

Psalms, the Playlist

#8 “There is No Answer” – Psalm 8

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Video Clip narration

For us, mostly stuck on our rocky little planet, the view of the universe begins with Earth. This is Earth – silicon and oxygen based, with a metallic core. The surface is mostly water. It teems with life and rotates once every 24 hours while orbiting a star called the Sun every 365 days.

This is the Sun -- mostly hydrogen and helium. Its surface temperature is nearly 10,000° F. For energy, our Sun converts 700 million tons of hydrogen into 695 billion tons of helium every second.

The Sun is part of a solar system that includes Earth and seven other orbiting planets from Mercury to Neptune; and it is not a stationary system. Our solar system is spinning, flying through space at 134 miles per second, turning in circles as part of a vast collection of stars and star systems.

There may be 200 billion stars in this collection called The Milky Way galaxy -- an estimated 6 billion of those stars with planetary systems like ours. Our solar system orbits the center of The Milky Way on one of its outer arms. The Milky Way is one of more than 125 billion galaxies that make up the visible universe.

This is the universe. It is really, really big.

Introduction to Psalm 8

I think the beauty of that video is in the last tenth of a second when he says, “It is really, really big.” This universe is contained in a drop, maybe a single drop of sweat of God – if He could sweat – because what could make Him perspire? But the bigness of the universe is contained by God.

I hope the video was helpful. Stargazing can help you that way to understand the vastness and the transcendence of God.

We will look at Psalm 8 today. As you are turning there, I would like for you to listen to a quote from a Hebrew scholar, Derek Kidner, when he writes of Psalm 8:

This psalm is an unsurpassed example of what a hymn should be, celebrating as it does the glory and grace of God, rehearsing who He is and what He has done, and relating us and our world to Him; all with a masterly economy of words, and in a spirit of mingled joy and awe.

This mastery and economy of words is, if nothing else, extremely efficient in Psalm 8.

What I like about the psalm came right to my mind when I was reading it weeks ago -- its artful balance of two opposing views of God that seem to be in contradiction to one another but they are not.

What I am referring to is the *transcendent* nature of God and the *imminence* of God. When people talk about the nature of God, and even in your own head rattling around there is whether you know these terms or not, is that God is transcendent or He is imminent. Transcendence has to do with the greatness of God and imminence has to do with the closeness of God. His transcendence has to do with his independence from all created things and His imminence has to do with His connectedness, His being intertwined with us. In our minds, we are usually negotiating one of these two aspects of the nature of God but rarely do we hold them in balance as we should.

In theological circles or philosophical circles sometimes men and women will pose this dilemma as – *What do you think God is? Is He transcendent or is He imminent?* – Then you have to choose one of the two and then argue your case. So would be the case in an under graduate or graduate doctoral level class in theology or philosophy. Which is it? This section of Scripture, Psalm 8, is beautiful in its answer to that question.

God is Transcendent

The word *transcendence* is a Latin word and means to travel across or go beyond. In the field of study known as epistemology, or the study of how we know when something is transcendent, it means that it is beyond our ability to conceive of it.

When we talk about God being transcendent, it means there are no adequate words to describe even the littlest things about God. People who write about the transcendence of God do not write very much. They will say that words cannot contain our descriptions.

Even the word *God* itself is inadequate and is inappropriate to even be used. When we talk about His being transcendent, it means we are consumed by His majesty. That is why we were yelling Majesty [in one of the worship songs prior to the teaching time]. It means that He is higher than creation; He is beyond creation. There is an infinite gap between who He is, what He is like, and everything that is contained as a created thing.

Examples of His transcendent nature are found quite succinctly in the first three commandments if you think about it. -- I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery.

#1: “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Well, of course not. How could you?

#2: “You shall make no image in My likeness.” – Whether it is in the sky or on earth or below the sea. Something in the likeness of God – try this. If you understand the transcendent nature of God, if you had to draw a picture of God, what would He look like? Hopefully you would not even pick up a pen

because He cannot be contained. That is why God says – *don't make an image out of Me because that would be so irreverent because I am transcendent of anything created. I am Spirit in nature. Are you going to put clay to Me? Really.*

#3: “You shall not use My name recklessly.” - I will hold, it says, everyone guilty who uses My name carelessly. Don't even say the name. So instead of using the name YHWH, we use the word Jehovah; it is safer. Some of you know people who when they write e-mails back and forth, they won't even say God; they will write G – d. They will not put an *o* in there because it is inadequate. It is not faithful to the transcendent nature of God.

So just to show you passages of Scripture which talk about the transcendent nature of God, let me read one. It is extensive but it will be worth it. Isaiah writes in chapter 40 in a humorous way about – what are you going to do, conceive in your mind or in materials, what God is like?

Isaiah 40:18-26 To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare Him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.

Then he looks for a craftsman to hew the base so that it does not topple. No one likes a toppling God after all.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

That video of the universe - that is a pup tent for Him.

He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than He blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

Thus goes Genghis Khan.

“To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of His great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

He calls the stars out, by name, and puts them in order – billions and billions of them.

God is apart from us. He cannot be in the company of things like us. **He is self-existent** and that means that He never had a birthday. He did not cause himself to exist. When people ask the question – “Well, then who created God?” They don’t understand the concept of what God is. If something created God, that thing that created God, that would be God. He is an uncaused cause, the unmovable mover, and He does not answer to us.

James Boice writes this about His self-existent nature:

“God’s self-existence means that He is not answerable to us or to anybody. Although He sometimes explains things to us, He does not have to and often He does not. God does not have to explain himself to anybody.” [*Foundations of the Christian Faith*, p. 103]

We cannot understand it and He does not owe it to us. He is self-existent.

God is self-sufficient, that means He does not need us. He does not need worshipers or our company. He does not need anyone’s company. He does not need our stuff. He does not need. He is self-sufficient. He is like nothing else. He is like nothing we can compare Him to.

It is impossible to contain Him or even house Him. Right now, or rather they have been doing this for about five or ten years, they are making entire floors in exotic places at resort hotels, extravagant resort hotels, to house the giant NBA type players. These men and women, mostly men, who are 6’8” to 7’5” cannot vacation well. It is not a vacation; it is not extravagant if you have to duck your head to go through a door jamb. Some of these hotels are not having a floor just for that. That floor is taller than any other floors; the ceiling heights are 15 feet at least and the door jambs are 9 feet and the beds are 8 foot long, so that these men can go and actually relax and stretch out. The hotels can house them, finally.

Have you ever been to a European cathedral? When you walk inside of those cathedrals and you look up and you see the ceiling heights there, 250 feet or so, you say – “Oh, God.” And that ceiling cannot contain Him. The windows – you can’t look through them but they can see right through you. The greatest artisans that man has ever produced, they decorate those things so that the sun shines through and they bring us to tears. And that cannot contain God. Those cathedrals have chairs with kneelers because when you go there and you worship the transcendent nature of God, you will want to be on your knees, and appropriately so. He is transcendent.

Error in Focusing on one of God’s attributes to the detriment of the whole

People who focus a lot of their thought on the transcendent nature of God find themselves drifting off into error and mistake because that is only half the story. If you focus exclusively or inappropriately percentage wise on the transcendent nature of God and His holiness, He can become so distant that He

would have nothing to do with us or especially you. When it comes to the problem of sorrow and evil in our lives, it is very easy for us to perceive that He has His arms folded and He is saying to us: *I don't answer to you. I am Me.*

If you spend too much time just focusing on the transcendent nature of God, you can find yourself slipping into, historically speaking, the theology called *deism* which means that God put everything together, set it into motion, and then just leaves it running because He doesn't need to mess with it anymore. Why would He? It is just us. – What happens to your prayer life is that it just dries up. It won't matter if you talk to Him anyway. He is out there, a long way from here and He won't meddle with these incidental things. So people just stop praying and they start working a lot harder. They feel a lot like they are on their own.

Sometimes it is the church you were raised in and it is deep seated – we don't even know what motivates us and we don't feel like we can lift our heads – we can't talk to Him. It is kind of a good thing that you have that value, but it is just not the whole story. While He is transcendent, there is also the other part of the dilemma – a false dilemma – that He is imminent.

God is Imminent

Imminent means that He is close. He has extended himself *into* our existence. It means that He has condescended. He has stooped down to be with us. In His greatness, He has allowed himself the ability to reach down to us.

Examples of this are songs that we sing sometimes. You will hear this one at a funeral or you might have heard it growing up. “He walks with me and He talks with me and He says that I am His Own.” Can you just visualize someone walking down a path and holding His hand? That is the picture. While God's transcendence is pervasive in the Older Testament, you can also see that God's imminence is being pronounced quite clearly as well. Whether it is the pillar of smoke or fire, or it is the tabernacle that God wants the Israelites to bring with them wherever they go, which ultimately becomes the Temple – and then when God clothes himself in skin and becomes Christ, it is told beforehand that you need to name Him Emmanuel, which means “God *With Us*”. That is the imminence. He is there.

When C. S. Lewis was speculating on the nature of God, even before he became a believer, because he understood the greatness of God, the transcendent nature of God, he said: *How could men know anything about God. How could our brains ever conceptualize it? How could we understand? He says: How could Hamlet know anything of Shakespeare?* Then when he reflected back on that

perspective, he said as a follower of Christ: *unless Shakespeare wrote himself into the story of Hamlet, then Hamlet could know him.* [C. S. Lewis: Christian History, Issue 7]

Interestingly, that was applied in the science fiction movie produced years and years ago, kind of a ground breaking thing, and they are making a sequel to it now, called “Tron.” [*understand that this is tongue in cheek*] Look, I am going to use science fiction around here. If you don’t like it, there are other churches. It is important to me to share science fiction with you.

The depth of Tron was that a gaming programmer became part of the game. There is a lot of theology that is played around by the participants in the game itself, whether there is such a thing as a programmer. And if there was a programmer, could he visit us? And he does and he is there. The idea is that the transcendent nature of a programmer can actually come – is it possible? Is it feasible? It is actually happening in this experience.

That is the story of the incarnation, the fleshing of God that is Jesus the Christ. He is transcendent; He is imminent. People who spend a lot of time – and that is the way things are in contemporary theology, especially in American right now – on the imminence of God, that He is close to us, that He is our friend. The problem that happens when you spend too much time in that aspect of the theology of God is that He becomes a buddy. He is the “Big Guy in the Sky”. He is the “Man Upstairs”. What happens is that He becomes manageable, doesn’t He? He becomes too much like us.

A. W. Tozer writes this:

Left to ourselves, we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where we can use Him, or at least know where He is when we need Him. We want a God we can in some measure control. ...

And that is what we do. We keep Him in our hip pocket and whenever we need Him, we rub the lamp. It is quite often that people who focus on the imminence of God, the friendliness of God, have a cavalier attitude toward sin because there is an obligation on God’s part to forgive us. When forgiveness is obliged, it is never numbing; it is never spell binding; it is revolutionizing; it never has the power to transform us if we can assume it and oblige God to give it to us. If God is not transcendent, if He is just a pal, then sin is He will understand. So we will expect forgiveness before we even make a decision to do something that would violate the holiness of God.

Before we get on to the passage itself, I want you to see that - again, if you just walk away with this understanding of these two big, fancy words, that would be okay because our lives in following Christ is a continual and perpetual elevation in a balancing act of the transcendence and imminence of God, constantly going up and up and up. He is getting bigger in our world, I hope, and He is getting closer in

our world, I hope. There are two ways to fall off this horse, isn't there? It is so simple to be that way. I would encourage you to be very careful about the books you read, especially today. In my opinion, they talk too much about the imminence of God. You read some of the old stuff, and they talk too much about the transcendent nature of God. So you have to balance these things. The songs we sing here are carefully chosen to focus on both of these attributes. If not one, then the next song will be about the other. It is important for you to grow in your understanding of His transcendence, His greatness, His bigness – and His imminence because it will affect your prayer life. Yes, He is huge and vast and He keeps this universe in a pocket somewhere ... but He knows when a sparrow falls and He has numbered the hairs on your head.

Psalm 8

When we look at Psalm 8, the beauty of this is how artistic the writer is at bringing both those things into our understanding: His transcendent nature and His immanency. We can see this beautifully done in the first three verses, which talk about His transcendence, and the remainder of the verses will talk about His imminence. – In the first verse, do you see how it refers to LORD in all capital letters, so he is talking about that official proper name.

God's Transcendence:

Psalm 8:1 O LORD (Jehovah), our Lord,

How majestic is your name in all the earth!

The majesty of God is in your name in all the earth.

:1b You have set your glory

above the heavens.

:2 From the lips of children and infants

you have ordained praise

because of your enemies,

to silence the foe and the avenger.

It is a little clumsy there in verse 2. Let me tell you what he is saying. The majesty of God's name is throughout all the earth. You have set your glory above and over all the heavens. And You have enemies. So all the enemies are scoffing and shaking their fists at You, You have responded and retaliated by allowing nursing children (that sound of nursing children) to be worship and that to overrule all these men who are fluttered and infuriated.

That is all God needs to tilt the scales to His favor. I will just use a nursing mother and that sound will drown them out. That is the story line. That is why Jesus quotes this psalm in Matthew 21. The context is that Jesus is healing lepers and the blind and deaf men and women. It is an amazing thing that takes place.

Matthew 21:14 The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant. So, these are the people in opposition that were clothed with power and majesty – they think – and they have a problem with Jesus healing and helping these other people. All the while, the children are saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” And here is what Jesus says.

Matthew 21:16 “Do you hear what these children are saying?” they asked Him.

“Yes,” replied Jesus,

I hear them over you.

... Yes,” replied Jesus, “have you never read,

“ ‘ From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise’?” (Ps 8)

So all your scoffing and all your threat of having your power taken away is being muted by the sound of children praising My name. I have kids that pull rank on you guys.

Psalm 8:3 When I consider your heavens,

The work of your fingers,

I love that – not hands, not arms – just with God’s fingers.

The moon and the stars,

Which you have set in place,

God’s Imminence:

8:4 what is man that you are mindful of him,

the son of man that you care for him?

It is like God to take us stargazing when we doubt His power.

A thousand years before this, God is trying to convince Abraham that He is able to fulfill the promise that He makes – that he would have a child. Abraham does not believe it and God says – *All things are possible with me*. I love the line in Genesis 15 – *Let’s go outside*. And he takes Abraham outside, it says, and he stares at the skies. God says, *count the stars. Never mind. You will have more descendants than the stars in the sky*. It was important that God used that visual for Abraham because it would be fourteen years of stargazing before Abraham would have the promised son. I wonder how many

times he slept outside of his tent, just staring up at the Milky Way, thinking – *If God is that big, surely He can give me one child.* Stargazing is a very helpful way to understand the transcendent nature of God.

Psalm 8:3 When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
Which you have set in place,
:4 what is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?

Why? Let's look at these two words here -- this immeasurable chasm between His bigness and His closeness.

Who is man that You would be mindful of him? Mindful means to remember, to recall. So what happens when you are away from someone you love for a number of days, weeks, or maybe even months – and you remember them? You are mindful of them. You fill in the details, right -- their hair color, their face, their eyes, their smile, their smirk, their tone of voice. What happens? It closes the distance, doesn't it? It makes them close to you. That is the point.

Who is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him?

Care is a great Hebrew word that means to look for, to hunt out, to jump up to see. Can you see God doing this, looking for us?

You have been to an airport, haven't you, where you have been estranged from someone you deeply love and you have been gone from for weeks, months, maybe a year. Can you imagine what it would be like to be a military spouse? Someone gets off the plane but it is in a crowded airport and what do you do? You are caring for them, you are hunting them out, you are looking through people. – Why does everybody dress the same in the military? – Pushing people away. You find them and then you could be a spectator watching perfect strangers. It is like those silly movies where it is a slow motion running. It is pretty silly unless it is you. When it is you, there is nothing sweeter. Then you cling to one another. That is the picture He is trying to show us.

Who is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him? – He is going through these galaxies, then solar systems, then planets, then continents, then countries, then neighborhoods, and then you. He is this big God. Why does He care? – I don't know. Who is man that You would be mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him? – It gets stranger.

Psalm 8:5 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
Some of your Bibles read “angels”.

And crowned him with glory and honor.

Let's just keep telling the story. He runs through the galaxies, the solar systems, the planets, the continents, the countries, the neighborhoods – finds you – and then He crowns you with a wreath that He has woven with glory and honor. He is placing this on your head as you kneel before Him. He is not a king; He is the maker of the universe. You cannot imagine Him in your head because your head cannot contain Him. Yet, He has woven this crown and placed it on your head. Why would He do that? For you. No answer.

But there is more to this than just laying a crown on your head.

Psalm 8:6 You made him (mankind) ruler over the works of your hands;

You put everything under his feet.

The crown is a knighting. He has knighted us. He has put this crown of glory and honor on our heads and He has done this. He said: I knight you human and I will give you the thing that is most like Me. It is what I do best. It is what I do most. I rule. I will let you be an expression of My image in you by ruling. I will put all these creatures underneath your feet – like a king puts other things under his feet. Look at the list.

Psalm 8:7 ... all flocks and herds,

And the beasts of the field,

:8 the birds of the air,

and the fish of the sea,

all that swim the paths of the seas.

God has done this. Why would He knight us and put us in this position of ruling? I do not know. That is why the psalm ends:

8:9 O LORD (Jehovah), our Lord,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Application

There is no answer to that question. *Who is man that You would care for him? Who is the son of man that You would be mindful of him?* There is no answer to that in light of the bigness of God. Yet He comes and He talks.

That should significantly influence our worship. That should revolutionize and transform our worship. When we come in here or when we worship at home, even more importantly, we should have a mind set of going before this transcendent God and at home it is easier and more appropriate to get down on your knees or on your face and when you talk about Him and when you sing about Him, it is with

intelligence and reverence. Sometimes when we sing here together, I will just stop singing because I want to read those words and I want to hear them through my ears and I want to think about them.

It should affect our prayer life. We should not see that He is so distant because He is so big; we should see that He is so big that He could answer our prayers and that He does ask us to ask and seek and knock – because He is there to answer our prayers. We would pray big, bold prayers that are according to His will. We would not be asking Him to fetch stuff for us. We would be asking to bring our wills in line with His.

We would be trying to submit to Him. We would pray expectantly, wouldn't we?

When it comes to giving, please, if it is about money, you have missed it. It is about some miniscule expression of showing that you get some of it. You get it a little bit. He should not look at us any more than a grasshopper as it says in Isaiah or a dust particle – but He chooses to and everything we have is His. So it is an expression of our understanding of who He has become in our own world. It should affect our worship big.

It should affect our worth, how we value ourselves. Most of us, if not all of us, have a comparative view of our worth. We compare ourselves to other people. Or, we think we are valuable because of some attributes or assets that we have. Friends, think about this for a second. Attributes or assets that we have compared to what? Compared to God? Think about that for a second. You think you are pretty? God has seen some pretty things. You are not pretty. We are not all that smart.

This last week I was in Santa Monica in southern California, in the Los Angeles area, for some family business. It is not a trip to California unless you see some really strange things. We saw a man, a homeless man, clearly in a state of some sort of bi-polar thing. It is a scary thing. It was outside of this grocery store on the corner. When I saw him, I felt such pity for him because it is a scary thing to realize that you and I (or at least I am) could be there in six months. We are just fragile. We are a couple of decisions from being on that corner or a chemical imbalance and bang. There we are. I was just taken aback by him because he drew our whole family into a conversation because he was very animated. He was a bigger guy and he was not at all attractive. I don't think he ever was. He had been ruined by the sun and the years on the street. But he was so expressive in his conversation with himself. He was on a game show and he was both players in the game show. He was very impatient with the contestants. So he asked the contestant, "You need to pick a number between 1 and 10." That is how it started, Pick a number between 1 and 10. "Well, how hard could it be? Just pick a number." Then he took the view of the contestant. "Well, I don't know. It should be 2 or I could be 7. I get confused at this point." He is going

back and forth with himself and his face is a little rubbery and he can do all sorts of contorted things with his face. – So, the girls and I were mesmerized by the whole thing.

Then I started thinking – beside, wow, it could be just the slip of something and any one of us could be there – you know what? When we look at things from God’s perspective, the best any of us can be is standing on that corner, talking to ourselves, thinking ourselves to be smart – but really foolish. Really, how many times as humans have we stood on some corner saying – We know so much. We know so much about everything. We know so much about everything that we know that those men five years ago were wrong about everything they knew – not even thinking that in five years, someone is going to say that about us.

If your worth is attached to your knowledge, you are a fool. God knows so much more and He can’t even explain it to us.

If your worth is attached to beauty because you are young, well, that is just the turn of a calendar, isn’t it? If you think you are pretty, you should see what God has created. He has made an entire realm called the angelic world that we cannot perceive because our eyes cannot contain it. So it stayed invisible for us. We say – but I have smooth skin. Skin? That is a detriment. So if you think you are valuable because you are pretty, that is a pretty ugly way of looking at life.

If you think you are worthy because you are powerful, can you stop and think when God gets playful with atoms and one of them breaks? It levels towns like Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Just an atom broken and it just terminates a city. And you say you have power? That is a pretty weak way of looking at life.

Here is how you gain worth. God said – *There is God; there are angels; and a little lower than angels are human beings. There. I have said it. It is true. Of those humans, I am mindful of them and I care for them. I made this crown of honor and glory and I have placed it on the head of human beings and I made them knights and I let them rule because it reminds Me of Me.* – That is why you have value. That is why you have worth. There is no other reason. It is because He chose to, because He wanted to, because He has a sense of humor, because He said so – that is all we have. Is that enough?

And all God’s people said – Amen. It is more than enough.

Dear heavenly Father,

It is a short little psalm and I ask that You help us to manage it, that we would somehow grasp it more this year than last year, that these nine sentences would make their way into the very fabric of our minds about how big You are, how You move planets around with your fingers.

Then You choose to care for us and You choose to think about us. Then you look for us. Then You knight us. So God, I ask that we would be a group of people who are forever violently worshipping You for who You are, and we are humbled by Your choice to adopt us and to turn your eyes towards us. I ask that You help us with that, that would be perpetually on our minds and that there would be no other god before us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen