But yet, God places his attention in the hearts of people. That whilst the natural world would say to us, well, we're just another part of this great insignificant nothingness, the Word of God says to us, no, God sets his mind and hearts on people.

That God speaks a universe into existence. But God involves himself personally in the creation of humanity, male and female.

[21 : 56] And he gives attention to our lives. He called a people to belong to him. And he shapes a people to know him. He reveals his affection to human hearts.

Some people find it easier nowadays to reveal their affection to their pets and their animals. It sometimes seems easier to relate to animals than it is to relate to fellow human beings.

But God says that that's not how I think. I've created the vastness of all that exists in the sea and in the heavens and on the land and all the rest of it.

But there's only one part of this massive creation that I seek to communicate with, that I seek to relate to, that I seek to love, that I seek to embrace, that I seek to forgive, that I seek to draw into my

presence to belong to me forever.

In our frailty, we're being asked and invited to worship God.

[23:02] The language used here to speak of human being is a language that speaks of our weakness and frail human experience. It's a language and word use that highlights our mortality, that we are a people who come and go.

We live fragile lives. We live troubled lives. We leave this planet often far too quickly. And sometimes we have a craving for noticeability or impact upon our world that seems to evade us. But yet God cares for us. The world barely notices most of us. Many a person would ignore and pass us by. But the God of heaven, the God of heaven remembers us.

Elsewhere, the psalmist reminds us or tells us that if he were to number all the thoughts God had towards him, they would outnumber the grains of sand.

And, you know, one of the precious things about coming home is reuniting and rekindling with people I haven't seen for a while.

[24:18] And you often have that conversation. You know, I was actually thinking about you. These are precious moments in friendship and relationship and family. But isn't it amazing that the God of heaven would say to you today, I was thinking of you.

You got up, you breathed, you got dressed, you fed. In your frailty sometimes, in your pain, in your sorrow, yet you made it.

And God is looking and says, you've no idea how often you are in my mind today. And as communion approaches, you're in the mind of God.

So where is he in your mind? Where is he in your heart? The psalmist here is astonished that God gives such perfect and personal attention to God and entrusts him with such authority in this world. You know, so much of the animal world is far bigger and stronger than us, but it doesn't rule the world. We rule over them. God has given us dominion over the works of his hands.

[25:33] God has dignified and graced our existence. He made us a little lower than the angels. And many a commentator will point out that sadly we live as if he made us just a little higher than the animals.

That's what many of the behavior scientists do today, isn't it? They study animals to see what we can learn about human behavior. And God's saying, that's not your starting point. I made you a little lower than the angel.

It's sin that has destroyed our behavior. It's our disobedience and rebellion from God that brings the heartache and the damage that we do to ourselves and to one another.

God has made us, he says, to reflect something of him. We have this unique position. We're not a little higher than the angels. We are made lower than the angels.

Sorry, not a little higher than the animals. We're drawn to have this spiritual direction in our life. God has dignified us. There's a paradox of our smallness and humility.

[26:38] Yet at the same time, there's an honor and exaltation. God has set us above things. God has set within us the reality of spirituality and a connection with the unseen world.

God recognizes the wonder of God's intention. And though sin has ruined and sin has destroyed, the glory of redemption is a reminder to us that God is a God of restoration.

God is a God who will one day have what he set forth in his original creation. He will have a people who dwell eternally in his presence, living in the joy and fullness of life with him.

And the gospel of Jesus Christ is inviting you and me to be in that number. We have been created to look to God for life.

Little more than the angels that we might look up the way. But sadly, we often live that we're just a little higher than the animals and we just look down the way.

[27:47] But this psalm is encouraging us in a preparation for the Lord's table to recognize, yes, there's a lowliness. Yes, there's a brokenness.

But in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the purposes of God, there's an exaltation, there's a dignity, there's a delight as we come to the Lord and trust in him.

And that's why in the closing of this message we turn finally and more briefly to the fact that there is, in a sense, in this psalm, a surprising prophecy regarding Christ's coming.

It's not spelled out in the way that we often see prophetic words in the Old Testament spelled out. But we recognize it as prophecy when we read the interpretation of it that we read in Hebrews chapter 2.

God made him a little lower than the angels. That's an amazing truth about humanity. And it was a position that we disgraced by behaving more like animals than angels, by pursuing self rather than being like the angels and serving God.

[28 : 56] We took that wrong direction and that wrong orientation in our life. But as this psalm is speaking to us about humanity and God's intentions for humanity, and that helps us in our evaluation, we also recognize that ultimately it is speaking to us about the greatest human being that ever walked the face of the earth.

Ultimately, it is speaking to us regarding the one who came to live in this world as a human being who is spiritually fully orientated towards God, as one who is more intent to do the will of the Father than to do his own selfish will, as one who could righteously pray and fulfill every day that God's will would be done in his life as it is in heaven.

And that's what the writer to the Hebrews reminds us of. When he's talking about Jesus and the miracle of Jesus coming into this world, the miracle of the incarnation, it's a miracle in the glory of creation, the position that humanity once held.

But how much more should we marvel at the mystery of the miracle that the Son of God held a position for his period in this life where he could be regarded as being a little lower than the angels, the King of the angels, the ones the angels worshipped and obeyed for the sake of the revelation of the glory of God in his creation by the performing of the sacrifice for our sins and the revelation of redeeming love.

The Son of God was made a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and on putting everything under his feet. Where humanity failed, Christ triumphs.

[30 : 45] Where humanity lost it, the Son of God regains. What you and I could never get, what you and I could never recover, what you and I could never do for ourselves in terms of relationship with God, Jesus was made a little lower than the angels.

So that he would bring you and me into that magnificent place of life with God forevermore. And we don't see it all perfectly worked out yet.

We don't see everything subject to him yet. That's what the letter writer to the Hebrews was saying. Writing to Christians who were suffering greatly. Writing to Christians who were under severe persecution.

Writing to Christians who were being cast out of their families and now cast out of their synagogues because of their belief in Jesus. And he says, no, we don't see it yet. We don't see every evil power under his authority yet.

We don't see death fully under his authority yet. But friends, what we do see is Jesus. What we do see is Jesus. Crown with glory and honor.

[32 : 00] Because he suffered death. So that by the grace of God, he might taste death for everyone. This psalm should be an encouragement.

It helps us with our self-examination. What are we that God has thought of us? Can I really come to the table? I can't remember who said it.

There's a great quotation regarding humility. That humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less. And think of Christ more.

He's the reason you can come to the table. He's the reason you can have the hope of heaven.

Jesus is the reason you can trust that there is real forgiveness for your sins.

He's the one who has accomplished what God's great plan for humanity was. The wonder of relationship with God in dominion over his creation.

[33 : 03] Where we failed, Christ has succeeded. Where you failed, Christ has succeeded. Where I failed, Christ has succeeded. And he calls us now to acknowledge him.

O Lord, our Lord. Let us pray. O Lord, our Lord.

How majestic is your name in all the earth. How majestic is your name on this island and in these villages.

How majestic is your name, O Lord, here in this building tonight. As we acknowledge our thankfulness that you made us.

And as we acknowledge, O God, our thankfulness that you've been patient with us. We acknowledge, O God, that we don't fully understand all things at all times.

[34 : 18] But we can always look to Jesus. And we always see in him a perfect righteousness. And we always see in him forgiveness and mercy.

