

Psalm 104 “Creation and Temple”
Psalm 104
Hebrews 1

January 7, 2018

Psalm 104 concludes with a call for the LORD to rejoice in his works –
and for *us* to rejoice in *him!*

Our tune for Psalm 104 is “Ode to Joy.”

Ludwig van Beethoven composed “Ode to Joy” as the conclusion to his Ninth Symphony –
a hymn to creation.

Of course, Psalm 104 is the *original* creation hymn –
and so it is fitting that we “recapture” the Ode to Joy and use it in the service of Christ!

Sing Psalm 104
Read Hebrews 1:1-2:4

Hebrews 1:7 quotes from Psalm 104, verse 4.
“He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.”

Some have tried to flip it around and make it say,
“He makes wind his messenger, and a flame of fire his ministers,”
but then again, modernists don’t believe in angels or demons!
So naturally they tend to read the Bible in a naturalistic way!

If you think about Hebrews is doing you will be better positioned to understand Psalm 104!

Here in Hebrews 1, we are told that the Son is “the heir of all things,
“through whom also God created the world.
He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature,
and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

In other words, when Psalm 104 talks about how God sustains and provides for all things,
Hebrews 1 says that this is what the *Son of God* does.

But think about what this is saying about angels and winds.
“He makes his angels winds,
and his ministers a flame of fire.”
If you are familiar with C. S. Lewis’ Space Trilogy,
you will have probably the best idea of what this is talking about.

Too often, we think of angels and demons as inhabiting something of a parallel universe.
Lewis does well at showing how the spirits are integrally related to this universe.

The naturalistic view says that God uses winds and flames to serve him.

The supernatural view says that angels and demons are fighting
in a parallel spiritual realm that has only ethereal connection to “our” realm.
Psalm 104 and Hebrews 1 tell us that the spiritual is manifested in the physical.
He makes his angels winds, his ministers a flaming fire.

But as is often the case in the scriptures,
the angelic hosts receive only a passing comment –
they are present, but they are not the focus.

The focus is on what God is doing in salvation history!

The first 12 songs in Book 4 of the Psalter have dealt with the *problem* at the end of Book 3 –
the question in Psalm 89 as to whether God’s steadfast love to David will endure.
Psalm 101 brought all that to a conclusion with “A Psalm of David,”
that *sings* of steadfast love and justice –
and how the Davidic King will establish justice in the city of the LORD.

And the answer in Book 4 is a resounding *yes!*
God *will* be faithful to David!
We have seen over and over again throughout Psalms 90-101
that God is establishing his Kingdom.

Psalm 104 opens and closes with the same phrase that we saw in Psalm 103 –
“Bless the LORD, O my soul.”
The whole song stays in the first person singular –
as an individual song of praise.

But Psalm 104 then adds a second ending – in the plural –
“Praise the LORD.”

There are all sorts of parallels to the creation days in Genesis 1 –
and there are even echoes of the order of the six days of creation –
but every attempt to force Psalm 104 into a simple six-day structure fails!
You are supposed to see the connection –
but without trying to make a one-to-one correspondence.

Introduction: “Bless the LORD, O My Soul!” (v1a)

Many commentators have said that Psalm 104 is all about creation –
and is not really dealing with redemption.

But since we just went through Exodus last year,
I suspect that many of you heard in Psalm 104 what I heard.
Psalm 104 is a Tabernacle song.
“stretching out the heavens like a tent”
“laying the beams of his chambers on the waters”

“setting the earth on its foundations”
“wine, oil, and bread”
“cedars of Lebanon”
Not to mention the smoke and thunder of Sinai!

Psalm 104 is talking about creation by using the language of the temple!
But that is not surprising – because the creation itself
was where God built his original temple –
the Garden of Eden was the original Holy of Holies –
where Adam and Eve walked with God.
If you think about it, in the original Holy of Holies –
in the Garden of Eden –
there was an *image* in the Most Holy Place.
Because God created man in his own image.

And you see this in the way that Psalm 104 reflects on creation.

1. Making the Heavens Like a Tent (v1b-4)

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
O LORD my God, you are very great!
You are clothed with splendor and majesty,
² *covering yourself with light as with a garment,*
stretching out the heavens like a tent.
³ *He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters;*
he makes the clouds his chariot;
he rides on the wings of the wind;
⁴ *he makes his messengers winds,*
his ministers a flaming fire.

Psalm 102 had spoken of the heavens as a garment that will wear out.
When we talk about the stars, we measure distances in “light-years” –
the distance that light can travel in a year!
Compared with the earth,
the heavens appear unchanging and serene.
And yet the heavens are a passing fancy compared to God himself!

Verses 1-4 set forth the glory of God in the heavens.
God has clothed himself with splendor and majesty,
he has stretched out the heavens like a tent.

In verse 3 we hear that “he lays the beams of his chambers on the waters.”
What “waters” are we talking about?
These are the waters above the heavens.
In Genesis 1 we are told that God separated the waters above from the waters beneath,
by means of a firmament (Hebrew–*raqia*).

This “firmament” God called “heaven”—what we normally call the sky.
Everywhere in scripture this firmament is presented as a solid object.
(Which is what everyone thought until the 16th century)
And when God appears to various prophets (Ezekiel 1, or the 70 elders in Ex. 24),
he appears at the peak of the firmament.

In other words, as verse 3 says—he lays the beams of his chambers on the waters.
God’s dwelling place is at the pinnacle of the heavens.
The clouds are his chariot.
God comes from the heavens riding on the clouds,
He rides on the wings of the wind.

How often do you think this way?
How often do you look at the heavens,
and behold the dwelling of God.
No—I’m not talking about some place way up there light-years beyond the stars.
That’s the language of modern science.
I’m talking about right up there at the peak of that blue sky.
Now, the biblical authors knew that God’s dwelling was not so easy to find.
Solomon speaks of how the heavens, and the heaven of heavens,
could not contain God.
But they speak of God’s dwelling as being that close to the earth,
because it is.
He is exalted over all,
and yet he stretched out the heavens as a tent,
He built the heavens and the earth,
as a place where he could dwell with his people.
Psalm 150 speaks of this when it declares,
“Praise the Lord in his sanctuary,
Praise him in his mighty firmament.”
It compares the sanctuary of the temple—the place where God dwelt with Israel--
to the firmament—the place which God created to dwell with all men.
The heavens and the earth were created to be a temple.
The earthly temple was needed only because of sin.
Do you think of the heavens this way?
Do you look up at the sky and see the vault of the temple?
The glorious tent that God spread over the place where he would dwell with man?

We should not hesitate to speak this way!
It’s not the language of modern science –
but science has stripped away the *meaning* of the universe!

2. Making the Earth and the Seas – Foundations and Garments (v5-9)

⁵ *He set the earth on its foundations,
so that it should never be moved.*

⁶ *You covered it with the deep as with a garment;*

the waters stood above the mountains.
⁷ *At your rebuke they fled;*
at the sound of your thunder they took to flight.
⁸ *The mountains rose, the valleys sank down*
to the place that you appointed for them.
⁹ *You set a boundary that they may not pass,*
so that they might not again cover the earth.

Verses 5-9 speak of the earth in language that could apply either to the creation or the flood. In the first creation God separated dry land from the waters, and in the flood (a second creation, in a sense) he did the same thing. And either way, this speaks of the power of the voice of God over creation. “At your rebuke the waters fled; at the sound of your thunder they took to flight.”

Never again will the waters cover the earth. If you study geology, you will watch the long, slow process of mountains being built up, and valleys slowly being cut by streams and rivers. But Psalm 104 reminds us that God does all these things.

3. Making the Springs to Water the Earth (v10-18)

a. From Your Lofty Abode – Valleys, Mountains, Beasts, and Birds (v10-13)

¹⁰ *You make springs gush forth in the valleys;*
they flow between the hills;
¹¹ *they give drink to every beast of the field;*
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.
¹² *Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell;*
they sing among the branches.
¹³ *From your lofty abode you water the mountains;*
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

In verses 10-18 we watch as water takes center stage. Verses 10-13 speak of how God provides water for the beasts and the birds. “From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.”

The term “lofty abode” is the same word we saw in verse 4 (translated “chambers”). From your chambers above the waters – you send forth the waters to satisfy the thirsty ground.

Beasts and birds – even the valleys and hills – are sated by the waters from the heavens.

It is not enough to say that God is the one who set the natural laws in motion. If we believe that “God’s works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions,”

then we must see the hand of God working powerfully in nature.

Verses 14-15 then come at the heart and center of this passage:

b. Grain, Wine, and Oil – for Man’s Heart and Face (v14-15)

¹⁴ *You cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,*

that he may bring forth food from the earth

¹⁵ *and wine to gladden the heart of man,*

oil to make his face shine

and bread to strengthen man's heart.

Livestock, wine, oil, and bread—the four staples of the ancient Jewish economy,
and the four most important substances in Israelite worship.

Livestock are the “clean animals”

that would be used in burnt offerings, sin offerings, and peace offerings.

Wine is used in drink offerings – oil is used in the anointing of the priests –

and bread is used for grain offerings.

Verse 15 speaks of the three things that man brings forth for food:

wine to gladden the heart of man –

oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man’s heart.

Notice the two elements of the Lord’s Supper used here –

wine and bread – to gladden the heart and strengthen the heart.

Yes, wine can be used very badly –

scripture nowhere encourages drunkenness! –

but the alcoholic properties of wine are highlighted here:

“wine to *gladden* the heart of man.”

It’s okay – indeed it is a *good thing* – to feel a little happy when you drink wine!

How do you know how much is too much?

Well, if *you* (or others around you) are *not happy*

because of the results of your drinking –

then you have had too much!

I have never yet met a person who was *happy* that they had a hangover!

I have never yet met a person who was *happy* about a drunk driver...

The *purpose of wine* – according to God’s word –

is to *gladden* the heart of man (both you and your neighbor).

Therefore, if you see someone who is getting close to the edge –

who may be passing (perhaps unwittingly) from gladness to misery –

say something!

So economics, worship, indeed, all of daily life,
are brought together here.
It is in this sense that all of life is an act of worship,
since the world we live in was created as a temple to God.

c. Cedars of Lebanon – Trees, Mountains, Beasts and Birds (v16-18)

¹⁶ *The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.*

¹⁷ *In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has her home in the fir trees.*

¹⁸ *The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the rock badgers.*

Verses 16-18 then speak of trees, mountains, beasts and birds –
curving back around to the imagery of verses 10-13.

And here again we run into the language of the temple:

“the cedars of Lebanon” were essential for the construction of the temple of Solomon.

But here they have not been chopped down –
they continue to grow and flourish as the trees of the LORD.
The birds build their nests –
like the swallow of Psalm 84 that builds its nest in the temple!

4. Making the Moon and Sun – Beasts Foraging in Darkness/Man Laboring All Day (v19-23)

¹⁹ *He made the moon to mark the seasons;^[a]
the sun knows its time for setting.*

²⁰ *You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the beasts of the forest creep about.*

²¹ *The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.*

²² *When the sun rises, they steal away
and lie down in their dens.*

²³ *Man goes out to his work
and to his labor until the evening.*

Verses 19-23 then speak of the moon and the sun and the passing of time.

God is the one who has made both the light and the darkness.

He is the one who gives the young lions their food.

The beasts of the forest work by night—and God provides.

Man works by day—and God provides.

Again we see man in the center of this part of the poem as well.

5. The Wise and Manifold “Makings” of the LORD – Leviathan at Play (v24-26)

²⁴ O LORD, how manifold are your works!

*In wisdom have you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.*

²⁵ Here is the sea, great and wide,
*which teems with creatures innumerable,
living things both small and great.*

²⁶ There go the ships,
and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it.

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

Verses 25-26 then speak of the sea creatures,
including the great monster Leviathan.

Leviathan was a mythic sea monster from pagan mythology
that was supposed to have done battle with the gods.

Genesis 1 includes a reference to these sea monsters,
but they do not do battle with God:

they are viewed as one of the tame creatures that does God’s bidding.

Psalm 104, by explicitly referring to Leviathan,

is continuing the apologetic thrust of Genesis 1.

Yahweh is bigger and stronger than the gods of the nations.

The gods of the nations had to fight against Leviathan.

Our God created Leviathan—“which you formed to play” in the sea.

The image is striking.

Imagine it.

This horrific sea monster of mythology is here portrayed as a frolicking fish,
just playing in the water.

“These all look to you, to give them their food in due season.” (v27)

The storks, the goats, the lions, the sea creatures, even Leviathan,
all look to God for their food.

“When you give it to them, they gather it up;

when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;

when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.

When you send forth your Spirit,

they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.” (28-30)

All things in God’s creation temple serve *him*.

Do you believe that?

Our culture wants us to think that the regular forces of nature provide food.

Scientists have explored in great detail the natural processes.

And they have understood much about the ordinary method of God’s providence.

But the psalmist reminds us that it is the hand of God that feeds all creatures.

6. The Providential Spirit – Food, Good Things, and Returning to Dust (v27-30)

- ²⁷ *These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.*
- ²⁸ *When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.*
- ²⁹ *When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.*
- ³⁰ *When you send forth your Spirit,^[c] they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.*

And the psalmist reminds us that providence does not only include the good,
it also includes the bad –
yes, God gives them food in due season –
but he also hides his face – takes away their breath, and the creatures die
and return to dust.
God’s provision covers everything!

We often speak of some special event as being “providential.”
If we meet somebody unexpected who gives us a lead on a great new job,
we say, “that was providential!”
That’s true—but it’s no more providential
than the fact that your toilet backed up last week.

The story has been told of a young man
going to visit Princeton Seminary professor Samuel Miller.
Dr. Miller lived outside of town along a bumpy road,
and the young man was thrown from his horse as it stumbled into a ditch.
Unhurt, the young man made it to the Miller’s house and said,
“Dr. Miller, I can tell you of the remarkable providence of God.
Though I was thrown from my horse along the road, I have hardly a scratch!”
Dr. Miller looked at the young man and said,
“I can tell you of an even more remarkable providence of God.
I have ridden that road now for thirty years,
and never have I been thrown by my horse!”

Some people try to “discern the hand of God” in their lives.
They often sound quite pious, but in reality they are thoroughly secular.
One who believed in the providence of God
would understand that God’s hand is in *everything*.
Such people often try to understand “the will of God for my life.”
They come to a major life decision and try to discern the will of God.
But that is a magical, superstitious practice,
no different from palm reading or crystal balls.
God’s will is very simple:
“Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”
If you are facing a choice between two paths,

do I marry this person or stay single?
do I take this new job, or stay at my old one?
if either choice would glorify God,
then whichever one you choose will be God's will for you.

7. The Glory of the LORD: Sinai, Sinners, and Me (v31-35a)

³¹ *May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works,
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke!*
³² *I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.*
³³ *May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the LORD.*
³⁴ *Let sinners be consumed from the earth,
and let the wicked be no more!*

Verse 31 then shifts from the description of what “he” does –
to a petition: “May the glory of the LORD endure forever” –
“Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name.”
And the Psalmist starts by asking that the LORD himself would rejoice in his works!

And there are echoes here of Mt. Sinai –
the LORD touching “the mountains and they smoke.”

And finally, the Psalmist switches into the 1st person singular
to say that “I will sing to the LORD as long as I live.”

Yes, we long for *God* to rejoice in his works –
but because of that we *also* rejoice in *him*.
We rejoice in the God who made all things –
the God who established his holy temple –
not merely in the first creation,
but even more powerfully and gloriously in the *new creation* –
when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Conclusion: “Bless the LORD, O My Soul!” (v35b)

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
Praise the LORD!

And so the Psalm concludes with a doxology:
May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works,
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke!
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.
May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the Lord.

The next line may seem out of place:

“Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more!
Bless the Lord, O my soul!
Praise the Lord!”

Does that make sense to you?

In this Psalm of praise to God for his wonders of creation and providence,
why does the psalmist conclude with a prayer for the destruction of the wicked?
Because the doctrines of creation and providence are inseparable
from the doctrine of redemption.

When the psalmist thinks about creation and providence,
and how God rules over all things,
he cannot help but think about how that rule extends also to humanity.
If God is the one who gives life and death to all creatures,
then we must pray that he will bless his people, and destroy the wicked.

So Psalm 104 concludes with a prayer for the coming of the Messiah.
—a prayer for the coming of the new creation,
where God will indeed rejoice in his works,
because once the wicked are no more,
then the whole of the new creation will sing for joy before the Lord.

The creation temple has been marred by sin.
Humanity can no longer worship properly because their hearts have been twisted by sin.
There must be a new temple—a new creation—where God and man can meet.

Jesus, then, is the singer the Psalm 104.

He is the new temple—the new creation—where God and man meet.
And he is the one who was sent to seek and to save that which was lost.
As he looked over the land of Canaan, the land of Promise,
he beheld the marvelous providence of God.
He saw with human eyes the work of his own hand.
He prayed that the glory of the Lord would endure forever
(thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven)
and in his death he brought destruction to the wicked,
and salvation to his people.

And in his resurrection, as he tells us Matthew 28,
“All authority, whether in heaven or on earth, has been given to me.”
This is what Paul speaks of in Ephesians 1:20-23.
Jesus has now been raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father,

“far above all rule and authority and power and dominion,
and above every name that is named,
not only in this age but also in the one to come.
And he put all things under his feet
and gave him as head over all things to the church,
which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

The Creator and Preserver of all things,
has now become the Redeemer.

You see,

it is your savior who rules and governs all things.

It is the one who died for you and lives and reigns at the right hand of God,

“as head over all things *to the church*,”

who now orders all things according to his purposes.

It is Jesus,

your brother,

who opens his hand to give you your daily bread.

It is your Father who cares for you,

and disciplines you to teach you his ways.

So that we can say with the apostle Paul,

that we know that for those who love God all things work together for good,
for those who are called according to his purpose.