

Psalm 104

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 January 2019

Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] I see trees of green, red roses too. I see them bloom for me and you. And I think to myself, What a wonderful world! I see skies of blue and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night. And I think to myself, what a wonderful world! The colours of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky, are also on the faces of people going by. I see friends, shaking hands, saying, how do you do? And they're really saying, I love you. I hear babies crying. I watch them grow. They'll learn much more than I'll never know. And I think to myself, what a wonderful world! It's such a cheesy song, isn't it? But Louis Armstrong nailed in that song something that all of us can't help feeling. As David Attenborough masterfully shows us the sights and sounds of this planet, we agree. It is a wonderful world. It is a world worthy of our 4K TVs, if you've got one of those, and Blu-ray players. And we can watch our wonderful world and we can lose ourselves in it, can't we? Planet Earth. A wonderful world.

The psalmist is going to take us in the next few minutes on a tour of this planet. And we will see with him its variety, its breadth, its detail and colour and vigour and life. He is going to get the BBC DVD, but he is going to hit the mute button and add his own narrative.

And this psalm is more than a catalogue of stuff that we see with an unexpected thrill, and we're not sure why. The psalmist is going to tell us why it is so thrilling to listen to this description of the world. Because the wonderful world in his mind means only one thing. There is a wonderful God.

Wonderful world. Wonderful God. It's going back a while, but you might remember we looked together at Psalm 103 together, where David speaks, do you remember, to his own soul.

Verse 1 of Psalm 103. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that's within him. Forget not all his benefits. He benefits, verse 2. He was preaching to himself, wasn't he? Of the wonderful God.

And he thought particularly about God's work of salvation. His patience and his compassion with sinful people. But Psalm 104, I don't know if you noticed, but it comes as the second of a prayer, where the psalmist starts in the same way. He speaks to himself. Verse 1.

[3 : 04] Bless the Lord, O my soul. This is a psalm, like Psalm 103, that is a song, that is a prayer that you can sing to yourself. Sing to your soul when, soul, have you forgotten how to worship God? Have you forgotten how wonderful he is? And we do, don't we, in a sense. Each week we come with anticipation, but if you're like me, your heart has grown a little bit cold, and you've forgotten how wonderful he is. And then, so we read this, and we speak to our own souls, and say, soul, listen to this. Soul, let us flick on the TV, and max out the colour settings, and let's fly through the clouds and the oceans. Let's take a tour through the mountain ranges, and into the valleys, and into the forests. Let's watch the sunrise and the sunset. Let's go through the seasons. Let us fill our souls with the sights and the sounds of a wonderful world, so we can see a wonderful God. We are going to indulge ourselves today, alright?

We are going to be in this psalm all day. I want to focus this morning on what the wonderful world tells us about God, and then tonight we will see what this psalm tells us about human beings, about man. Wonderful world, wonderful God. Firstly, because the wonderful world, it shows God's majesty. The wonderful world shows God's majesty. In general, life majesty, kind of glory, is seen in three ways, isn't it? And flashy Londoners know this really well.

It's seen in your clothing, it's seen in your car, and in the size of your house. And the better those things are, the more glorious you are thought of. So you put your going out clothes on, don't you? So that your majesty is more obvious and more pronounced to others. People get big houses to win the admiration of the neighbours. A big car is a status symbol, and if that's true today, it was particularly true then, in that ancient culture. The bigger your house, and the better your chariot, and the better your clothes, the more majesty you had.

And so the psalmist opens up the narration with a profound view of what the world is. Just look at verses 1 to 4. Do you see those three things there? The world, what is it? It is his clothing, it is God's house, and it is God's driveway. But the world is God's status symbol. The world is God's bling. And different parts of the world display different things about his majesty.

Now, he uses poetic language, doesn't he? He says, imagine God getting dressed. But his clothing isn't made of cotton or even silk. Verse 2, you cover yourself with light, as like a garment.

[6 : 33] And his house, try and feel the sense of scale here, his tent, he says, is the sky, it is the heavens. His house is so big that the bottom of it is up in the clouds. He lays the beams on the waters, as I think is the clouds here. In verse 13, his abode is lofty. It is the penthouse above all other penthouses. And then there's the limousine, isn't there, that clouds his chariot, verse 3. He rides on the wings of the wind. It is very poetic language, isn't it? But don't miss what he's actually saying here. The world is a place where God is. He is beyond this world, of course. And yet he is present in the world, making it a place to display his majesty. And so what is planet Earth? Is it a fortunate mistake? Is it a rock? A globe? It is our hope.

But the psalmist says it is much more than that. The world, the planet that we live on is like a stage for God to be and to display his majesty. As you read through the psalm, you'll see it roughly follows the pattern of the days of creation in Genesis 1. But it gives us a slightly different take on that week of creation, I think. In Genesis 1, God speaks creation into being, doesn't he? Let there be light, and so on. And he says that the creation is good. But we might read that and sort of feel like he's a little bit detached from creation.

He says it's good, but it might feel that that is merely just a kind of cool appreciation of all that stuff down there that he's made. But the psalmist says, no, that is to read Genesis in the wrong way. Because he creates with a warm enthusiasm and involvement and presence in the world, as if he were kitting out his own house to live in. It's interesting, isn't it, that later in the Genesis accounts that the same language is used of creation as is used for the building of the tabernacle and of the temple where God will dwell with his people.

Planet Earth is God's place to be active and present and working, to be worshipped. And as you fly through the waters and you see the clouds and you take in the massness of the sky, things of almost incalculable grandeur and scale, the narrator is telling us things that David Attenborough will never tell us. That the world is charged not just with nature, but with God's energy. It is alive with his presence and his majesty. It is God's playground and his abode. It is God's catwalk. It is God's show home. It's God's driveway. This is a tour, isn't it, which sees the world with a profoundly different vision. Of course, it is to be wowed by the wonderful world around us and not see this. Biologists and tourists might never see this. The narrator isn't trying to get us to see the world with a kind of mythological lens or with fantasy glasses on, imagining God as this kind of oversized man in the sky who sits around on clouds with a big grey beard. But he wants us to see the world with the eyes of faith. That's what the writer to the Hebrews says, doesn't it? By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. By faith we see that this planet, planet Earth, is all about that. That behind the grandeur of the visible world is something deeply spiritual going on. There is something of a performance going on all of the time. And God is on stage. He is like some artist.

Like some master tailor, dressing himself with the fabric of light. Like a grand designs architect building his house with beams of water, chauffeured in majesty on the clouds.

[11 : 35] And so you think about that for a moment. When you step out of this building in an hour or so, you are not just walking into West London, England, UK, planet Earth, universe, are you?

You are about to walk into the biggest free exhibition gallery ever made. And it's all around you. And it's above you and beneath you. Showing you what God is like. The scale and the grandeur of his majesty. It's his bling. When you see it by faith. So it shows his majesty. Secondly, though, the psalm goes into more detail because it shows God's hospitality. Planet Earth shows God's hospitality.

I don't know if you saw those pictures of the kind of Chinese spaceship, what would we call it, the landing craft, going onto the dark side of the moon a couple of weeks ago. It's amazing, isn't it, that they did that. It's mind-boggling that they've managed to get those pictures. I think you can see pictures of the surface from Mars now, unless I'm getting mixed up with Star Trek or something. But I think that's right. They are amazing pictures.

But however great those pictures are, what strikes you about them is actually just how inhospitable those places are. You might be able to survive for a few minutes with the right kind of kit on the moon. But the moon is hardly a welcoming place, is it? And in our tour, there is so much to see and do in verses 11 to 18. There's so much detail. We can't go into it all in great detail. But I think the gist of it is that the world uniquely shows God's nature as a host.

That he makes a hospitable, homely, welcoming place for his creatures. Do you notice how the narrator describes the world? It is a place that God has expended great energy in making homely and welcoming and livable in. And again, the psalm follows the pattern of Genesis 1, where on day three God creates land amidst the water. Look at verse 7 to 9. At your rebuke they fled, at the sound of your thunder they took to flight. The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that you appointed for them. The water that covers the earth, it's talking about there. In the beginning, has a kind of self-assertiveness. The deep. It stood above the mountains, verse 6. But at God's rebuke, it clears away and the mountains rise up and the land appears. Do you see what he's saying? God turns a hostile, dangerous, unwelcoming place into a safe, dry, solid place.

[14:53] And see how that water that once threatened, in verse 10, is changed into springs that gush forth in the valleys. The once threatening atmosphere is turned into a friendly atmosphere where these springs flow and give drink in between the hills. He is the perfect host. It is not a globe flooded with chaos. And neither is it a dry, post-apocalyptic desert. He has made it into a place that is secure and enduring. It is not going to fall apart. He's set the earth that its foundation should never be moved, verse 5. And so this world, this wonderful world, shows that he is a hospitable God.

He goes on, doesn't he, and describes the variety of places that God has made for creatures to live. He mentions some of them. Birds sing in the branches, building nests in the cedars of Lebanon, verse 17. The high mountains for the wild goats. The rocks are the refuges for badgers. The stork has her home in the fir trees. There are nests, there are crags, there are trees, there are burrows, there are cliffs, there are hillsides, there are rocks, there are dens. The place itself is full of homeliness. Like some wonderful real version of wind in the willows, isn't it? It's as if God is saying, come in, Mr. Fox. Come in, Mr. Badger. Here is your house, Mr. Stork. Come and know my hospitality.

It is the reason that we are not living on a rock made of moon dust, isn't it? A wonderful world that stands out in comparison with its inhospitable neighbours. You see as well, it is a place where its dwellers are made to welcome and host each other too. And we'll see a bit more of this tonight, but one of the unique things this psalm brings us is the different ways parts of the world rely on each other. The wonderful world is full of things that exist for the sake of other members of the creation community. The trees exist for the birds. The grass grows for man. Man lives to cultivate the grass and helps the grass grow, verse 14. Branches exist for birds and rocks exist for badgers.

Do you see, it is a wonderful world. As we live here along now with what they're saying, around 8.7 million other species. And we have found it, along with those other species, a very homely and welcoming place to be.

He has this massive house and car and amazing clothes, but he is not the kind of God who keeps all of that to himself and keeps everybody else out. The world shows that he is an open-hearted and hospitable God. And we know that too by the design that he makes in the routines of time.

[18:20] It's what he talks about in verse 19 to 23, isn't it? The psalmist says, soul, we've seen so much.

Let's have a look at the sunrise and the daytime and the sunset and the nighttime. And this is day four in the week of creation, where God creates the sun and the moon to mark out the daytime and the nighttime.

And what that means here is that God hosts creatures in a world that generates a rhythmic pattern of existence that accommodates everyone's needs. Just look at verse 20.

You make darkness and it is night when all of the beasts of the forests creep about. Do you see, at night, when the sun goes down, it is a time for beasts of the forests to creep about when they're not disturbed by predators, when they do their thing and we've stopped doing our thing.

And then when the sun comes up, they go to bed, don't they? They steal away and lie down in their dens, verse 22. And then mankind gets up and goes to work.

[19:35] God has built within the world the moon and sun like gentle puppeteers, moving us in a rhythm of rest and of routine, of bedtimes and of rest times and of fresh starts in every morning

time, of time for some animals and creatures to sleep and others to wake.

And so it's a regularity that brings refreshment and space for each creature to be. They say, don't they, that cities are becoming the new countryside.

There are more foxes and badgers and wildlife inside the M25 than there is outside of it. And we get annoyed with that, don't we? We get annoyed as we watch the fox trash all of our recycling outside in the bins on the street.

But I think this psalm is telling us, be a bit more slack with them. Next time you see a fox at night, think, this is a beast of the night. He's going through my bins, yes.

But this is his time now. And this fox, this creature is here because God is a great host.

[20 : 54] And you and all the other creatures who found a home here have found that God is in his lofty abode but he's not mean. And he's not blind to need.

And he's very hospitable and he makes it a welcoming place with different times for different creatures to do their thing. And he isn't blind to our needs so we don't live on Mars.

He has set up the grandest and most hospitable homeless shelter in the universe for his creatures.

The wonderful world shows he is majestic over all life.

And he is hospitable to life. But this wonderful world, thirdly and lastly, shows that he is essential for life. God is essential for life.

Scholars of ancient texts have really helpfully found a piece from around the 14th century BC from Egypt. That looks a lot like Psalm 104.

[22 : 03] It's a hymn that one of the pharaohs had written about his God. And it speaks about the wonderful world in which he lived. And in a lot of ways it's really similar to Psalm 104.

There's a lot of things that are the same about it. It's pretty likely that actually the psalm writer knew about that hymn and he could have even ripped it off.

That's okay. He was a human being, writing as a man, under the inspiration of the Spirit. He shows, doesn't he, that God's people have a shared appreciation and wonder of the world with people who don't believe in God.

We can all watch and see how wonderful the world is. But the interesting thing is not that it was a rip-off. It's not in seeing what was the same about the psalm and that Egyptian hymn, but what is different about it.

Because Pharaoh's hymn looks at the creation and stands in wonder, but it goes absolutely no further than that. But the psalmist knows that the world is only wonderful because there is a wonderful God.

[23 : 16] And he is essential to all life. There are two things going on here. The psalmist says life and provision comes from the earth.

He looks to nature and says, isn't it wonderful? The lions look to their prey. Verse 21. It's a wonderful world. It provides for the lions. Man needs grass.

Verse 14. It's a wonderful world. Man has grass. Donkeys quench their thirst from the water. Animals gather up their food.

Verse 28. So the psalmist shows that food and provision come from work and cultivation and from nature itself. It's a wonderful world. It comes from skill in hunting and getting resources from the earth.

And you know, the pharaoh would have been pretty happy with that, wouldn't he? He would have been happy with that. He would have been really happy to believe that everything that we have comes from creation itself.

[24 : 17] From nature. From the sun. From the grass and from the water and all of that. And that's why actually in his hymn he worships the sun. The sun was his God.

And we think, don't we all, how primitive sun worshippers. But actually in our modern day we've come no further. Because we are just like Pharaoh. We're not in awe of the sun.

But we're in awe of mother nature. And we've missed the other thing that the psalmist puts to us. That nature and our skill to harvest it would be nothing if God were not there.

And he is essential to all of our life. Do you see what he adds? That the lion seeks food from God. The grass is watered by God. God gives water for the donkey to drink. Verse 28. Yes, they gather up. But only what God gives them.

[25 : 22] When you open your hand they are satisfied. When you watch David Attenborough and you kind of see the lions. You kind of watch them through that yawning thing, don't they?

And they're looking for their prey. And what he is saying here is that the lions are asking God for food. David Attenborough doesn't see that, does he?

The psalmist says that all creatures as they look for food in nature are actually looking to God. God for food. And so even though he calls the donkeys wild in verse 11.

The bigger picture actually is that there are no wild animals on planet earth. Did you think about that? That there are no wild animals because all creatures and all animals actually are domesticated beasts in God's house.

All of them are in God's game reserve. And he is the game keeper. It's a deeply alternative view of the world, isn't it?

[26 : 30] In our modern city we're so out of touch with where our food comes from we barely know what a field is in Ealing. But they would have understood that, wouldn't they? They would have known that.

They would have been dependent on the agricultural seasons. They were totally reliant on the harvest, on the sun and on the rain. They lived by the seasons or they died by them. And so it's easy to imagine them treating those things as gods.

So what the psalmist is saying is totally radical here. That the things that we think we rely on to live on are not essential. Only God is.

That's his point in verse 27 to 30. If there's a famine, it is because God has turned his face away.

When you are filled and satisfied, it is because God has opened his hands, like feeding the ducks.

When you die, it is because God takes your breath away.

[27 : 34] When you live, it is because God gives you breath. God is essential to life. Life is not just natural.

It is supernatural. We should be worried, shouldn't we, when people start talking about they have a particular gift of healing and they want people to come to them.

I think we need to be careful on that and nervous about that. About people who claim miraculous gifts and powers of healing. Healing ministries and things.

But in our nervousness, we lose a sense of the God who heals. And we think it's all Western medicine, don't we?

So when you get better from a cold, it's just the antibiotics. It's not. When you eat bread and feel satisfied, it's not just the biology that gets the bread on your plate.

[28 : 36] When you breathe, it's not just a happy accident that there happens to be enough oxygen in the air. The forests, the fields, the streams, the pastures, the vineyards.

Underneath all of that is the outflowing energy that God provides. There is no Mother Nature. Only God the Father.

In Him we live and move and have our being. And so when we are healed and we take antibiotics, it is God who heals us through those things.

Soul, meet God. God the forester. God the builder. God the gardener. God the farmer. God the homemaker. God the generous host.

God the majestic source of all energy and all life. Soul, if you've forgotten how to worship, you need to be intimidated by the wonder of this world around us.

[29 : 41] Teeming with life. Swarming with abundance. Verse 24. Oh Lord, how manifold it all works. In wisdom you've made them all.

Soul. With unspeakable variety. Supercharged with God's energy. Soul, look. Don't leave this building this morning praising the world.

And looking to nature. Because wonderful world. Wonderful God. Let's pray.