

How Great Thou Art Psalm 104

Main Idea: In this hymn of praise, the Psalmist celebrates the way the created order glorifies the Creator.

- I. The Lord Is Clothed in Splendor and Majesty (104:1-4)**
- II. The Lord Rules the Earth and the Waters (104:5-9)**
- III. The Lord Provides for His Creation (104:10-18)**
- IV. The Lord Governs the Rhythm of Day and Night (104:19-23)**
- V. The Lord Delights in His Creatures (104:25-26)**
- VI. The Lord Gives and Takes Away (104:27-30)**
- VII. The Lord's Glory Endures Forever (104:31-36)**

The famous British philosopher Bertrand Russell sadly stated the result of a godless worldview, “There is darkness without and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendor, nor vastness anywhere; only triviality for a moment and then nothing” (in Piper, *When I Don't Desire God*, page). Contrast with theologian John Calvin who said, “The world is a theatre of God's glory.” The reformer also credited the creation of the world to *God's goodness*. He said, “Moreover, if it be asked what cause induced him to create all things at first, and now inclines him to preserve them, we shall find that there could be no other cause than his own goodness” (Institutes, 1.5.6.). Psalm 104 reveals much about the goodness of God and the glory of God, and which should win our affections to God. So let's think about one of the most astonishing things God has ever done: create the world. And what a world it is! It is full of splendor and beauty because it reflects the splendor and beauty of God!

Psalm 104 begins and ends the same way Psalm 103 begins and ends, with an inward call to “bless the Lord.” In Psalm 103, David focuses *redemption*, but the (unnamed) author of Psalm 104 focuses on *creation* as the subject of his self-exhortation. With wonder and detail, the Psalmist in 104 reflects on the Creator-King in order to stir his soul to worship. He reflects in particular at how God enjoys His creation, and in God's goodness, God invites us to enjoy the world and to glorify God.

We should indeed reflect on creation deeply, in order to worship our Creator joyfully and gratefully. In verse 34, the Psalmist says, “May my meditation be *pleasing to him*, for I rejoice *in the Lord*” (ESV). The Psalmist is meditating on *God*, as he considers the breadth and variety and detail of God's creation. A lot of people today are attracted to creation, but often fail to meditate on *the Creator*. Paul teaches in Romans 1 that many worship created things rather than Creator, and to their own destruction. We should instead join the Psalmist in meditating on God, and rejoicing in God, while reflecting on His amazing creation.

Psalm 104 contains many echoes the days of creation account of Genesis 1 (see Kidner's breakdown, 368), and there's also an overlap in vocabulary. But there are some differences. Genesis 1 is logical and schematic, whereas Psalm 104 is exuberant and free, and employs a rich vocabulary (Allen, 31). There's also a difference in order. Psalm 104 mentions animals and mankind earlier than the account in Genesis 1 (Ibid). Finally, there's a difference in how much is said about each day of creation (Wilcock, 121). However, the most significant difference may be with this fact: Genesis 1 is a look back to what happened at the beginning of creation; Psalm 104 celebrates *the way creation works presently* (Ibid., 122).

Often scholars bring up the similarity between Psalm 104 and an Egyptian sun hymns, like the “hymn to Aten” (see Allen, 29-31). But Psalm 104 worships the Maker of the sun, not the sun. If the Psalm is alluding to one or more of these ancient sun hymns, the reason may be for making this very point. In other words, the message is: Don’t worship the sun; worship the Maker of the sun! Again, the focus of one’s meditation on creation must not culminate with marveling at created things, but with rejoicing in Creator God.

I personally love the Psalmist’s account of creation because today there are endless debates around Genesis 1. These debates are important, but what tends to happen when we constantly debate things like the age of the earth and the length of a day, is that the grander of creation gets lost. And consequently, the greatness of God gets lost. Psalm 104, as a poet’s version of creation, stirs up our souls with awe and wonder. Don’t just debate creation; celebrate creation!

Further, the focus on the way the creation *presently* works also stands out as a practical feature of this Psalm, which supplies us with needed motivation to get outside and behold the wonders of creation daily. It also shows us why all of the things we see exist, namely to glorify God. In Psalm 148, the Psalmist says, “Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!” (148:3-4, ESV). Do you talk like this? “Come on, you bright yellow sun, praise God! Praise God you big blue sky! Praise God you little spider!” Creation reveals the incomparable wisdom of God, the unrivaled power of God, and the breathtaking goodness of God. Learn to see it!

Let’s join the Psalmist now in meditating on the greatness of God. Since the Creator is the primary focus of the Psalmist, I will begin each section of this exposition with reference to Him.

The Lord Is Clothed in Splendor and Majesty (104:1-4)

After preaching to himself (104:1a), the Psalmist declares, “O LORD my God, you are very great!” (104:1b, ESV). This expression sets the tone for the rest of the Psalm. The following verses magnify God’s greatness. The Psalmist calls God “my God,” showing that only a person in a relationship with God will view God as great and greatly to be praised.

In verses 1c-4, the Psalmist uses metaphors to convey the glory and power of God. As a sign of God’s Kingly royalty, the Lord is “clothed with majesty and splendor” (1c). The King’s splendor is conveyed with similar language in the Psalter (cf., Ps 8:1; 21:5; 93:1; 96:6).

God’s divine glory is expressed with the phrase, “He wraps Himself in light as if it were a robe” (2a). Recall that John tells us that “God is light and there is absolutely no darkness in Him” (1 Jn 1:5). Light is vital to life, hence we read about it in day one of creation (Gen 1:3-5); God is covered in light. He is full of light and life, and gives life to all His creation.

Verses 2b-4 echo day two of creation. The Psalmist says that God spreads out the sky “like a canopy” (2b), which transitions from Creator to creation. God made the heavens and controls them. VanGemeren comments, “As a camper pitches his tent somewhere, so God without exertion prepared the earth for habitation” (658).

Next, God lays “the beams of His palace on the waters above” (3a). The word for “palace” is used again in verse 13, “He waters the mountains from His *palace*” (13a, my emphasis). Kidner says, “The dizzy height of ‘the waters above the firmament,’ or the clouds, is pictured as but the base of God’s abode (369). God is enthroned above the waters above the firmament (cf., Gen 1:7; Ps 29:3; 148:4). The poet expresses with this choice location how God is involved with yet separated from the world (Amos 9:6).

With more poetic exuberance, the Psalmist adds, that God makes “the clouds His chariot, walking on the wings of the wind” (3b). God drives the clouds, as a driver directs his chariot!

Remember that Jesus was taken up from earth in a cloud (Acts 1:9), and will return “in the clouds with great power and glory” (Mk 13:26). “Walking on the wings of the wind” also expresses God’s sovereignty over nature, and symbolically conveys God’s transcendence.

God not only directs the winds, but He rules over the angels. The Psalmist says that God makes “the winds His messengers, flames of fire His servants” (4). Modern translations take this phrase to describe more about God’s rule over nature. But many scholars prefer to interpret it as referring to the angelic host, viewing the sentence the other way around; that is, God makes “His messengers (angels) winds, and his ministers a flaming fire.” Kinder says that this suits the Hebrew word order better and that Hebrews 1:7 quotes it with this meaning (Kidner, 369). The implication is that God is also ruling His angelic hosts, who are wrapped in light and assume the form of the wind and lightning (Ibid.). Williams asks, “Is it possible that these angelic presences account for the wind and fire on the Day of Pentecost?” (kindle). We should also consider how Hebrews 1:7 contrasts the angels with the greater glory of the enthroned Son of God!

The first four verses show us why the Psalmist begins saying, O LORD my God, you are very great!”

The Lord Rules the Earth and the Waters (104:5-9)

Having considered day 1 and 2 of creation, the Psalmist considered day three: the formation of land (cf., Gen 1:9-10; Job 38:8-11). God “established the earth on its foundations; it will never be shaken” (104:5). This is a poetic way of describing the security of God’s creation. The waters covered the whole earth (104:6; cf., Gen 1:2) forming a vast “deep,” like a garment to be worn. The foundations of the earth were present but weren’t separated from the waters. But then the waters receded at God’s thunderous “rebuke” (104:7). Mark may have had this verse in mind when he spoke of Jesus rebuking the wind (Mark 4:39).

The Psalmist continues, “mountains rose and valleys sank — to the place You established for them” (104:8). Translations vary on this verse. VanGemeren prefers the NIV: “they flowed over the mountains, they went down into the valleys, to the place you assigned for them” (660). In other words, the waters flowed over the mountains, as the land appeared, and went down into the valleys as streams coursing toward the sea. The “place appointed for them” shows God’s sovereign control of them. The waters are held within bounds (104:9a) that they may “never again cover the earth (9b). They may rage against the shore, but they cannot cross it so as to overwhelm the earth again (Goldingay, 186).

From these verses we see God ruling His creation. The waters are no threat to God’s sovereignty. God brings order out of chaos. He controls that which people fear, including the waters. He established a place for the waters; He sets the boundaries for the waters; and He reigns over the waters. In the New Testament, we see that authority displayed by Jesus. In light of His sovereign power, we should trust in Him wholeheartedly in times of personal chaos and disorder.

The Lord Provides for His Creation (104:10-18)

The Springs and the Rain (104:10-13). Even though the waters have gone to the oceans, God still provides the needed moisture for the earth. In verses 10-12, we marvel at the Creator’s gentle care for His creatures. He not only creates them, but as these verses show, He sustains them. The Lord provides the water they need. He “causes the springs to gush into the valleys; they flow between the mountains (104:10). The Psalmist is apparently reflecting on the splendor

of mountain rain with its impact on the plant and animal life (VanGemeran, 661). In “causing springs to gush forth” the Psalmist highlights God’s control and care. The Lord only prevents the waters from being dangerous, but puts them safely into a reservoir to serve creation (Goldingay, 187).

These waters give life to “every wild beast” (11a). The Psalmist draws attention to “the wild donkeys” in particular, who “quench their thirst” with God’s life giving water (11b).

At the same time, these waters, supply the needs of the birds, and provide for the growth of the trees (12). In response to God’s provision, the birds can peacefully “sing among the branches” (12b; cf., Matt 6:26; 13:32).

In verse 13, we see that the Lord the creation is “satisfied” with the Lord’s work of sustaining the world. In God’s wisdom and power, from His “lofty abode” (13, ESV), He “waters the mountains” (13). Williams says, “He opens the windows and sends the showers” (kindle). VanGemeran marvels as well, “His watering is as effortless as that of a man watering plants or irrigating a garden” (661). Goldingay quips: “Yhwh is acting as a celestial sprinkler operative” (187).

Behold then how God cares for His creation. He satisfies and sustains His creatures. As you see observe nature personally, consider how He does all this, make it an occasion to praise God. You should also make it an occasion to rekindle your trust in God. For if He cares for the birds how much more will he care for us? (Matt 6:26). In the words of Peter, entrust your soul to “a faithful Creator” (1 Pet 4:19, ESV).

Mankind in the Midst of Creation (14-15). The Psalmist continues to think about the Lord’s providence, turning his attention to mankind in the midst of creation. The thought of water naturally flows to a description of the growth of vegetation (the second part of day three of creation, Gen 1:11-13). The Psalmist says:

He causes grass to grow for the livestock
and provides crops for man to cultivate,
producing food from the earth,
wine that makes man’s heart glad—
making his face shine with oil—
and bread that sustains man’s heart. (104:14-15)

Notice how God provides for mankind both indirectly and directly. Indirectly, the Lord provides food for cattle (14a). By so doing, he provides for man. These creatures aren’t wild, but exist for mankind. Then directly, the Lord provides “food” for mankind (14b; cf., Gen 1:29).

Because of the Lord’s work in creation, humans (day six of creation) are able to “cultivate” the land (14). Man is thus set apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. Humans are farmers, not merely gatherers (104:14, 28). God provides vegetation (e.g., grain, the vine, and the olive tree), and man has the ability to create something from these crops. Humans are made in God’s image, and part of our uniqueness is the ability to create things, reflecting our Creator. God made us *makers*.

Further, these gifts of God – wine, oil, and bread – are expressions of God’s *goodness*. The whole Psalm shows His goodness. Here in particular, we see that the Lord in His goodness gives bread for our sustenance (Deut 7:13), wine to lift the spirits (cf., Judg 9:13; Eccl 10:19), and oil to protect, cleanse, and beautify the skin (cf., Ps 92:10; Lk 7:46). These were basic products in the biblical period. From God’s provision of these things, we see that God gives us what we need to survive, and in His goodness, He also gives us things to *enjoy*.

Recall that Jesus' first miracle involved turning water into wine at a wedding! God is not a Cosmic kill-joy. He's the giver of all good things (cf., Jam 1:17). We should eat, drink, and bathe to the glory of God, who "richly provides us with everything to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17, ESV). We should avoid all abuses these God's gifts – gluttony, drunkenness, addictions, and conceit. Kill these sins. Spiritual maturity involves enjoying and using God's gifts with self-control, reasonability, and not as an end in themselves. The ultimate end is to enjoy the gifts of God with gratitude to God (1 Tim 4:3-5).

God could have made a world that was very boring and mechanical. All food could have tasted like rice cakes, and we could have just drank water all the time. But God created us with palates, and He created plants to cultivate, meat to eat, bread to nourish, wine to enjoy, and oil to refresh us. We enjoy all of this now, even though the world is under the curse; one day, the curse will be reverse and paradise will be restored where we enjoy the new creation with our King, Jesus. Here's to that day!

Homes for Creatures (16-18). The Psalmist moves from grass and food to *the trees*. He says, "The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted" (104:16). Notice it is the Lord who planted and sustains these trees in Lebanon! The region of Lebanon was proverbial for its cedars. God gives the birds homes in these majestic trees (17). The Psalmist includes the "stork" as an example, who builds her home in the "fir trees" (17b, "junipers," NIV). The juniper was another tall, impressive tree that flourished in Lebanon (Goldingay, 188). Then there are the hills, which serve as homes to "wild goats," with the cliffs serving as refuge "rock badgers" (18).

The Lord Governs the Rhythm of Day and Night (104:19-24)

Our attention now shifts to the regularity of the created world. The Psalmist teaches us that the Lord governs the sun and moon (day four of creation, Gen 1:14-19). The Psalmist gives some examples of some common patterns in creation related to the sun and moon. In showing some examples, he once again highlights the fact that the moon is not God, nor is the sun. God rules over them. God "made the moon to mark the seasons," and by God's design, the sun knows "knows its time for setting" (104:19).

At night, the "all the beasts of the forest creep about" (20). The lions "roar for their prey and seek their food from God" (21). When the sun rises, the lion returns to his den to sleep (22). Humanity's work pattern is the reverse. Generally speaking, humanity rises with the sun, and goes out to labor "until the evening" (23).

The idea of the lion preying on other animals shows that the Psalmist is accepting the way things work in the world now. Now, they have to be tamed. But in the end, the lion will dwell with the lamb, and eat only hay (Isa 11:6-7; Goldingay, 190).

In verse 24, the Psalmist pauses for moment of worship. He declares, "O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (104:24). This verse is transitional. It looks back at all that has been said, and looks forward to what is yet to come. Of particular interest to the Psalmist is *God's wisdom*. Recall the author of Proverbs saying, "The LORD founded the earth by wisdom and established the heavens by understanding" (Prov 3:19; see also Prov 8:22-31). God's wisdom is revealed in all the ways His creatures exist and dwell under His sovereign care. They reveal the work of the Master Craftsman. We too should marvel at the wisdom of God in creation, and give Him glory.

Piper

The Lord Delights in His Creatures (104:25-26)

The Psalmist turns our attention now to the wonder of the seas (day five of creation, Gen 1:20-23):

Here is the sea, vast and wide,
teeming with creatures beyond number—
living things both large and small.
There the ships move about,
and Leviathan, which You formed to play there (104:25-26)

The Psalmist highlights the vastness of the seas, and the innumerable number of creatures in the seas. I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase:

What a wildly wonderful world, GOD!
You made it all, with Wisdom at your side,
made earth overflow with your wonderful creations.
Oh, look—the deep, wide sea,
brimming with fish past counting,
sardines and sharks and salmon.
Ships plow those waters,
and Leviathan, your pet dragon, romps in them.

Indeed, it is a “wildly wonderful world, God!” And He made it all.

The mention of the ships traveling these seas obviously reveals a post-Eden reflection on the world. This fact also draws attention to man as the pinnacle of creation. Man can use seas for his own purposes. Because man is a maker, being made in the image of God, he can create a vessel to cruise the dangerous waters.

As people travel the waters, they discover new creatures, and one mysterious, sportive creature is mentioned here: the “Leviathan” (26). The Psalmist says that the Leviathan was formed to “play” in the sea. We don't know what this creature is. You can imagine sailors coming back from trips trying to explain a magnificent sea creature, like a whale.

Some refer to this unknown creature as “God's pet” or as God's “pet dragon.” Humans loving their pets is also a sign of being made in God's image! God created us not only for rest and work, but also to play and enjoy life.

So then, from the sea monster, we can observe that chaos has been tamed, and God's pets play in the seas. Job puts it this way:

Can you pull in Leviathan with a hook
or tie his tongue down with a rope?
Can you put a cord through his nose
or pierce his jaw with a hook?
Will he beg you for mercy
or speak softly to you?
Will he make a covenant with you
so that you can take him as a slave forever?
Can you play with him like a bird

or put him on a leash for your girls? (Job 41:1-5)

It's important to see that God takes pleasure in His creation. John Piper unpacks this idea in his classic work, *The Pleasures of God*. Regarding the sea monster Piper says, "Why did God create sea monsters? Just to play, to frolic in the ocean where no man can see, but only God. The teeming ocean declares the glory of God, and praises him a thousand miles from any human eye" (Piper, 74).

Consider the fact that there are magnificent flowers that grow, display glory, provide wonderful fragrances, but will never be seen, felt, or smelled. They exist for the mere pleasure of God. The Psalmist doesn't know what's going on in the deep. He just knows that creatures exist for God's enjoyment and glory. There are millions of creations that we will never observe – things that crawl, walk, blow bubbles, make homes, etc. that exist to glorify God. When the blue whale smacks his tale, and sailors hear it three miles away, God can say, "Did you see that? I did that! That's my whale!" (Piper, "The Pleasure of God in Creation").

Piper suggests that *Ranger Rick* magazine inspires more praise than most other theological journals! This is because it records man's discovery of incredible phenomena in nature that up till recently have only been enjoyed by God for thousands of years (74). In commending this magazine, Piper is showing how creation should make the believer worship the Creator with wonder. He says, "We should pray for the eyes of children again, when they saw everything for the first time" (76). I read that sentence and thought about a little boy in our congregation, Jai, who brings his toy sharks with him to our gatherings. The creatures of the deep fascinate him! That's a good thing. That's a God-thing.

When we behold this wildly wonderful world of God, we should shout, "O Lord, how manifold are your works!" (104:24, ESV)

The Lord Gives and Takes Away (104:27-30)

God is the source of life for all creation. These verses show how the whole creation is totally *dependent* on God. Regarding all His creatures, the Psalmist says, "These all look to you, to give them their food in due season" (104:27, ESV; Gen 1:29-31). Regularly, they live in reliance on God. The "live, move, and have their being" in God (Acts 17:24-25).

In verses 28-30, the poet emphasizes the Lord's actions: you give... you open your hand ... you hide ... you take away ... you send ... you renew." The creation merely *gathers* what the Lord *gives* them (2a8). When the Lord *opens His hand* generously, *they are filled* with good things (28b). This idea expresses God's common grace in the world (Matt 5:45; Ps 145:9).

However, if the Lord expresses disfavor ("hides his face") perhaps through pestilence or famine, the creation is "dismayed" (29). Likewise, if the Lord should "take away their breath" they die, returning to the dust (Gen 2:7; Job 34:15).

The Lord grants life by His life-giving spirit: "When you send forth your Spirit, they are created" (104:30a, ESV). He also preserves and restores it: "and you renew the face of the ground"(30b). Each passing generation is replaced by the next. God didn't merely create and takes His hands off. He is active in sustaining His creation. God's renewing power over creation will be on full display in the new creation, and even now creation groans for that day (Rom 8:22)

The Lord's Glory Endures Forever (104:31-35)

In this final section, the poet praises God with one final burst. Kidner says, “The Psalm from first to last, hallows the name of God” (372).

The Psalmist prays in verse 31, “May the glory of the LORD endure forever, may the LORD rejoice in His works.” The Psalmist is really praising God for something that will happen. The Lord’s glory will endure forever. The heavens declare the glory of God now (Ps 19:1-2); and the glory of God will also cover the whole earth like the waters cover the sea (Num 14:21; Hab 2:14).

Regarding the Lord’s rejoicing in His works, we see that in the beginning God declared that His creation was good. He took pleasure in creation (cf., Gen 1:31; Prov 8:31). Commenting on Psalm 104:31, Piper says:

God does take pleasure in his creation, because this whole Psalm [Ps 104] shows (as we shall see) that the “works” in mind are the works of creation – things like water and clouds and wind and mountains and thunder and springs and wild asses and birds and grass and cattle and wine and bread and cedars and wild goats and badgers and rocks and young lions and sea monsters. God delights in all the works of his hands (66-67).

The Lord’s absolute control of creation is seen in verse 32. He merely “looks on the earth, and it trembles; He touches the mountains, and they pour out smoke.” The language reflects God’s great glory and power (cf., Ps 144:5; Ex 19:18; Amos 9:5).

In the final three verses, we find three ways we should respond to the Lord’s glory:

I will sing to the LORD all my life;
I will sing praise to my God while I live.
May my meditation be pleasing to Him;
I will rejoice in the LORD.
May sinners vanish from the earth
and wicked people be no more.
My soul, praise Yahweh!
Hallelujah! (104:33-35)

When we behold the glory of God in creation, how should we respond? This Psalm gives us three responses.

First, respond with songs of praise. For as long as we live, we should join creation and praise the Lord (104:33; cf., 146:2). While we have breath, let us give praise our Creator! The proper response to beholding God’s glory is praise. It completes our enjoyment.

Second, respond with joyful meditation. The Psalmist asks that his meditation would be sweet to God (cf., Ps 19:14), as he rejoices in who God is, and what God has done. We too should reflect on this world that we may worship our God.

Third, respond with gospel hope. Almost out of nowhere, we read about sinners being consumed from the earth in the final verse! The Psalmist wants the wicked gone! Why is this statement here? VanGemenen puts it well, “The psalmist is not vindictive in his prayer against the wicked but longs for a world fully established and maintained by the Lord, without outside interference” (664).

This longing is really a longing for the new creation. We must never forget that creation is tied to the gospel. Michael Bird states, “God’s act of creation is the presupposition of the gospel, while the new creation is the ultimate goal of creation” (*Evangelical Theology*, 140). The creation will be comprehensively restored, and sinners will be no more. So then, let all who have not

bowed the knee to Jesus Christ, the Lord of creation, do so now. In grace, God is able to make sinners “new creations in Christ Jesus” (2 Cor 5:17), so that they may later enjoy God’s new creation. Then, we behold even more glory! Then we will enjoy even more of creation than we do now! My friend Nate says, “I’m going to ride dolphins in the new creation!”

As we behold the glory of creation now, allow your reflections to point you ahead for the glory that will be revealed later. Allow this gospel to hope to encourage you. Preach to yourself “Bless the Lord, o my soul!” (35b) as you reflect on a world with no conflicts, cancer, death, and brokenness. Such reflections can cause the most dejected to shout, “Praise the Lord!” (35c)

Reflect and Discuss

1. Why would Calvin call the world “a theatre of God’s glory?” How does Psalm 104 support this concept?
2. How are Psalms 103 and 104 similar? How are they different?
3. What strikes you the most about the nature of God in verses 1-4? Why?
4. How do we see the goodness of God revealed in Psalm 104?
5. Should we enjoy creation? Why or why not? How should we enjoy it?
6. What are some of the ways we see the doctrine of the image of God illustrated in Psalm 104?
7. How does creation reveal God’s wisdom?
8. Does God take pleasure in His creation? Explain.
9. How does this Psalm show creation’s dependence on God?
10. How does the Psalmist teach us to respond to the glory of God’s creation? How is the gospel related to creation?