

Psalms for the Summertime: Psalm 104

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Psalm 104

A while back, in a sermon I preached at an evening service here, I referenced something the poet Malcom Guite said when he was on Russel Moore's podcast. As a poet, Guite pays a lot of attention to the metaphors, the images we people use to talk about our reality. He noted that the images we use to talk about our fellow human beings have recently changed.

It used to be that when we talked about human pursuits and human activities, we would use language of calling and giftedness. So if a person showed talent at playing the cello, we would say, "She was made to be a cellist. It's so obviously her calling. She has a real gift." That kind of talk, that kind of metaphorical language was used by believers and non-believers alike and it suggests that our abilities come from outside ourselves. They are a gift. But now the metaphors are different. Now if someone is a really good violinist, people are more likely to say, "It's in her DNA, it's how she's wired. Music is in her genes." With those images, we are no longer people receiving a gift from a higher power; now we are more like machines. These are mechanical images: DNA. Wires. They suggest a more mechanical view of a person. Your talents aren't gifts; they just happen to be wired into you. The old metaphors suggested that life is a gift of God; the new metaphors suggest that you are more like a machine.

That kind of shift hasn't just happened in the way we talk about people; that shift has happened in the way we talk about creation. We tend to see the whole natural world through the lens of mechanical processes. Weather is the moving of warm fronts and cold fronts, which are in turn dependent on the movement of ocean currents and ocean temperature. Mountains are products of tectonic shifts which, over long periods of time, caused continents to collide and crinkle. The cycle of sunrise and sunset is caused by the earth's rotation. The seasons are caused by the tilt of the earth's axis with respect to the sun. We see the world through the lens of mechanical processes. It's our default orientation. If you just let the language and the metaphors of the modern world form you, you'll be trained to see mechanics and processes.

But now, Let's have Psalm 104 form us. How would Psalm 104 have us see the natural world? So how does the psalmist see the world and what sort of vision is being formed in us when we pray this psalm or read this psalm or sing this psalm? It's not a mechanical view of the world, is it? The psalmist doesn't see wind and light and mountains and seasons and sunrises as natural processes, he sees them as the work of God; the active work of God.

It's not that God made the processes and set them in motion; God is busy in nature right now. A sunset is not simply sunlight refracted through the atmosphere; every sunset is a work of art that God created that night. The light that pours through your window on a sunny summer morning is not simply the rays of the sun on your counter; it's the hem of God's garment sweeping through your kitchen. The mist that shrouds the mountains is not simply condensation from warm moist air meeting cold air; it's God touching the mountains so they smoke. The clouds are not just condensation they are God's chariot. The mountains aren't just the product of tectonic shifts; the mountains are formed and watered by the hands of God. The breath of every living thing is not simply the operation of their respiratory system; it is the breath of God sustaining them; God keeping them alive with every breath. The world is not a machine; it is the theater of God's glory.

Psalm 104 is a nature walk. The psalmist takes you on a tour through creation, sometimes the psalmist soars high, to show you the mountains, the rivers and the seas. And sometimes the psalmist swoops in close, to show you the birds making their nest in the Junipers and to peer into the rocky crags where the hyrax, the rock rabbits, are raising their young. In every place he takes us he sees God working wonders. None of these things are just happening, all of them come from the hand of God, the breath of God, the word of the living God.

Does that mean the psalmist doesn't believe in the process? When he says that the mountains smoke when God touches them, is he denying the process of condensation? When he says God raised the mountains, is he denying plate tectonics? No. Of course not. He is denying that these processes are only cold mechanical processes. He's saying that all these natural phenomena are more than processes, that God is intimately

involved in the moving of the tectonic plates. The earth doesn't spin on its axis mindlessly; God is the one who keeps it in motion.

Depending on how they are phrased, the mechanical perspective and the Psalm 104 perspective don't have to be in conflict. If you see as pot of tea boiling on a stove, you could describe the mechanics of the process. You could describe the way the stove makes an electronic spark that ignites the natural gas creating a heat source. You could observe that the boiling point of the water is 212 degrees Fahrenheit and you could describe what happens to the water molecules at that temperature. Or you could look at the pot of boiling tea and describe how a woman has just put on a pot of tea for her good friend who she hasn't talked to in months. You could describe the richness of their friendship and their joy at the opportunity to share a couple of hours of good tea and good conversation. Both ways of looking are correct, but the second is richer, and deeper, and more meaningful. Psalm 104 is teaching us to see the creation around us, not as a mechanical process, but as the work of a loving God who rejoices in this beautiful world, and who invites us to rejoice with him.

What happens to us, what is God forming in us when the Holy Spirit makes us see like this psalmist? Many things, but I will close with just three. When we see the creation from a Psalm 104 perspective, God shows us his presence. There are many Psalms where the psalmist has a hard time seeing God. "Why do you stand so far from my groaning? Why have you forsaken us? Show us your face Lord!" There are other Psalms where God's presence seems elusive. That's a real part of human experience.

But that's not Psalm 104! The psalmist sees God everywhere. Everywhere he looks he sees God present and active. In the grass, the trees, the wind the clouds, the streams; everywhere he looks God is smiling and saying here I am! It reminds us that love of creation and careful attention to God's handiwork can be a really important part of our relationship with God. This takes patience and attention on our part. God's presence is there. God is waving to us all the time in the created world. The heavens are telling the glory of God, but we are so busy, heads down, plowing through our stuff, we can't see him waving.

There are ways to sharpen our attention. Dean Rooks has led folks through local nature places and together you've practiced attention. You could say you were letting the Holy Spirit teach you a Psalm 104 perspective. Another thing you can do, another way of experiencing God's presence in creation is to do a simple sense exercise. Go outside, either go for a walk or if you're not that mobile, simply sit on your porch and do an inventory of your senses: What do I see? (I see the beautiful slanted light of morning, thank you Lord for this gift). What do I smell? (I mowed the lawn last night and I smell the fresh-cut grass, thank you Lord for this gift.) What do you feel? (the coolness of the morning and the slow awakening of my body after a long sleep, thank you Lord for this gift.) What do you hear? (I hear the joyful chatter of the birds welcoming the morning, thank you Lord for this gift). What do you taste? (I taste the pleasure of the day's first cup of coffee, thank you Lord for this gift). This is a simple spiritual practice, but it is absolutely a way to practice the presence of God, a way to have the Holy Spirit develop a Psalm 104 perspective in your life. And when you begin to see God in the natural world around you, it will help you tune in to the action of God in the rest of your life's story.

When we see the creation from a Psalm 104 perspective, God also trains us in praise. I don't have a lot of time to spend on this one, but I think you can see: If you see the world as a brainless machine, there won't be much gratitude. But if you see the world as the creative work of a loving, active God, you will be led to thanks and praise. Which is where the Psalm ends: "I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to God as long as I live."

So when you have a Psalm 104 perspective, the Holy Spirit trains you in presence, he trains you in praise and finally the Psalm 104 perspective assures us of God's protective power. To make this point I need to get into some stuff behind the text that you might not see at first reading. Remember, this psalm would have been written at a time where the religions of the surrounding nations were polytheistic. They had multiple gods, and these gods tended to be associated with the different forces of nature. A god of the sun, a god of the moon, a god of the storms, a god of the sea. And while each of these gods were powerful, their power was limited to their jurisdiction. The god of the moon was powerful at night. The god of the sun was powerful during the day. The goddess of the sea was powerful out on the water. The earth goddess was powerful on the land.

Why does that matter? Well, many scholars have noticed that parts of Psalm 104 bear a strong resemblance to a well-known Egyptian song of praise to the sun god Ra. The section from verse 19-23, where the psalmist talks about night coming and the beasts of the forest prowl and the lions go about seeking their

food. There's a section a lot like it in that Egyptian hymn. Here's a bit of the Egyptian hymn to Ra. The poem says about the sun god: "At night, when thou dost go down, the earth is in darkness, resembling death...Every lion has come forth from his den, all the snakes bite. Darkness prevails and the earth is in silence since he who made them is resting in his horizon." You can hear the similarity: the sun going down, the lions prowling around.

But the psalmist doesn't plagiarize the old hymn, he does something much more interesting. Did you hear the differences? For the Egyptian hymn, the night is a time of fear, a time where it's like death, a time when the snake bites. It's a fearful time because the sun god is not there and he doesn't have power at night. At night the snakes and the lions are in charge.

Is that how our Psalm views the night? No. Read Psalm 104:19-23 again. God made both the sun and the moon. He's Lord over them. God is the one who tells the sun when to go down, it is God who brings the darkness, and when the lions roar for their prey, God provides their food. The psalmist has taken the Egyptian poem and has changed it as a way to proclaim that the Lord is not like Ra. Ra only rules the day. Both the day and the night belong to the Lord. The moon and the stars are his. So are the heights of the heavens and so are the depths of the sea.

This is a message you hear all through the Psalms, right? Psalm 95: "In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land." When you hear a proclamation like that in the Psalms, "the day and night are his", it's a jab at the gods of the nations with their limited jurisdictions. It's also a message to little Hebrew children who are lying in their beds at night and worried about the things that go bump in the night that God is Lord of the night too, and he will take care of them and they don't need to be afraid. It's also a message for us grown up children lying in our beds worrying about our family, our children, our health, that God is Lord of the night, that he will take care of us, and that we don't need to be afraid.

When it proclaims God's lordship over all parts of creation it's Psalm 104's way of saying that 'neither life nor death, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.' When you have a Psalm 104 perspective the Holy Spirit forms you in God's presence, in his praise, and in his protective care.

The church has had an uneasy history with contemplating God in creation. Sometimes creation spirituality can sound spacey and new agey. But in Psalm 104, the Holy Spirit shows us that God loves this world, he delights in it, and he makes himself known through it. In Psalm 104 the Holy Spirit shows us that there is a way to contemplate the created world that leads us into the presence of the living God. After all, didn't Jesus himself practice the Psalm 104 perspective when he said,

"Consider the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin, yet not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed as one of these. And if that is how God clothes the grass of the field, will he not much more clothe you?" Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who continues to bless us with the beauty, the order, and the witness of his creation.

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