

The God of Creation

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PSALM 104

This psalm differs from the preceding, inasmuch as it neither treats of the special benefits which God bestows upon His Church, nor lifts us up to the hope of the heavenly life, but by presenting to us a lively image of His wisdom, power, and goodness in the creation of the world, and in the order of nature, encourages us to praise Him for the manifestation He has made of Himself as a Father to us in this frail and perishable life.

PSALM 104:1-4

1. Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God! You are exceeding great; You have clothed Yourself with praise and glory. 2. Being arrayed with light as with a garment; and spreading out the heavens as a curtain: 3. Laying the beams of His upper rooms in the waters; making the clouds His chariot; and walking upon the wings of the wind; 4. Making the winds His messengers; and His ministers a flaming fire.

The revelation of the God of Creation in nature

1. *Bless the LORD, O my soul!* After having exhorted himself to praise God, the Psalmist adds, that there is abundant matter for such an exercise; thus indirectly condemning himself and others of ingratitude, if the praises of God, than which nothing ought to be better known, or more celebrated, are buried by silence. In comparing *the light* with which he represents God as *arrayed* to a garment, he means, that although God is invisible, yet His glory is conspicuous enough. In respect of His essence, God undoubtedly dwells in light that is inaccessible; but as He irradiates the whole world by His splendor, this is the garment in which He, who is hidden in Himself, appears in a manner visible to us.

The knowledge of this truth is of the greatest importance. If men attempt to reach the infinite height to which God is exalted, although they fly above the clouds, they must fail in the midst of their course. Those who seek to see Him in His naked majesty are certainly very foolish. That we may enjoy the light of Him, He must come forth to view with His clothing; that is to say, we must cast our eyes upon the very beautiful fabric of the world in which He wishes to be seen by us, and not be too curious and rash in searching into His secret essence. Now, since God presents Himself to us clothed with light, those who are seeking pretexts for their living without the knowledge of Him, cannot allege in excuse of their slothfulness, that He is hidden in profound darkness. When it is said that *the heavens are a curtain*, it is not meant that under them God hides Himself, but that by them His majesty and glory are displayed; being, as it were, His royal pavilion.

3. *Laying the beams of His chambers in the waters.* David now proceeds to explain at greater length what he had briefly stated under the figure of God's clothing. The scope of the passage is shortly this, that we need not pierce our way above the clouds for the

purpose of finding God, since He meets us in the fabric of the world, and is everywhere exhibiting to our view scenes of the most vivid description. That we may not imagine that there is any thing in Him derived, as if, by the creation of the world, He received any addition to His essential perfection and glory, we must remember that He clothes himself with this robe for our sake.

The metaphorical representation of God, as *laying the beams of His chambers in the waters*, seems somewhat difficult to understand; but it was the design of the prophet, from a thing incomprehensible to us, to ravish us with the greater admiration. Unless beams be substantial and strong, they will not be able to sustain even the weight of an ordinary house. When, therefore, God makes the waters the foundation of His heavenly palace, who can fail to be astonished at a miracle so wonderful? When we take into account our slowness of apprehension, such hyperbolic expressions are by no means superfluous; for it is with difficulty that they awaken and enable us to attain even a slight knowledge of God.

The God of the winds and the clouds: God's word teaches that God sends calamities and natural disasters. We ought to tremble when God sends calamity and yet rejoice in His goodness when we see His blessings.

What is meant by His *walking upon the wings of the wind*, is rendered more obvious from the following verse, where it is said, that *the winds are His messengers*. God rides on the clouds, and is carried upon the wings of the wind, inasmuch as **He drives about the winds and clouds at His pleasure, and by sending them here and there as swiftly as He pleases, shows thereby the signs of His presence. By these words we are taught that the winds do not blow by chance, nor the lightnings flash by a fortuitous impulse, but that God, in the exercise of His sovereign power, rules and controls all the agitations and disturbances of the atmosphere.**

From this doctrine a twofold advantage may be reaped. In the first place, if at any time noxious [dangerous] winds arise, if the south wind corrupt the air, or if the north wind scorch the corn, and not only tear up trees by the root, but overthrow houses, and if other winds destroy the fruits of the earth, **we ought to tremble under these scourges of Providence.** In the second place, if, on the other hand, God moderate the excessive heat by a gentle cooling breeze, if He purify the polluted atmosphere by the north wind, or if He moisten the parched ground by south winds; in this **we ought to contemplate His goodness.**

As the apostle, who writes to the Hebrews (Hebrews 1:7) quotes this passage, and applies it to the angels, both the Greek and Latin expositors have almost unanimously considered David as here speaking allegorically. In like manner, because Paul, in quoting Psalm 19:4 in his Epistle to the Romans (Romans 10:18) seems to apply to the apostles what is there stated concerning the heavens, the whole psalm has been injudiciously expounded as if it were an allegory. The design of the apostle, in that part of the Epistle to the Hebrews referred to, was not simply to explain the mind of the prophet in this place; but since God is exhibited to us, as it were, visibly in a mirror, the apostle very properly lays down the analogy between the obedience which the winds manifestly and perceptibly yield to God, and that obedience which He receives from the angels. In short, the meaning is, that as **God makes use of the winds as His messengers, turns them here and there, calms and raises them whenever He pleases, that by their ministry He may declare His power,** so the angels were

created to execute His commands. And certainly we profit little in the contemplation of universal nature, if we do not behold with the eyes of faith that spiritual glory of which an image is presented to us in the world.

PSALM 104:5-9

5. He has founded the earth upon its foundations, so that it shall not be moved forever. **6.** He has covered it with the deep as with a garment: the waters shall stand above the mountains. **7.** At Your rebuke they shall flee; at the voice of Your thunder they shall haste away. **8.** The mountains shall ascend, and the valleys shall descend to the place which You hast founded for them. **9.** You have fixed a boundary over which they shall not pass; they shall not return to cover the earth.

The God of Creation sustains His creation by His mighty power.

5. He has founded the earth upon its foundations. Here the prophet celebrates the glory of God, as manifested in the stability of the earth. Since it is suspended in the midst of the air, and is supported only by pillars of water, how does it keep its place so steadfastly that it cannot be moved? This I indeed grant may be explained on natural principles Again, if the waters are higher than the earth, because they are lighter, why do they not cover the whole earth round about? Certainly the only answer which philosophers can give to this is, that the tendency of the waters to do so is counteracted by the providence of God, that a dwelling-place might be provided for man. If they do not admit that **the waters are restrained by the determinate appointment of God**, they betray not only their depravity and unthankfulness, but also their ignorance, and are altogether barbarous. The prophet, therefore, not without reason, recounts among the miracles of God, that which would be to us wholly incredible, did not even experience show its truth. We are very base indeed if, taught by such undoubted a proof, we do not learn that **nothing in the world is stable except in as far as it is sustained by the hand of God**. The world did not originate from itself, consequently, the whole order of nature depends on nothing else than His appointment, by which each element has its own peculiar property.

By trusting in God as our Sustainer, we need not live in a state of constant fear and anxiety like those who do not know God.

Nor is the language of the prophet to be viewed merely as an exhortation to give thanks to God; it is also intended to strengthen our confidence in regard to the future, that we may not live in the world in a state of constant fear and anxiety, as we must have done had not God testified that He has given the earth for a habitation to men. It is a singular blessing, which He bestows upon us, in His causing us to dwell upon the earth with undisturbed minds, by giving us the assurance that He has established it upon everlasting pillars. Although cities often perish by earthquakes, yet the body of the earth itself remains. Yes, all the agitations which befall it more fully confirm to us the truth, that **the earth would be swallowed up every moment were it not preserved by the secret power of God**.

The God of the Sea

6. He has covered it with the deep as with a garment. This may be understood [most suitably as that] the sea is now the covering of the earth. At the first creation the deep was not so much a garment as a grave, inasmuch as nothing bears less resemblance to

the adorning of apparel than the state of confused desolation and shapeless chaos in which the earth then was. Accordingly, in my judgment, there is here celebrated that wonderful arrangement by which the deep, although without form, is yet the garment of the earth. . . . I have indeed no doubt that the prophet, after having said that God had clothed the earth with waters, adds, by way of exposition, that the waters would stand above the mountains, were it not that they flee away at God's rebuke. From where does it come that the mountains are elevated, and that the valleys sink down, but because boundaries are set to the waters, that they may not return to overwhelm the earth? The passage then, it is obvious, may very properly be understood thus—that the sea, although a mighty deep, which strikes terror by its vastness, is yet as a beautiful garment to the earth.

The reason of the metaphor is, because the surface of the earth stands uncovered. The prophet affirms that this does not happen by chance; for, **if the providence of God did not restrain the waters, would they not immediately rush forth to overwhelm the whole earth?** He, therefore, speaks advisedly when he maintains that the appearance of any part of the earth's surface is not the effect of nature, but is an evident miracle. **Were God to give loose reins to the sea, the waters would suddenly cover the mountains.** But now, fleeing at God's rebuke, they retire to a different quarter.

By the rebuke of God, and the voice of His thunder, is meant the awful command of God, by which He restrains the violent raging of the sea. Although **at the beginning, by His word alone, He confined the sea within determinate bounds, and continues to this day to keep it within them,** yet if we consider how tumultuously its billows cast up their foam when it is agitated, it is not without reason that the prophet speaks of it, as **kept in check by the powerful command of God**; just as, both in Jeremiah (Jeremiah 5:22) and in Job (Job 28:25) God, with much sublimity, commends His power, as displayed in the ocean.

The ascending of the mountains, and the descending of the valleys, are poetical figures, implying, that unless God confined the deep within bounds, the distinction between mountains and valleys, which contributes to the beauty of the earth, would cease to exist, for it would engulf the whole earth. It is said that *God has founded a place for the valleys*; for there would be no dry land at the foot of the mountains, but the deep would bear sway, did not God command the space there to be unoccupied by the sea, as it were contrary to nature.

9. You have set a boundary which they shall not pass. The miracle spoken of is in this verse amplified, from its perpetuity. . . . It is entirely owing to the providence of God, that part of the earth remains dry and fit for the habitation of men. This is a fact of which mariners have the most satisfactory evidence. Yes, were even the rudest and most stupid of our race only to open their eyes, they would behold in the sea mountains of water elevated far above the level of the land. Certainly no banks, and even no iron gates, could make the waters, which in their own nature are fluid and unstable, keep together and in one place, as we see to be the case.

I have just now said that earthquakes, which bring destruction upon some places, leave the globe, upon the whole, as it was before; and in like manner, although the sea, in some parts of the world, overpasses its boundaries, yet the law, which confines it, within certain limits, stands fast, that the earth may be a fit habitation for men. The Baltic Sea, in our own time, inundated large tracts of land, and did great damage to the Flemish

people [in Europe] and other neighboring nations. By an instance of this kind we are warned what would be the consequence, were the restraint imposed upon the sea, by the hand of God, removed. How is it that we have not thereby been swallowed up together, but because God has held in that outrageous element by His word? In short, **although the natural tendency of the waters is to cover the earth, yet this will not happen, because God has established, by His word, a counteracting law, and as His truth is eternal, this law must remain steadfast.**