

# What Happened in the Beginning?

*Psalm 8*

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February 17, 2019

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- <sup>1</sup> O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.
- <sup>2</sup> Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
- <sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;
- <sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?
- <sup>5</sup> Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honour.
- <sup>6</sup> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,
- <sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,
- <sup>8</sup> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
- <sup>9</sup> O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
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Just a little over five years ago, two heavyweights squared off in a battle that was to settle the issue once and for all. In one corner, hailing from the Planetary Society in Pasadena, California, weighing in at some weight, was Bill Nye, the Science Guy. In the other corner, hailing from the United States wing of Answers in Genesis and the founder of the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, was Ken Ham. And what led them to this *impasse in the bluegrass* was a YouTube video post entitled "Creationism is Not Appropriate for Children."

The video uploaded in August 2012 featured Bill Nye, the Science Guy, lamenting that significant portion of the United States population did not believe in evolution. Within a month, the video went viral, with more than 4.6 million views. Shortly thereafter, the Answers in Genesis group responded with a video of their own, featuring Ken Ham, who called on Bill Nye to come visit his Creation Museum in Kentucky. Finally, after months of effort, Bill Nye agreed to a debate with Ken Ham on February 4, 2014.

The tickets to this prize fight sold out in minutes. After all, the matchup between the famous science guy and a believer in a 6,000-year-old Earth was intriguing to say the least. And so, in a highly hyped event, the two men went head-to-head for almost three hours, with 750 people watching in person, and another 3.6 million watching a live stream. After it was over, both men took flak from their constituencies. Evolution proponents were upset that Nye had given undue credibility to the creationist worldview by participating in the event. Meanwhile, Creationist proponents thought that Ham rambled too much, perhaps doing more damage than good. Regardless of the critique, what really mattered is that, in the end, neither was convinced of the other's position.

This same type of battle has been taking place for the last 160 years. From the time Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution in "The Origin of Species" in 1859, creation and evolution have been on "trial" - both in the courts and in the court of public opinion.

One of the most prominent examples of this battle was the Scopes "Monkey" Trial. In 1925, Tennessee schoolteacher John Scopes incriminated himself for teaching evolution in a classroom, purposefully challenging a state law prohibiting

evolution from being taught. In a star-studded battle between defense attorney Clarence Darrow and prosecutor William Jennings Bryan, broadcast by radio across America, Scopes was eventually found guilty and fined \$100. While the Tennessee Supreme Court later overturned the verdict on a technicality, it upheld the law preventing evolution from being taught.

After the trial, other states enacted their own anti-evolution laws. But gradually, the anti-evolution movement lost steam, and evolution snuck back into textbooks. Thirty years later, as the space race heated up and science education was made a priority, evolution was given a shot in the arm. But it took two cases before the Supreme Court, *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968) and *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987), before the prohibition on teaching evolution was finally ruled to be unconstitutional. Preventing teachers from educating students about evolution was determined to be a violation of the establishment clause of the first amendment prohibiting the government from establishing a religion.

One of the more recent legal battles dealing with creation or evolution was the 2005 court case *Kitzmiller v. Dover*. A local school board in Dover, Pennsylvania, required teachers to kick off their biology classes by reading a statement about intelligent design. "Intelligent design" is the idea that a creator guides the process of evolution. Parents took the district to court, and ultimately, the judge ruled that the school board's rule was unconstitutional. Intelligent design, the decision argued, is a religious theory, not a science.<sup>i</sup>

As people of biblical faith, we often feel like we must side with the creationists as a matter of spiritual principle. After all, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1) That's what our Bibles say, and we don't

want to yield any ground to those who suggest otherwise. And so, well-intentioned Christians dig in, becoming entrenched in their position. But you need to know, the battlefield of the courtroom or the stage of a museum auditorium is not the place to have this discussion. The fact is, in this battle between science and religion, two different things are being debated.

The late Stephen Hawking, perhaps the most brilliant scientist of our generation, observed that: "science may solve the problem of how the universe began, but it cannot answer the question: why does the universe bother to exist?"<sup>ii</sup> And consider what evangelical theologian J.I. Packer has to say: "It was to show us the Creator rather than the creation...[It was] to teach us knowledge of God rather than physical science that Genesis 1 and 2 were written. Rather than criticizing these chapters for not satisfying our curiosity about matters of science, we should take from them a needed rebuke of our perverse passion for knowing nature without regard for what matters most: knowing nature's Creator."<sup>iii</sup>

Science and religion have different interests. Science is interested in the "how" and the "what" of creation. Religion is interested in the "who" and the "why." And the "who" and "why" is exactly what we find in Psalm 8.

Psalm 8 is the first song of praise in the psalter. It has the distinction of being the only psalm addressed to God throughout in the second person. And in its nine verses are the psalmic interpretation of creation.<sup>iv</sup>

The psalm begins and ends with the same stylistic feature - the phrase: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." Two important things are communicated in this repeated statement. The first deals with the issue of God's "name" or identity. "Name" describes character and essence. God acts

in a particular way with particular aims. The second gives evidence to God's reign over "all the earth." If the psalm was just a nice story, this repeated phrase would serve as the bookends. But this phrase does more than just serve as a fixed placeholder. These proclamations of God and God's reign are the boundaries or frame of the psalm. If Psalm 8 were thought of as a circle, this would be the outer band of the circle. Everything that comes next takes place within that circle - within the playing field of God's reign.

The next band inside the circle describes God's work. God has conquered the chaotic forces and ordered them in creation. By doing so, God's glory was set above the heavens in such a way that everything could see the splendor of his work. If God's character and reign frame this psalm, it is God's work that helps to make this known.

Within those two outer bands is the center of the circle. Verse 3 of Psalm 8 shifts the orientation to humanity. The center circle - the centerpiece of this psalm - is people like you and me.

Psalm 8 has been described as a psalm for stargazers. In looking at the heavens, the moon, and the stars, the expanse of it all, how God could even consider something as small as humans? You can almost hear him singing the Kansas song, "All we are is Dust in the Wind." In the scope of creation, we are hardly noticeable.

Biblical scholar Rolf Jacobson has a different take on it. He suggests it is not a psalm for stargazers but for soul searchers.<sup>v</sup> He thinks the psalmist, after considering the vastness of the universe, asks the question about humanity as a question of relationship. "What are human beings that you are mindful of them,

mortals that you care for them?” Or as the Hebrew suggests, “who are you that you remember and visit us?”<sup>vi</sup>

If you have ever wondered that same thing, the answer to that question is what wraps around this question. The good news for the questioning psalmist, and for us, is that God's sovereignty cannot be understood apart from the knowledge that God does choose to be "mindful" and to "care for" humanity. And even though verses 3-8 center on humanity, throughout these verses, the primary actor is God. What this means is that humanity cannot be understood apart from this relationship with God. But the notion that God who created the galaxies and yet is in relationship with us comes full circle when humanity is also mindful of God.

We live in a different world from that of the author of Psalm 8. When the singers of the psalm looked at the heavens, the moon and stars, they saw the stars and the moon as fixed points on a half-dome sky, surrounding an earth that was the center of universe...that was the universe. Even so, they were overwhelmed by the grandeur.

But today, we know much more. We know from our science classes, planetariums, and telescopes that the magnitude of the universe is mind-boggling. If one were to scale down the size of the Solar System so that the sun was the size of tennis ball, the Earth would be the size of a grain of sand about 27 feet away. And the next nearest star to the Sun (to this tennis ball) would be more than 1400 miles away. From where I am standing here in Wichita Falls, it would be the equivalent of another tennis ball located in Washington D.C. or in Fresno, California.<sup>vii</sup>

We know so much more about the world and the universe that we live in. With our greater understanding, theologian Fred Gaiser suggests, shouldn't we be all the more awed by our expanded sense of universe, giving greater praise to God?<sup>viii</sup>

But our scientific exploration hasn't been devoid of this reality. As Apollo 8 made the first trip and orbit around the moon on Christmas Eve 1968, the three astronauts on board celebrated this achievement by reading the first ten verses of Genesis 1 while people around the world watched the grainy television images and listened to the crackly radio transmission with their intermittent NASA beeps.<sup>ix</sup> And the Apollo 11 mission left a silicone disc containing the text of Psalm 8 on the surface of the moon.<sup>x</sup> There almost seems to be a respect for the relationship between creation and humanity.

The circular arrangement of Psalm 8 suggests that there is an echo chamber of divine love and human adoration.<sup>xi</sup> It also gives us a model for seeing things differently, for thinking differently, and for responding differently when someone wants to debate the merits of science versus religion. This model comes in the five things the Biblical story of creation tells us.

First, the Biblical story of creation tells us who God is. The first things we see God doing in scripture are creating and providing. God put humanity in a lush garden and shared with them the purposeful work of creation. God provided abundantly for them, and even walked with humanity in the cool of the evening in intimate fellowship. These are pictures of a God who is there with us, who made us, knows us, and loves us.

The second thing the Biblical story of creation tells us is who I am. We are the apple of his eye. By our very creation, we were willed by God, wanted by God, and chosen by God. By the very fiber of our being we know that we are loved and valued.

Because this is true for me, it's also true for you. That is the third thing the Biblical story of creation tells us. This is what Biblical ethics is about. Creation establishes the worth of every human being. And part of our duty to God is to guard the image of humanity because it bears the image of God. This is why other people should matter to us. The poor, the rich, the native-born, the immigrant, the healthy, the sick, the majority, the minority, the Democrat, the Republican, the Texan, and the Californian...if I matter to God, so do they.

And this is why science also matters. The study of science, that is interested in the “what” and “how,” is actually a way of caring for creation and one another. By learning all we can about our earth and our physical bodies, we are being good stewards of what God has entrusted to us. The study of science isn't antithetical to our spiritual beliefs. It's actually a way of expressing our care for one another and for God's creation.

The fourth thing the Biblical story of creation tells us is what I owe God spiritually. This is what Psalm 8 describes – that echo chamber of praise I mentioned a moment ago. What creation tells us that God asks for our worship. In Romans 1, Paul notes that God shows himself to us in the goodness, order, and beauty of creation in such a way that God demands our trust and thanks in response. Worship begins in wonder and delight. Amazed and delighted in what God has done in creation, our role is to respond in thankful praise.

Finally, the Biblical story of creation tells us the real meaning of salvation. The biblical story of creation paints a picture of life in perfect harmony; of everything and everybody fitting together as God intended. This is the reality found in the beginning of scripture, and the end destination described in Revelation. Genesis 1 and 2 describe the “shalom” of creation, and the biblical witness tells us there will someday be a re-creation - a new heaven and a new earth. And the work of that re-creation began on the day that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

Many of you know that my daughter Abby is currently a part of the cast of *Newsies* at the Wichita Theater. After months of rehearsals, they are now in the midst of a multi-week run of shows. She is part of an amazingly talented cast...but you need to know, it's not just about the actors. After all, actors don't arrive on empty stages for their stirring performances. Somebody has already been there before getting everything set up, getting everything ready for what follows. And for us as Christians, that the meaning of creation. Jesus doesn't arrive on an empty stage. Jesus comes as the Savior in a story that began in a garden at the dawn of history. Who he is and what he does makes sense because God made the heavens and the earth. And the question of Psalm 8:4 (what are mortals that you are mindful of them?) is answered in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.<sup>xii</sup>

The real casualty of the fight between science and religion is the diminishment of creation in the teaching of the church. For fear that we will be identified with the misguided arguments of more fundamentalist “Creation Science” Christians, we who are more moderate tend to avoid thinking or talking about it at all.

But the front door of the Bible is creation. And if we keep going in the side door, both we and our guests miss the grand entrance. We will miss the full picture of how we, and they, are invited into the story.

Tim Keller, the author and retired pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City recently wrote: There are two ways to read the Bible: it is basically about me or basically about Jesus. Is it about what I must do or about what he has done?<sup>xiii</sup> And that's why creation matters. It's why we've got to reclaim the story of creation. Because...creation is about what God has done for you and for me. I believe in creation, but I believe in the Creator.

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<sup>i</sup> Pappas, Stephanie. "Creationism vs. Evolution: Six Big Battles" in *Livescience*. February 5, 2014. <https://www.livescience.com/43126-creationism-vs-evolution-6-big-battles.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Gumbel, Nicky. *Searching Issues*. Cook Ministry Resources, 1996.

<sup>iii</sup> "Guideposts for the Current Debate Over Origins." The Editors of *Christianity Today*, October 8, 1982.

<sup>iv</sup> K. Cho, Paul K. "Commentary on Psalm 8" in *Working Preacher*. June 11, 2017.  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3298](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3298)

<sup>v</sup> Jacobson, Rolf. "Commentary on Psalm 8" in *Working Preacher*. October 7, 2012.  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1459](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1459)

<sup>vi</sup> Hannan, Shauna. "Commentary on Psalm 8" in *Working Preacher*. May 22, 2016.  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2857](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2857)

<sup>vii</sup> Schifferdecker, Kathryn M. "Commentary on Psalm 8" in *Working Preacher*. May 30, 2010.  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=587](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=587)

<sup>viii</sup> Gaiser, Fred. "Commentary on Psalm 8" in *Working Preacher*. January 1, 2012.  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1171](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1171)

<sup>ix</sup> Clendenin, Daniel. "The Poetry of Creation" in *Journey with Jesus*. May 18, 2008.  
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080512JJ.shtml>

<sup>x</sup> McCann, Jr., J. Clinton. "The Book of Psalms" in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. IV. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. 711.  
<sup>xi</sup> K. Cho.

<sup>xii</sup> "The five things the Biblical story of creation tells us" is heavily influenced by a sermon preached by Dr. Douglas B. Skinner, "What's the Big Idea?" October 2, 2005.

<sup>xiii</sup> Keller, Timothy. Twitter post 2/12/19, 4:34 AM.