

Creation Psalms

Psalm 104 – Is Creation Good?

For Your Reflection

Would you say that this is a positive psalm or a negative one? Pick out a few verses that support how you feel about the psalm. Are there others that would support the opposite view?

What kind of picture of God does this psalm leave you with?

There are only a few references to humans in this psalm. Which sections (or verses) attract you most? Write a verse that adds you into that section.

Some have suggested that this psalm references Genesis 1.1-2.3 (or vice versa). Compare the two passages, list similarities and differences, and see if you agree or not that they are connected. Have you learned anything from making this comparison?

My Reflection

Is the universe good? Psalm 104 takes the form of a celebration of creation, and a sense of joy seems to run through the psalm. Everything seems to be in its place and everything is wonderful, with God presiding over everything, wrapped in majesty and shining splendour (v.1). From the stretching out of the heavens in v.2, through the establishment of the earth and the limiting of the sea in vv.5-9, to God providing the daily needs of all creatures in vv.10-23 and vv.27-30, the universe is beautiful and just so. It's no wonder that the psalmist imagines God rejoicing over creation in v.31. The psalmist joins in with this rejoicing, repeatedly addressing God directly as 'you', rather than the more formal third-person language that is commonly used in the psalms. God is rarely named – the psalmist is too caught up in the ecstasy of celebration. The whole poem is bracketed in doxology – "Bless the LORD, O my soul." (vv. 1, 35). All creation is wonderful and God the creator is even more wonderful.

It is easy to slip into a romantic view of nature, especially when you live in a city and only encounter it in the tamed context of gardens and parks. The only wild animals most of us ever see are caged in a zoo, apart from the birds, urban foxes and squirrels whom we feed and photograph, posting their cute pictures on Facebook. Most of us are ignorant of where our food comes from and we prefer it that way, buying our meat ready-butchered in plastic trays in the supermarket along with eggs and dairy produce, all cleanly packaged up, perhaps bearing a picture of the kind of happy animal that was unlikely to be the producer of what's in the package. It is easy to imagine ourselves like Disney's Snow White, singing along with the wild creatures as they help us with the housework. Nature is beautiful, cute and cuddly.

Even a short trip into the wild gives the lie to this romantic view. Whether it's biting insects or microbial pathogens in the stream or the threat posed by heat or cold or storms, survival in nature depends on a certain degree of setting oneself against nature. Nature is not always benign. It's a midge-eat-man world out there, and it can be enough to drive you back to the deceptive safety and denial of the city.

Perhaps Psalm 104, with its mood of celebration of nature, is an urban psalm. However, a closer read might de-romanticize it. There are wild lions roaring for their prey (v.21), and the prey animal is given to the lion by God. There are wild asses, epitomes of freedom (v.11). There is fire and flame (v.4) and thunder (v.7). There are earthquakes and volcanoes (v.32, notwithstanding v.5b). And there is Leviathan, the ancient sea-monster, symbol of primordial chaos, against which the gods fight in some creation stories, just sporting in the sea, perhaps under the ships that blithely sail along (v.26). As in Genesis 3, for some unfathomable reason there is a snake in Eden.

Psalm 104 has echoes of Job 38-39, plus Job 41's celebration of Leviathan. This similarity should also check us in any temptation to read the psalm romantically. Like those closing chapters of Job, the psalm incorporates into the knowledge and wisdom of God (v.24) the wild animals, including the animals of the forest creeping out at night and the young lions roaring for their prey, "seeking their food from God" (vv.20-21). All is within the same divine ordering that keeps the sea to its limits (vv.6-9) and that keeps the moon and sun to time (v.19). Can humans make any special appeal to God within this order? What if a forest animal should creep into your village at night and take your goat or – God forbid(?) – your child as its food, as if God has opened his hand to fill the predator with good things (v.28)? God may delight in Leviathan frolicking in the sea in v.26 (as in Job

41), but what prayers are being heard from the sailors in the ships sailing above that ancient monster? In fact, humans receive little attention in this psalm. Verse 23 mentions us going out to our daily work, and that is expanded on somewhat in vv.14-15 in God's provision of the plants we use, oil for our faces, wine to gladden our hearts and bread to strengthen them. That is all. Indeed, from a human point of view, there is little romance in this psalm; little to make us feel secure and safe.

In Robert Macfarlane's beautiful evocation of what wilderness is left in Britain, 'The Wild Places', he describes a mid-winter night spent on the summit of Ben Hope, the most northerly mountain in mainland Scotland. Unable to shelter from snow and freezing wind, and miles from any other human being, Macfarlane writes,

This was one of the least accommodating places to which I had ever come ... This place was not hostile to my presence, far from it. Just entirely, gradelessly indifferent.¹

The indifference of wild nature to human well-being terrified Macfarlane and truly, it is terrifying. If this psalm, as in God's response to Job, uses the celebration of wild nature to symbolize the indifference of God to human well-being, that is all the more terrifying. If God feeds me to the midges of Dartmoor, who need blood in order to make their eggs in order to survive, or – worse – if God feeds my child as prey to a wild animal, what am I supposed to do? Just shrug and say, "Well that's the way the world is. It's the circle of life"? Can I make any special appeal to this God who regards me, if not with indifference, as one creature alongside countless billions of others, each loved and cared for? The community of creation, all creatures loved and valued by God, is no place for romance when you factor in hunger, or the need of a planet that is mostly molten rock to shudder and vent sometimes.

Just as the book of Job doesn't so much answer a question as question an answer, so Psalm 104 is not going to answer these questions. However, there are some keys in the psalm to help us in our continuing efforts to make sense of a life of faith in this vast, splendid, dangerous and enormously diverse cosmos.

One key is that of humility. Just as Job had to learn that he was not the centre of the universe, this psalm teaches a similar lesson. Humans are not the main feature of the psalm's celebration of the panorama of creation. We work and we

¹ Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places* (2007, Granta), p.157

enjoy a basic diet, and that is all the psalm has to say about us. If you were reading the Psalter in order, you might have the words of Psalm 103.14-16 in your mind:

For he knows how we were made;
 he remembers that we are dust.
As for mortals, their days are like grass;
 they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it and it is gone
 and its place knows it no more.

It is so important to remember that we are dust: that we as fragile and insignificant as grass waving in the wind. The world does not exist for the benefit of humans. In fact, biblically, it is the other way around. In Genesis 1, in the story of Eden (Genesis 2-3), after the flood (Genesis 8-9), and in countless places in the commandments of the Torah, and in the prophets and the wisdom literature, humans are charged with the care of nature and given boundaries to prevent us getting above ourselves and exploiting creation rather than caring for it. There is something of this in Psalm 104.23, with its simple description of people going to work. Putting the world into its right order in our minds, with God at the centre in the place of glory and with humans as the servants of nature, is crucial to the right ordering of the world in reality. We are very powerful and can easily cross the boundaries from care to oppression and from receiving as gift to extracting by force. The psalm is aware of this boundary-crossing in its mention of sinners and the wicked, in v.35, who must be dealt with for the sake of the well-being of all.

A second key is a very practical one: diet. Verses 14-15 speak of the food God provides for humans, and it's very simple: bread, oil and wine. A psalm that rejoices in lions roaring for their prey is not advocating vegetarianism. But can I be offended, in my faith as in my feelings, if the lion's prey is someone I love, when I not only prey on animals for my food but pay for them to be reared in order to eat them, and, too often, in a way that is both uncaring and cruel? The impact on the wider environment of large-scale, intensive, raising of animals for slaughter should be a matter for huge concern. So should be the way many animals are farmed, from the stinking filth of a 'well-lit barn' (possibly lit 24/7) filled with hens or pigs, to the slaughter as waste of male chickens dairy calves. These practices are surely incompatible with the concept of care for nature. Even if people who strive to model their lives on the love of God for all creatures continue to eat animal products, they should take steps to withdraw from production systems that are cruel, uncaring and indifferent. These steps are likely to be costly and

hard to take. They should be combined with positive support for a fair and managed transition for farmers to more nature-friendly practices, allied with campaigning against the power of enormous agricultural corporations, so that the countryside is once more managed by those who actually work the land, with less of a focus on profit and more on livelihood, for all concerned. Most farmers are natural environmentalists, but they have to live.

Something even more demanding to strive for is Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 11.6-9 (paralleled in 60.25) of all creatures living in peace in the age of the Messiah (or simply in the age to come, depending on your interpretation). What will a peaceful and just world look like? What will be its values and practices? How can I start making the vision a reality in my life now, by God's grace?

The grace of God is a third key in the psalm. In verses 27-30, all things look to God and depend on God for their existence. The psalm is not picturing an independent universe with God smiling benignly down from behind a bushy beard. This is a picture of God's continuing interaction with the world, in small detail and in large sweep. Psalm 104 doesn't say explicitly that God is loving, but at a very mundane level it points to God's gracious love through its celebration of the care and provision of God for every creature. There *is* an element to faithful living that does not complain to the creator that the world could be better. But that itself is part and parcel of receiving a gift. The problems come when we move away from grace and into duties, rights, privileges and expectations. Always, in the bible, salvation comes as a gift and must be received as a gift, otherwise there's a risk that the gift will be withdrawn – because it can only be God's gift through grace. Fostering gratitude at a mundane level, lowering our expectations while raising our expectancy, is a path to peace and to new life. Gratitude is a good counter to grasping, and grasping is behind much of the harm that humans are doing to the majority-creation. I explore this idea further in the chapter on Psalm 136.

We must refuse to romanticize nature, just as we must refuse to romanticize our participation in it. We must be realistic about sin and equally realistic about the steadfast, gracious love of God, that removes our boundary-crossing from us “as far as the east is from the west” (Ps 103.12). Knowing who we are, living within God-given limits, and living out of thankfulness for God's steadfast love to all, will make our praises true and our meditation pleasing to God (vv.33-34) and lead us all towards the renewal of the face of the earth (v.30). How that renewal will happen is hard to see, but it will be the gift of the gracious and glorious God.

Ideas For Praying With Psalm 104

Outdoors

Go for a walk and collect a selection of things you find. (Note: while it's OK to forage for the 'Four Fs' – Fruit, Foliage, Flowers, Fungi – it's best to leave growing things growing as they are. It's illegal in the UK to uproot a whole wild plant (unless you're the landowner), or to disturb a bird's nest that's in use. For this exercise, try to stick to things you see lying around – a seed case, a feather, a fallen leaf, etc). You may have to take photos of some of the things you see, e.g. a deer in a field or a badger footprint. Try to imagine what the story is of the different objects, just at a very simple level. For example: Who has feasted on that half-eaten leaf? Where was the badger going? With these imagined stories in mind, say a psalm of praise for the creation they represent.

Indoors

The psalm portrays creation flourishing in balance within itself. Name to God some aspects of goodness in the world and give thanks for them.

We know that creation today is out of balance and many creatures are suffering. Spend some time meditating on the verses in the psalm that refer explicitly to humans: 14-15 and 23. Ask God to show you specific ways in which your life is out of balance with majority-nature. Acknowledge the harm this causes and the pain you feel in your compassionate heart. Ask: What one behavioural change could you start making today to bring more harmony to your life in creation? Offer that to God, checking that it feels true to you (i.e. that you want to do it; you're not just picking something you ought to do), and ask God for help in doing it.

Prayer

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Clouds and sunshine,
Rainbow and rain,
Wind and lightning,
Air that I breathe.
Bless the skies, O my soul!

Sea and river,
Ocean and pond,
Falls and springs,
Water of life.
Bless the waters, O my soul!

Rocks and mountains,
Trees and flowers,
Grain and grape,
Bread of life.
Bless the earth, O my soul!

Lions and goats,
Storks and badgers,
Whales and cattle,
Help-mates from Eden.
Bless the animals, O my soul!

Months and weeks,
Seasons and years,
Day and night,
Life and death.
Bless the time, O my soul!

Let all that is within me
Bless the world God made.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
Hallelujah!
Amen

Collect

God of all Creation,
clothed with honour and majesty;
fill our hearts
with joyful humility and loving service,
that we might be clothed with
the same mind that was in Christ Jesus our Saviour,
in whom all things were made
and in whom all things are held together.
Amen