

What Is a Human Being? | The Doctrine of Humanity | Psalm 8
To Be a Christian: Nine Questions Every Life Answers
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In our sermon series, *To Be a Christian: Nine Questions Every Life Answers*, we come today to our third question: *What Is a Human Being?*

We will turn to Psalm 8 for our answer, where David poses this very question, “what is man?” (Ps 8:4).

But first I want to share a personal story that’s been coming to mind as I’ve studied Psalm 8 and this topic—the Doctrine of Humanity.

I must have been around twelve, and it was late spring because my dad was doing what he always did as temperatures heated up—installing our air conditioner unit in the dining room window.

It was a beast of a machine, wide as it was deep, heavy, awkward. My dad would put on a back brace for the lifting, and call a neighbor, because this was a two-man job.

I was sitting on the couch watching TV when my mom asked if he’d called the neighbor. To which he replied—to my surprise and hers—“No. Sam can help.”

I got up with a mixture of fear and newfound confidence. Together, my dad and I carried that beast of a machine up the basement and foyer stairs, then secured it in the window.

In so many ways, this story is no big deal. But I kept thinking about it as I followed David’s line of thinking in Psalm 8. He moves from man’s insignificance in light of the bigness of things to his calling into the glory of his father’s work:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet (Psalm 8:3–6).

This event, when my father identified in me something worthy of being called into his labor in his home, was a microcosm, a metaphor, of something much deeper: it touched on what it means to *be a human being*.

Do we not see this very theme at work in the life of Jesus, who shows us perfect humanness: He was His “Father’s Son” (Matt. 3:17), wanted to be “in His Father’s house” (Luke 2:49 ESV), and remain “about His Father’s business” (Luke 2:49 KJV).

Let's keep this image in mind as we turn to the question at the very center of Psalm 8: "what is man? (8:4). The Psalm situates humanity in the creator's world and tells us that to be human is to be *from God, like God, and for God*. Put another way, it answers the question of what a human being is by showing us humanity's **story, design, and purpose**.

I. Humanity's Story: *from God*

Psalm 8 and God's Story

What is man's story? Many thinkers have noted what seems obvious upon reflection: *human beings understand themselves in light of stories*. To know who we are, how we should live, we need a controlling plot about the world around us.

What story does Psalm 8 situate human beings within?

The Psalm envelops us in a divine, cosmic, and earthly setting—beneath and within a massive world that calls to mind the story of creation in Genesis 1.

God is first and foremost—hence "LORD" is the first word in the Psalm. David then draws us downward to "the heavens" (1), "moon and stars" (3), "man" (4-5), animals and fish (6-7), and finally "paths of the seas" (Ps 8:8), regions deep at the bottom of the ocean.

This setting is not a mere backdrop; it is a *story*—what God is doing in and by His creation. So whatever else man is, he is a being who finds himself embedded in God's Story of Creation.

Psalm 8 and Competing Stories

To help us see how this story shapes our self-understanding, let's consider it in light of two other stories that are popular today, that vie for shaping power in our lives.

The first competing story we'll call *I am what nature made me*. This is a fairly strict view that the natural world is all there is, and who we are is a matter of what the mysterious and impersonal forces of nature made us.

Nature—whether our genes, DNA, process of development—teaches us things. But by itself it cannot establish our real value and significance.

Notice the tension that David raises between a view of nature and a view of man in verses 3-4, where in light of the bigness of the night sky man risks being swallowed up by insignificance:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man (Psalm 8:3-4 ESV).

David is right: if nature is all that there is, it's hard to establish humankind as particularly significant in the cosmic scope of things.

And processes such as "natural selection" or "survival of the fittest" sit awkwardly alongside our commitments to the inviolable rights of every human being. But look at verse 2 of our Psalm, where God's penchant to use the weak to stop the strong shows up:

Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger. (Psalm 8:2 ESV)

The theme of this verse seems to cut against the grain of the natural world—small and weak things still and shape the strong.

Set in God's story, humanity can learn from nature, is part of the created world, but is not finally determined by it.

Another competing story popular today is what we call, *I am what I make myself*. Here, it's not nature outside me but the voice within me that tells my story. My true self can be discovered within and following that voice is the key to authentic existence.

One trouble with this story is that while it tells us we can define ourselves from within, we keep looking outside ourselves for affirmation and proof that we matter. We are told that what matters is loving ourselves and being true to ourselves, but in reality we are constantly evaluating ourselves against others: what school did he get into, look how pretty she is, how many likes did they get.

The *I am what I make myself* story, ironically, ends up outsourcing our identity and value to an every-changing crowd.

But notice how different the story of Psalm 8 is.

Our identity is God-given, not man-made: "you have made him" (5). This speaks to God's authorship of every human life: we discover who we are not by looking within and around, but by looking up to God.

And our worth and value don't come *after* we have performed. Rather, we are crowned and honored before we do anything:

you have ... crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet (Psalm 8:5–6 ESV)

One implication from knowing ourselves in light of God's Story: *we need a theology of humanity*.

We learn much about humanity from science and the humanities. Doctors understand much about our pain, and writers and poets plumb our pathologies. But to truly understand ourselves we need more than science and the humanities—we need *theology: God's Word about humanity*.

Mom's and dad's, do you have *theology* about your children? Along with the books about behavior, doctor checkups, school evaluations, do you know your children come *from God*, that God is "mindful" of them and "cares" for them?

Employers and policy makers, do you lead with a *theology* about the people you impact?

All of us, is our self-talk shaped by a *theology* of humanity or merely our mood?

A second way Psalm 8 answers the question, *what is man*, has to do with humanity's design.

II. Humanity's Design: *like God*

Sometimes our kids put the wrong shoe on the wrong foot. They still can walk, but not great, because they are not using their shoes according to their design.

Things are like this—they have a design which determines how they're to be used. What about human beings? What's our design?

David touches on this in verse 5, where he seems to be echoing the great "image of God" passage of Genesis 1:

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor (Ps 8:5).

The phrase "heavenly beings" can also be translated "god," and here suggest a distance but also closeness between human beings and the divine. So too does the language of being "crowned with glory and honor," which echoes the "majesty" and "glory" of God in verses 1 and 9.

Humanity is not God; but reflects the glory of God. As stated in Genesis 1,

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26).

Scripture reveals man's design as *an image bearer of God*. Humans reflect, resemble and represent God in His world.

Certainly, we resemble God in our capacity for **knowledge** and understanding. So too, in our social and **relational** nature, we reflect the Triune God.

But Psalm emphasizes our image-bearing-design by how we represent God's *rule*—His wise, life-giving rule over His world. We see this in the language of "dominion":

You have given him **dominion** over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. (Psalm 8:6–8)

In the ancient world, kings would set up images, statues, of themselves in distant lands over which they ruled. These images *represented* their sovereign presence.¹

Such is God's actions with human beings in Genesis 1 and Psalm 8. He "crowns him with glory and honor," (v 5)—**royal imagery**. He "gives him dominion over the works of his hands" (v 6)—**vice-regent imagery**.

We are God's living statues, set up to represent His rule and care for the world in his world.

This means wise, life-giving cultivation of whatever patch of earth God's given us influence in.

Herman Bavinck captures the essence of this beautifully:

¹ See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, 82; Cited in Strachan, 28

Man is to “cultivate” the earth, to “open it up, and so cause to come up out of it all the treasures which God has stored there for man’s use.”²

I love that phrase, “open it up.” It’s like thinking of creation as a seed, and man as part of the watering and growing and cultivating so creation realizes its potential.

This, of course, speaks to our work, our callings to build, develop and care for the things God has placed under our influence.

To quote Bavinck again,

And this dominion of the earth includes not only the most ancient callings of men, such as hunting and fishing, agriculture and stock-raising, but also trade and commerce, finance and credit, the [mining] of mines and mountains, and science and art. Such culture does not have its end in man, but in man who is the image of God and who stamps the imprint of his spirit upon all that he does, it returns to God, who is the First and the Last.³

Dominion means cultivation and protection. It means both a kingly and priestly vocation. It means flourishing and holiness. It means building homes that are also temples, developing physical and spiritual health.

Application

Where has God given you dominion right now?

Where do you see in your life God-given responsibility?

Your job is one area. Your family another. Also, your friendship. It is also the case that our bodies, minds and hearts are part of God’s creation—we are to have dominion over them—meaning to care for them in ways that please God.

And it means applying the mandate of dominion to technology.

Artificial Intelligence is raising questions about everything—from our work to our humanity. Psalm 8 speaks powerfully at such a moment.

God did not make *machines* to have dominion over the work of his hand. He made humans for that. As has always been the case with technology, humans can use the tools we develop to aid in this duty of dominion. But it is our responsibility to understand what good dominion means, what it looks like; it is our calling, moreover, not to be dominated by any technology—whether smart phones or chat bots—but to dominate and rule over our most powerful tools.

As Ben Sasse said in a speech back in May: Our choice is this: master the tools or be mastered by them.⁴

² Bavinck, *Wonderful Works*, 169.

³ Herman Bavinck, *Wonderful Works*, 189

⁴ Ben Sasse, “Habits for Americans in an Age of Disruption.”

III. Man's Purpose: *for God*

Finally, we ask a last question as we follow David to verse 9. There David repeats verse 1,

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:9)

Here we see what the ultimate purpose of human beings: to love and magnify the greatness of God. As the famous opening question of the Westminster Catechism reads:

Q. 1. What is the chief and highest end of man?

A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.

The flow of thought of David moves: *we come from God, were made like God, ultimately to be for God.*

What does it mean to glorify God—to be for him.

First, it means calling him “Lord,” as David does: “Lord, *our* lord.”

The first “LORD” is God's personal name, Yahweh. The second “Lord” is from a Hebrew word, (אֲדֹנָי, **aw-done**), which means “sovereign,” or “master,” or “owner,” hence here, “lord.”

Despite all our grandeur, human beings are not their own masters. We will be mastered by something or someone. Freedom, for David and for us, comes when we are mastered by our Lord.

Second, it means making working for his reputation, his name, not our own. David does not say, “how majestic is humanity's name, or my name.” He says, “how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:1 ESV).

When people come to truly understand our lives—what makes us tick, how we cope with stress, how we do our jobs—do they see that we ultimately depend on God? Do they smell the aroma of prayers and tears before the throne of God when they come into our lives?

And it ultimately means being human by being like Jesus. And while this risks getting into next week's question—*what happened to us*—we need to close by being honest about our stewardship of our humanity. Who among us has succeeded in living a life that is *from God, like God, and for God*?

Which is why the earliest Christians came to see that the true human Psalm 8 is talking about is Jesus. In the book of Hebrews, Jesus becomes the man of Psalm 8. Hebrews 2:5-9 reads,

It has been testified somewhere, “What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely **Jesus**, crowned with glory and honor

because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” (Hebrews 2:5–9 ESV)

What is a human being? We can now be a brother or sister of Jesus Christ—our Perfect Elder Brother. And though we are all made in God’s image, through Jesus, we all can now become sons and daughters of God.

And Jesus takes us by the hand and restores our humanity; he shows us the way to live as a being who is from God, like God, and for God.

Close: So that afternoon, as I sat watching TV—being shaped by the voices and ideas of the world—my father’s voice cut through the static: “Sam.” It called to me as someone worthy of being involved: “Sam can help.” It invited me, not into my story or my purposes, but my fathers. It was not ultimately about my strength, but my sonship.

What is man? asks David. What is a human being?—a man or woman created by God, to be like God, to live for God.

Small Group Questions

1. Take some time to sit with David’s question, “What is man?” (Ps 8:4). What is a human being? How would you answer that question? The sermon describes two competing stories that can shape our answer: “I am what nature made me” and “I am what I make myself.” Where do you see these stories shaping the way people think about identity and worth?
2. Psalm 8 says that God has “crowned” human beings with “glory and honor” before describing what they accomplish. How might believing that your worth is received from God rather than achieved change the way you approach success, failure, comparison, or insecurity?
3. The sermon describes dominion as the wise, life-giving cultivation of whatever God has placed under our influence. Where has God given you dominion right now? What would faithful cultivation and care look like there this week?
4. “Despite all our grandeur, human beings are not their own masters. We will be mastered by something or someone.” What things are most likely to master you—approval, work, comfort, technology, achievement, fear, something else? What would it look like to live more consciously under the lordship of God?
5. Hebrews 2 identifies Jesus with the human vocation described in Psalm 8. How does Jesus both show us true humanity and restore our humanity? Where do you especially need him to restore you to life that is “from God, like God, and for God”?