

Sermon – Psalm 148: All creation sings the maker's praise

About the author

Dominic Smart has been the Minister at Gilcomston South Church of Scotland, Aberdeen, since 1998, and was previously a Minister in Dundee. He is a regular speaker at conferences such as the Keswick Convention as well as universities and other venues. He is a visiting lecturer at the Highland Theological College and was chair of the Board of International Christian College, Glasgow from 2007-2009. Dominic and his wife Marjorie have four children, two dogs and two cats. He has written several books, including *When We Get It Wrong*, on failure; *Grace, Faith and Glory*, on the Bible's antidotes to legalism; and *Kingdom Builders and Kingdom Growth* on the book of Acts (all published by Authentic Media), *40 Days with Jesus* and *40 Days with David* (published by Christian Focus Publications).

Bullet point notes – For a short sermon

1. Introduction

- a. We look at creation and praise its wonderful Creator
- b. The rest of creation praises him too!
- c. Psalm 148 is creation's song of praise

2. Who should praise the Lord? All that he has made!

- d. Look at the language of the psalm
 - i. Psalm 148 includes everything by referring to the two extremes: heaven and earth
 - ii. It draws on the first chapter of Genesis as it reiterated its days.
- e. The heavens (verses 1–4)
 - i. The 'Sun, moon and stars'
 - ii. The amazing night sky declares the glory of God
- f. The earth (verses 7–12)
 - i. The world around us praises him
 - ii. And so should we: all of us, in all our amazing diversity

3. Why should all things praise the Lord? Because he reigns!

- g. Look at the structure of the psalm
- h. Both parts of the psalm give this reason
 - i. He is the Creator God who creates and rules by his commanding word
 - j. He is the Creator God who is above all things
 - k. He is the Creator God who reigns and saves
 - l. He is the Creator God who reigns and saves and loves his children

4. How can all things praise God? By being what he's made them to be.

- m. All creation praises him by being what he's made them to be
- n. So we praise him by being who he's made us to be, where he's put us and by doing what he's given us to do
- o. We don't need to be someone else, somewhere else doing something else in order to glorify God
- p. It's only as we glorify God with our whole lives that we become more fully ourselves

Full text – For a longer sermon

1. Introduction

Much of what we're thinking about today has to do with the wonderful world the Lord has made: we are celebrating creation.

God's creation is diverse, colourful, microscopic and cosmic. Whether you're a believer or not, you can find it fascinating, inspiring and awesome. It's the ultimate 'Grand Design'.

But for believers, the world we are part of is testimony to the endless inventiveness of the one who made all things, keeps renewing and sustaining all he has made, rules it with boundless wisdom and whose purposes are ultimately served not thwarted by his creation. We look at the world that he made and cannot help but admire our Maker: 'Lord, you're a genius!'

But the Scriptures extend that impulse to praise God and they expand our understanding of the world of which we are part. We humans express our 'Well done, Lord, you're amazing', but in Psalm 148 the worshipping songwriter wants all that God has made to sing the Maker's praise. Fit to burst with wonder and adoration, the praising heart of one believer wants to bring in all voices – like a conductor bringing in first one then another section of a vast choir. For God is so great that all voices are needed to praise him as he ought to be praised. Creation celebrates its Creator.

So for a few minutes today we'll let Psalm 148 expand our horizons. First, we'll look at that vast choir as we ask '**who should praise the Lord?**' Second, we'll look at what it is about God that invites such praises as we ask '**why should they praise the Lord?**' Then we'll end by asking **how can all creation – including all of us here today – praise him?**

2. Who should praise the Lord? All that he has made!

At first the range of voices seems merely wild and exuberant, but the psalmist is thinking and organising as well as feeling. Notice in verses 1–6 how he groups together the things that are over the earth; and then in verses 7–12 he calls on the earthly creation.

There's a Hebrew trick of including everything between two extremes by pointing out the limits – describing the whole bookshelf, so to speak, by referring to the bookends. What the psalmist is doing is embracing all creation, some of which he actually specifies, by referring to the heavens and the earth.

But notice what else he's doing here: he's recalling the days of creation; not by precisely repeating their details but by encompassing their scope and by grouping his psalm according to Genesis 1.1 – '**In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**'

The heavens (verses 1–4)

He begins, then, by waving his pen, like a baton, in a skyward direction and brings in the heavens. From angelic beings and the heavenly hosts comes delight in the Maker. The army that, elsewhere in the Old Testament, the Lord of hosts deploys to fulfil his purposes, defend his people and defeat their enemies, is here called to sing adoring admiration to its Creator. The sun, moon and stars are introduced from day 4 of God's first work (Gen. 1.14ff). Then the waters above the skies, from day 2 (1.6ff), are summoned to take their part in the praise concert.

Look out and up on a clear night; get away from the city lights if you can. Let your eye tune in to the darkness so that you can see the stars more clearly. How far do you think you can see? (OK, you can see a lot further if you've got your contact lenses in!). The more you look the more you see.

This is an illustration from my own experience of true wonder. Use this if you want, but it would be better if you used one of your own experiences.

One clear night in England's stunningly beautiful Lake District we – the whole family including the youngest, who loved being outside way past bedtime – were to be seen standing in a field dressed in nightwear, thick coats and wellies all craning our necks as we gazed into up into the sky. (These city folk!) Were we mad? No, we were utterly entranced by the same creation that the psalmist had in mind. That far south we were watching the most dazzling display of the 'Northern Lights', the aurora borealis, as the boffins call them. What had started as a faint, greenish glow in the clear night sky had, over about 20 minutes, developed into the most breathtaking display of multi-coloured curtains of light you could imagine. For nearly an hour, vast sheets of colour, a nocturnal kaleidoscope, rippled, twisted, swirled above Conistone and the fells. It really looked as if the very atmosphere was dancing for joy. And it infected us with joy. Particularly the youngest of us, who gaped in wide-eyed and innocent wonder at what God was doing. If we weren't so British we'd have been dancing too!

What we were seeing that night was the truth of Psalm 19.1–2; 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.'

The earth (verses.7–12)

Now the conductor aims his baton lower – at the earth; days 3, 5 and 6 of the originating work are evoked. The inhabitants of the teeming oceans are called to sing (as whales do so beautifully). The weather starts praising – a curious notion for most of us who live in Scotland, but there you are: faith stretched! All that geologists, botanists and zoologists study joins in the song. Living or inanimate; animal, vegetable and mineral; chaotic stuff and solid stuff: all that we study with our sciences, depict with our arts and occupy with what poet Ted Hughes called our ‘little heat’; all has its place in the Creator’s choir.

And so do we. All Adam’s offspring, from across every divide, from ‘every nation, tribe, people and language’ (Rev.7.9) and every other group you could think of: all our voices are called upon to sing God’s praise. No voice is ruled out by social status, race, age, or gender. Every one of us here today is included somewhere in verses 11–12.

You might include here a reference to the ethnic diversity within your own fellowship on the day that you preach; put that in the context of the size and diversity of the community that you’re in. Alternatively, you could use slides of people’s faces from different races and in different countries. Slides of ‘the blue planet’, of different landscapes and ocean views and of different animals and plants might be helpful here too. A random, fairly fast-moving assortment is perhaps best.

Around 6.8 billion of us, in 13,000 linguistic people groups are scattered among 193 countries. We occupy 13 different climate zones with, between land and sea, 910 different eco-regions spread out over 510 million square kilometres; and we’re only one numerically small species among at least 10 to 20 million others. We live on the third rock from the sun and the rock weighs 6 kilograms – with 24 noughts after the 6! This rock is moving around that sun at 30km per second; not that fast you might think, but that’s 108,000 km/hour, which would get you to Tesco and back quite quickly really!

3. Why should all things praise the Lord? Because he reigns!

Each of the two sections – heaven and earth – is called to praise and the reason is given for each at the end of its particular section. The way that the Psalm is laid out in some Bibles makes it look as though it has three sections, with the third beginning in verse 13. But that’s misleading. You can see the way that the Psalmist is thinking from the repeated phrases that show the structure of his thoughts. After an introductory ‘Hallelujah!’ verse 1 opens with ‘Praise the Lord from the heavens’. That section closes with the ‘Let them praise the name of the Lord, for ...’ of verse 5. The same opening and closing phrases are used in verse 7 for the next part of the choir: ‘Let them praise the Lord from the earth’ and then in verse 13 ‘Let them praise the name of the Lord, for ...’. Two matched sections, each composed of the call to praise and the reason to praise.

The interesting thing is that both the heavens and the earth are called to praise for the same reason: they are governed by the Lord who reigns.

In verses 5–6, the heavens, which praise God, were created by his command. (Hear the echoes of the phrase by which each day’s creation is introduced in Genesis 1: ‘And God said ...’) His word expresses his will and who can thwart that? None, so he just had to say and it was done. His word is creative: it both originates the heavens and sustains them.

You might want to include this, which connects the Psalm with Christ as he is spoken of in the New Testament, but weigh carefully whether or not it might distract your listeners.

The same point is made in the New Testament with reference to Jesus in Hebrews 1.2–3 and it lies behind John’s reiteration of Genesis at the opening of his Gospel: the new-creating Word is spoken not in audible sounds but in living flesh (John 1.1–14).

The place and behaviour of the sun, moon and stars, the angels and the waters above the skies are also given by his command. The Lord set them in place, like a jeweller setting diamonds, by his decree. His voice of authority gives the heavens their continuing existence. He is their governor, their ruler, for ever. All that we now understand about the ‘laws’ of nature is testimony to the Creator’s wise governing of his creation. From the predictable orbits of planets to the magnificently unpredictable discovery of new stars, all that we see testifies to the continuing creative word of the ruler of all things.

In verses 13–14 the theme re-emerges as the reason for the earth to extol him. His is the highest name, which is another way of saying that he is the highest being. None can match the brilliance of his glory: his splendour is greater than the splendour of all that he has made and overarches it.

But the theme of sovereignty receives a crucial development. The people who were to sing this song in the temple together, calling on all created things to worship their Creator, have a special reason to praise him: he has raised up a king (as many understand the ‘horn’ of verse 14) who will reign for him over them. So the king that he has raised is inherently praise-worthy. And

those who lavish their praise upon him will be called his saints: they will belong to him. Here, 'saints' means 'set apart from one master and for another'.

It's a way of saying that they are his by virtue of being made by him and by virtue of being redeemed by him. Double the volume of praise, then; and it's praise that is directed to the Father and to his anointed King-Messiah, to Jesus the Saviour and Lord, the one who has supremacy over all things (Colossians 1.15–18).

That theme of a particular, appointed king over saints is itself developed as the saints are defined: they are his offspring. 'Israel' in verse 14 is not to be understood as a political thing but in the way that God describes it: as his son. When the Lord was saving his people from Egypt – taking them out from under a tyrannical master so that they could live under his loving, kind rule – he commanded Moses, 'Say to Pharaoh, *'This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.' But you refused.'* (Exodus 4.22–23a)

The relationship between everything else in the Psalm and the Lord is that of creature to Creator. But the relationship between God's people and the Lord is unique. It is also that of the covenant (chosen) children to their Dad. Everything else exists by creative command and wise decree. We are here by creative command, by wise decree and by covenant love. Everything is lower than him, but we are 'close to his heart'. Nothing quite matches the place that God's children have in his life. Praise him who reigns over you with love!

Again, you should adapt this for your own situation, but the words of the song are worth quoting. If you don't feel they are, you might think of quoting another children's song (for the sake of preserving the surprisingly adept simplicity): 'Our God is a great big God' covers the same ground, though you probably wouldn't want to quote all its repeats! 'Who's the King of the Jungle?' isn't bad; ditto 'You can't stop rain from falling down'.

In dim and distant days I did summer missions with United Beach Missions. One of the staple songs – with actions! – was 'He made the stars to shine'. It's one of the ultimate golden oldies and has been replaced by gazillions of other songs. But what a brilliantly simple and child-friendly summary of Psalm 148! Come down memory lane and listen to the words afresh in the light of what we're learning from the Psalm. Do the actions if you must!

- He made the stars to shine,
- He made the rolling sea,
- He made the mountains high
- And he made me.
- But this is why I love him:
- For me he bled and died.
- The Lord of all creation
- Became the crucified.

4. How can all things praise God? By being what he's made them to be

By this stage in the sermon you might be thinking that it's all very nice talking about how much God loves us, but isn't all this stuff about a cosmic choir a bit far-fetched? Isn't the Psalm really just a product of poetic licence? I mean, how can you really speak of the weather actually praising God when it can't think? OK, so I might sing encouraging songs to the plants in the garden (when the neighbours are out) but you'd have to be really loopy to say that you heard them singing! Isn't the psalmist just expressing his own heart here, rather than saying anything about the rest of the cosmos? How does creation praise God?

The question is worth asking because the answer is so helpful.

As far as God is concerned, all that he has made reflects the fullness of his character, his brilliance, in short, his glory. And it does so by being where he wants it and by doing what he made it to do. Storms glorify God by being uncontrollable. It's the very 'mountainous-ness' of mountains that honours God. The sea, supporting abundant and hugely varied life, glorifies its Maker just by being the sea. It brings God pleasure as it reflects back to God the perfections of his skill and power. Just by being the sun, the sun brings a smile – if we can put it like this – as much to God's face as it does to ours in the UK.

There's a saying: 'Spit on the desert and a flower will grow'. Unseen rain storms fall in desert places. Seeds that have lain dormant for years are moistened. Within days, flowers bloom that no single human being will ever see and be inspired to say 'Praise the Lord for that beautiful flower'. But God sees it. There are short-lived fields of desert sand verbena or of thale cress (Arabidopsis to the biologists in the congregation), for instance, that only God ever sees – they don't make anyone else feel good, but they are a pleasure to their Maker just by being there. It's one of the wonderfully eye-opening features of our times that today's acute observers in our scientific community are revealing to us the amazing diversity of the Creator's work. So now we can picture the dance of cells in the blood stream; biologists continue to plumb the depths of the marvellous structure and functions of our DNA; particle physicists delve into yet more intricacies of the atom or the mysteries of black holes and dark energy.

These astonishingly diverse members of the cosmic choir glorify their Maker by being what he made them to be, where he made them to be it and by getting on with doing what he made them to do. You and I, in the very diversity that the psalmist describes are part of that glorifying creation.

Now here's where the answer to the question about 'poetic licence' really helps us: you don't need to be someone else to glorify God.

Being who you are you can glorify God. But unlike stars, cows or sub-atomic particles you can deliberately, knowingly, consciously, bring pleasure to God. What an encouragement! And how contrary that runs to the way we do culture and, sadly, the way we do the Christian life. Our culture says, 'Become like these people in the adverts or the films and then you'll be fulfilled.' Tragically, we can feel just the same pressure in church. 'If only I/you were more like such and such! Then you'd be a better Christian'. As if God slipped up when he made you: 'Oh if only he'd made me perpetually young/a woman/a barrister or judge/ more socially connected' (delete as appropriate)!

But it is the very fact that we all sing his praise as such different people that brings him so much glory! His excellence can't be told by one social group, or by one age range or by one gender. There aren't enough words in any one language to speak his praises adequately – all the global nuances of the phrase 'well-done' or 'praise the Lord' are needed. Only a choir as large and diverse as the cosmos will do to sing the praises of the Maker of all things. Don't succumb: the pressure to be someone else before you can really bring pleasure to your Maker doesn't come from him!

In this next paragraph, you could include, if not too pointed, some of the things that occupy the people in your own fellowship. Again, if you can use slides of people being busy with a range of activities it might help.

And the same goes for where you are and what you're doing. You won't become more pleasing to God by becoming a pastor or vicar or whatever you want to call them, unless of course he's appointed you to be one. Housewives, students, nurses, old folk; scientists – especially today the scientists; introverts and wild, outgoing extroverts; arty types, engineers and care home managers; in dull places and exciting ones, in humdrum routines and chaotic changes – all bring pleasure to God by getting on with being who they are made to be where they have been put and doing what they've been given to do.

Don't waste your God-glorifying life by waiting for it to become something else before it can glorify him. Caterpillars glorify God before they become butterflies, as well as after. If a hippopotamus can glorify him, so can you!

So why not do so? Indeed, it is only by glorifying God in worship, work, leisure, family and social justice, through scientific enterprise and artistic expression that we become what we are meant to be and share with all creation in glorifying God. Together we can perform in the grand choir of all that he has made.

This bit is highlighted because it gathers together this last main section and helps to 'land the plane', so to speak.

Psalm 148 tells us that ...

- We praise him for his cosmic sovereignty by doing his will.
- Tomorrow morning, you can praise him for his glorious salvation by trusting his Saviour.
- Three weeks next Thursday afternoon, while you're stuck at the traffic lights, you can praise him for his covenant love by loving, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength the one who holds you close to his heart.

Your distinctiveness is not a licence to join in the rampant individualism of our culture; it's a gift from your covenant-making God. Use it to add your praising voice to all creation's song. Join with all that your Father has made to sing praises to his glorious name and to adore, to trust, and to follow Jesus, his glorious, saving King.