

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – June 16, 2019

Psalm 8 & Romans 5:1-5

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the NRSV on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Psalm 8 (From *Homiletics*; “Big History”, May 30, 2010)

The universe is astronomically large and infinitesimally small (subatomic particles). God’s creation is amazing and awe-inspiring (see Psalms 8:3; 19:1-6; Job 37–38). In this context, how can relatively insignificant human individuals matter all that much to God (the One to whom David and we pray and praise, “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens” — Psalm 8:1, 9)?

The NRSV translates the paired Hebrew singular noun-forms of verse 4 (*’enosh* and *ben-’adam* — also see Psalms 73:5 and 144:3-4 for similar pairings) as generic plurals: “[W]hat are *human beings* that you are mindful of them, *mortals* that you care for them?” The Hebrew noun-forms can be translated in a variety of ways, as exemplified by Greek and English translations of the verse: The LXX has *ανθρωπος* and *υιος ανθρωπου* (*ανθρωπος* can mean a human being of either gender in biblical Greek). NIV has “man” and “the son of man.” NLT has “people” and “mere mortals.” *Tanakh* has “man” and “mortal man.” NET has “the human race” and “mankind.” The singular or collective Hebrew noun-forms, by both basic and contextual meaning, encompass women and children as well as men, and they imply the entirety of the human race. Even so, the various English collective or plural translations may miss an originally intended Hebrew nuance of God’s noticing a single human being as an *individual* (a person, a human being) in the midst of the vastness of the universe. Jesus frequently refers to himself as “the Son of Man,” which may have had the general meaning “the Human One”; however, in the apocalyptic passages toward the end of the synoptic gospels (e.g., see Mark 13:23-27; 14:61-62), the referent is likely Daniel 7:13-14 (the Aramaic’s *kebar ’enash* is “like a son of man” in most English translations but “like a human being” in NRSV and *Tanakh*), where the context may signify a quasi-divine figure.

The verb-forms of verse 4 (“you are mindful of them” and “you care for them”) are second-person singular Hebrew imperfects that describe God’s characteristic activity; each of the verb-forms ends with a third person singular pronoun with an “energetic nun” (the “n” of the Hebrew alphabet). The suffixed verb endings themselves *may* be emphatic, and certainly in context they *are* emphatic. To paraphrase the astonished psalm-singer’s words, “Given the vastness and complexity of the universe, why would you, Majestic Lord, take note of and care deeply for a single one of those *human beings!*?”).

Verse 5 elaborates: “Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.” The NRSV note says that alternative translations for “God” (‘*elohim*’ in Hebrew) are *the divine beings* or *angels*. The LXX Greek and the Latin Vulgate understand ‘*elohim*’ to mean “angels,” as does KJV. The NIV and NET have “the heavenly beings.” In portions of the Old Testament, a belief is expressed in a “divine council” or heavenly assembly comprised of the Lord God of Israel and other divine or divinely endowed beings around the Lord’s throne. See Psalms 29:1; 82:1; 89:5-8; 138:1; also the “Let us” and “our” of Genesis 1:26 (see below) may reflect this understanding.

The Lord’s having made human beings just a little lower in status than God or than other heavenly beings is paralleled by the Lord’s having crowned them with glory and honor. Glory (*kabod* in Hebrew) and honor are ascribed to God far more often than to human beings.

Genesis 1:26-27 states: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” “Humankind” (vv. 26 and 27) is ‘*adam*’ in Hebrew (see *ben-’adam* above); the word (unless it’s used as the name “Adam” in the Genesis 2–5 story) is usually a collective noun that means *not* a male individual (other Hebrew words are used for “a man”), but rather mankind, human beings or people. LXX has *ανθρωπος* (see above).

Psalms 8:6-8 alludes to Genesis 1:26-28, in that God gave to human beings dominion over the works of God’s hands. NIV has “made him ruler.” NLT has “gave them charge.” NET has “appoint them to rule.” *Tanakh* has “made him master.” New Jerusalem Bible has “made him lord of the works of your hands.” God has “put all things”/subjected all animals of land, sky and sea to them (“under their feet”), alluding to the Genesis passage.

From the wider biblical context, this would be a *responsible* shepherding or “vice-lordship” over *God’s* creation, not a reckless or negligent enterprise. God has given each one of us an important position within his good creation.

The writer of Hebrews 2:5-10 cites Psalm 8 and applies it to Jesus. Similarly, the apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, alludes to a portion of Psalm 8, as he applies it to God’s action in Christ.

We begin and end our response to God’s call by praising our majestic Lord. Verses 1b and 9 are identical in wording (both in Hebrew and in the NRSV). See Psalm 104. Psalms 76:4 and 93:4 use the same Hebrew word for “majestic,” as does Psalm 8:1b. NRSV’s “Lord” (all four capitals, with the last three letters being small caps) is the characteristic English translation of the Hebrew tetragrammaton YHWH (Yahweh). NRSV’s “Sovereign” (Hebrew ‘*adon*’) is most often translated “Lord” or “lord” (with three or four lowercase letters) in English.

Verse 2 is puzzling, both in Hebrew and in English. Jesus alludes to the LXX translation of this verse in Matthew 21:15-16 (“Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise”), to counter those who objected to the children crying out, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (= “the Messiah”) after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week. David may be averring that the utterances even of young children attest that God’s eternal purposes for creation and for humanity within creation will overcome any chaotic earthly or heavenly powers that would attempt to thwart God’s creative purposes.

As “insignificant” and “weak” as we may see ourselves to be, we, as David, stand in astonished awe of our God, who would so highly esteem human beings. How are we to respond to such a God who has placed us in such a position — created as beings not far below God/heavenly beings/angels? How do we relate both to the God who created us and to other parts of God’s creation over which God has given us much responsibility? We continue to praise our majestic God as we ponder and live out these things.

Commentary on Romans 5:1-5 (From *Homiletics*; “Real Peace”, June 16, 2019)

Within the context of the whole letter to the Romans, this selection opens chapter 5 as a bridge between the description of how Jesus Christ saves the world and the next several chapters, which describe the life of the Christian as dying through baptism to rise with Christ (chapters 6-8). Patricia McDonald has argued that in addition to providing literary and theological bridges between sections of Romans, this section provides a bridge between Paul and the Roman community (“Romans 5:1-11 as a rhetorical bridge.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 40 [1990], 81-96). She notes that here occurs the first use of “we” as a pronoun since the opening, semi-formulaic verses, and from this point forward in the letter, Paul writes with the assurance that he and the Romans form one community. Paul feels free to do this because, summarizing his rhetorical strategy very broadly, first of all, in a classic act of group identity, he has established who he and the Romans are *not*. They are not lascivious pagans (1:18-32), hypocritical judges (2:1-16, 22-24) or boastful Jewish teachers (2:17-24). With boundaries well established, he then explains that all Gentiles and Jews have the same God and are brought into right relationship with God through the actions of Abraham and Jesus (chapters 3 and 4). As Paul and the Romans are now of the same family of God, he can address them as “we,” the “justified by faith.”

In this context, the term “faith” appears to be capable of having more than one reference. A debate has proceeded for nearly 2,000 years over how Paul’s reference to the salvific effect of the “πιστις Χριστου” should be translated. It might be “faith *in* Christ,” a translation many think of as the more traditional, which emphasizes the action of the believer. But the grammar can also support a translation as “faith *of* Christ,” which refers to Christ’s own faithfulness to God. In *Pauline Theology IV* (eds. Richard Hays and E. Elizabeth Johnson [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997]), Professors James D. G. Dunn and Hays argue forcefully, Dunn for the former, and Hays for the latter. In starkest terms, the difference in the two translations is whether it is the faith, or perhaps better, the faithfulness Christ exhibited toward God which brings salvation to the world or it is the faith of individual faithful persons in Jesus’ faithfulness toward them which brings salvation. The former interpretation may be considered to be a more inclusive reading which ultimately may permit the understanding that Christ’s action has power over Christian and non-Christian alike.

Linguistic arguments on both sides are weighty and persuasive. They are not, however, new. In fact, the Alexandrian scholar Origen, working early in the third century, recognized the issue and concluded that he would be open to both senses of the term. In the contemporary context, this “both/and” reading strategy may well be the best (see Mark Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation* [Knoxville: Westminster John Knox, 2005], 41; see also Paul Achtmeier, “Apropos the faith of/in Christ” in *Pauline Theology IV* referenced above). If that strategy is adopted, the simple phrase “from faith” would be full of meaning, for it would convey that Paul and the Romans are now one family because of the faithfulness of Christ to God which enables all who are faithful to Christ to come into relationship with God.

The references to boasting in verses 2 and 3 provide an exclamation point to Paul’s comments, first disparaging the boastful Jewish teacher in 2:17 and then defining in chapter 3 who may boast. In chapter 5, however, Paul refers to the boasting in which Christians are indeed allowed to indulge, thus condemning boasting elsewhere while engaging in it himself here. What has made Paul change his mind? In 2:17-24, Paul condemns the Jewish teacher who boasts because the teacher presumes a relationship with God out of knowledge of the law, but nevertheless engages in stealing, adultery, idolatry and otherwise breaking the law. In 3:27-31, Paul makes what appears to be a convoluted argument concerning on what basis the Jew and the Gentile are able to boast. Suffice it to say that the conclusion of the argument is that both can boast on the basis of “faith,” which, Paul argues, does not negate the law but supports it. In other words, Paul does not condemn boasting *per se*, but only certain instances of it. Further, it is not clear that the OT, particularly the Greek translation of the OT in which it is assumed that Paul was trained, has a singular attitude toward boasting. The verb *καυχασθαι* appears (in one form or another) more than 40 times in these texts. The earliest texts seem to condemn boasting, particularly that of warriors who believe victory is due to their own efforts and not to the work of the Lord (for example, Judges 7:2; 1 Kings 20:11). But in later books the verb is used where the Hebrew texts and their English translations clearly indicate exultation in the gifts and deeds of the Lord (for example, NRSV Psalm 5:11, “Those who love your name may exult in you”). Sirach, a deuterocanonical text composed around 100 B.C., does it all: At 11:4, Sirach condemns rejoicing at the misfortune of others; at 24:1 the author tells how Lady Wisdom in the midst of her people rejoices in her glory. There is an enlightening discussion in

Sirach 39:1-8 about those who devote themselves to the law. They search throughout the world for wisdom and, in their prayerful study, God may fill them with understanding and wisdom. Then, they will glory in the law of the Lord's covenant (v. 8).

As a consequence of this brief word study, it can be seen that neither in Paul's writing nor in the OT is "boasting" always to be condemned. One may — perhaps even should — boast of God's gift of a divine relationship, expressed in Sirach as obtaining wisdom and understanding through study of the law, and expressed in Paul as the relationships created by God in response to the faithfulness of Abraham and of Jesus Christ. Then in this selection Paul and the Romans can together exult, glory and boast in a mutual relationship, grounded in the love of God poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit (v. 5), which itself brings hope, trials, endurance and character (vv. 2-4). As there is one God who loves them all, so they are united in this development.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Psalm 8:

1. So much has changed since biblical times in our understanding of cosmology. The three-tiered universe of the ancient world has given way to the "big bang," the infinite void of space, and even the possibility of a "multiverse." But one of the things that remains the same is the way in which a few moments spent gazing up at the stars tends to turn our thoughts to contemplation of God and our place in the universe. When have you experienced such moments? What make your thoughts turn to God and the nature of the universe in the way the Psalmist speaks of here?
2. From Shauna Hannan ([workingpreacher.org](#), 5/22/2016): *"Who am I?" is one of those questions I've asked of God on numerous occasions. Who am I, God, compared to all this beauty that you have made?" ...Who am I compared to all of this majesty and wonder? ...What are human beings that you are mindful of them? The response was [and is] loud and clear: "Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." ...Linger for a while in the question, who are we? ...God's heavens, the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars, for example, prompt the Psalmist's (and our) question: Who are we that you are mindful of and care for us? Or, as the Hebrew suggests, who are we that you remember and visit us? Even more, who are we that you would give us a job? Trust us with such a responsibility? How do you answer such questions? Does such contemplation make you feel loved and valued? Small and insignificant? Empowered and ennobled? Inept and outmatched? If you are totally honest, who do you say that you are in relation to God? Who do you believe God says you are?*

Reflection Questions on Romans 5:1-5:

- 1.** What does it mean to be “justified by faith?” (v. 1) Do you feel the need for such justification? If so, why? If not, does this text have any meaning to you?
- 2.** What is the value of “boasting?” Is this opposed to the value of humility, or somehow related? To whom are we boasting? God? Others? Ourselves?
- 3.** This text asserts that through Jesus, we can have peace with God, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Given that this is “Trinity Sunday,” try to unpack this a bit. What does it all really mean? How do the three persons of the Trinity interact in both history and in individual lives? And just how does this help us more than a simple assertion such as “God made us and God loves us?”

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?