

Psalm 148 – Orchestrating Creation's Praise of its Creator

Ravel's Bolero

Many of you will remember the gold-medal-winning performance by Torvill and Dean in the ice dance competition at the winter Olympics at Sarajevo in 1984. They skated to an edited version of Ravel's Bolero.

The full version of Ravel's Bolero is a remarkable piece of music lasting about 17 minutes. It begins with a single drum beating out a driving rhythm which will run on through the entire piece of music. A single flute is then brought in with the melody. This is then taken up by a clarinet along with two or three violins being gently plucked in the background. These are then accompanied by a harp. The melody is then taken up by a bassoon, clarinet and an oboe – the strings continuing to play quietly in the background. A muted trumpet then takes up the theme accompanied by a flute before handing over the main melody to a saxophone. A few piccolos then join in as does the piano and French horns. Now most of the orchestra is playing together and the music has become much louder with the violins and other stringed instruments now being played loudly with their bows. Then the harsh and dominant sound of a trombone rings out and all the instruments are playing together as the music soars to its climax.

It's a remarkable piece of music in which the conductor has the key role of bringing in each instrument in its proper place and keeping all of the instruments playing together. It's an exhilarating but exhausting performance for any conductor.

This psalm is like that, but on a far grander scale, as all of creation is called to join in the praise of its Creator.

Psalm 148

The psalm begins with the call, "Praise the Lord." This is the drumbeat that runs insistently through the whole of the psalm.

Then, everything in the heavens is called on to praise the Lord. The angels are called upon to praise the Lord – those spiritual beings, invisible to us, who surround God's throne in the heavens are called to praise him. We might not be able to hear their praise, but it is real and constant.

The psalm then calls upon the sun, the moon and all the shining stars to join in praise of their creator.

When this psalm was written, God's people were surrounded by those who worshiped other gods. Who thought of the world as being dominated by a host of spiritual forces that needed to be humoured if life was to go well for you. Others thought of the sun, moon and stars as spiritual powers that governed human lives. The psalmist reminds us that there is but one God. Angels and all spiritual beings were created by him to be his servants and to do his bidding. Sun, moon and stars were all created and set in their places by him. They also are his servants and do his bidding. All of these heavenly beings, spiritual and material, were created for God's glory and are called upon to praise him.

Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for at his command they were created,
and he established them for ever and ever –
he issued a decree that will never pass away. (vv. 5-6)

We live in a world that is still afraid of all manner of imagined spiritual powers. The lives of many people are dominated by fear and superstitions. Others go through life with no thought for anything beyond their immediate needs and those of their family. The world around us needs to hear the good news that there is a God – the one and only true God – who created all things and is sovereign over all things. He is a God who can be trusted for he cares for all that he has made. He is a God who is worthy of our praise.

Attention now turns from heavenly powers to the earthly creation. Everything on earth is called to praise the Lord. Great sea creatures which inhabit the depths of the sea are called to praise him – whales and dolphins, giant squid and all sorts of unimaginable animals that lurk in the deep. They were each made by him and called to praise him. I am reminded of the verses from Psalm 104:

How many are your works, LORD!
In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number –
living things both large and small.
There the ships go to and fro,
and Leviathan, which you formed to frolic there.
All creatures look to you
to give them their food at the proper time. (Ps. 104:24-27)

All these creatures were made by God and by their delight in being what they were created to be they praise the one who created them.

Then all the weather systems are called to praise God: lightening, hail, snow, rainclouds and the powerful winds all bring praise to the Lord as they do his bidding. We may not always take such delight in them!

Now the very fabric of nature is called to praise him: mountains and hills, trees that provide fruit and mighty trees that adorn the hills and provide wood for building – all that clothes and adorns the earth was created by God and displays his glory.

Then the animal kingdom is called to praise the Lord – wild animals that roam the earth and those animals domesticated and farmed by human beings. All are created by God and are to bring him praise.

Last, but by no means least, all human beings are called to join in the praise of God. People with a high view of themselves such as kings and princes are called to acknowledge that the Lord is God and to bring him their praise. And ordinary folk like us, old and young, male and female, all alike are called to praise him.

So, having called in turn every part of heaven and earth to join in praising the Lord, this part of the psalm reaches its climax with the call:

Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for his name alone is exalted;
his splendour is above the earth and the heavens. (v. 13)

The conductor of the orchestra

But who is the one orchestrating this praise? Who is the great conductor who is leading all of creation in praise of its creator?

In the beginning, God created human beings in his own image and set them in charge of all that he had made. We read in the first chapter of Genesis:

God created human beings in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.' (Genesis 1:27-28)

As those reflecting his image, human beings were made to rule over God's world in God's name. They were to care for all that God had made and entrusted to their charge and were to orchestrate creation's praise of its Creator by enabling all that God had made to reach its full potential – to become all that God had made it to be.

But something has gone horribly wrong with us as human beings and something has gone horribly wrong with God's creation. Instead of us leading creation's praise of its creator we have exploited one another and together have exploited creation to satisfy our own insatiable demands. Instead of creation lifting its voice in praise of its creator, it now groans in pain, longing to be liberated from its bondage to frustration and decay. The voice of praise has been turned into a cry of pain as creation no longer reflects the good purposes of its Creator. We live as dying people in a dying world.

Who can now call creation back to a united shout of praise of its Creator?

God has heard the cry of his wounded creation and has taken acted to heal its hurt by sending the Lord Jesus into the world. He came to share in the hurt of a fallen creation and to take that hurt upon himself. In his death and by his resurrection he came to redeem and restore the world that God had created for his glory. Listen to how Paul describes the Lord Jesus Christ in his letter to the Colossians:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:15-20)

God's purpose in Christ is not simply to save a few souls and bring them to heaven. His purpose is to redeem the entire creation. Through the cross, through Jesus death and resurrection, God is bringing the whole of creation back under the dominion of the living God. Paul tells the Christians at Ephesus that God's great purpose is, "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (Ephesians 1:10).

Where we failed to look after creation, Christ has come as the second and last Adam, perfectly reflecting the image of the living God. He is Lord over all creation. And he is calling all things in heaven and earth to praise their Creator. He is the one who will orchestrate creation's praise.

Our calling as Christians

And the Lord Jesus calls all those who follow him to join him in orchestrating creation's praise. So Psalm 148 concludes by declaring of God:

He has raised up for his people a horn,
the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart. (v. 14)

The picture of a horn is of one possessing power and strength. The term is used of the Messiah (Psalm 132:17). God has raised up Jesus as the one who will lead his people's praise of their Creator and redeemer. So Psalm 148 is followed by Psalm 149:

Praise the Lord.

Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.

Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;
let the people of Zion be glad in their King.
Let them praise his name with dancing
and make music to him with tambourine and harp.
For the Lord takes delight in his people;
he crowns the humble with victory.
Let his faithful people rejoice in this honour
and sing for joy on their beds. (Psalm 149:1-5)

We live in a world where many have no thought of God and where many use his name and the name of our precious Saviour only as expletives. In such a world, we are called to praise our God. We have cause to praise him for his great goodness towards us in in creation but also and especially for his salvation in the Lord Jesus. We are to offer the Lord our praise and worship as the firstfruits of the praise that is due to him from all creation.

Moreover, we are also to be those who call upon all creation to praise him. Just as Psalm 148 was sung by God's people at worship in the temple long ago in Jerusalem, so today, we are to call upon all creation to join us in praising of the Lord. We are to invite the people among whom we live to join us in the praise of our great God. We are to tell them of all that God has done in Christ and to encourage them to come and praise the Lord with us.

And we are also to seek to encourage all of creation, animate and inanimate, to praise its creator by fulfilling its created potential. Creation is not to be exploited but tended and led into praise. Can you imagine what it means for mountains, hills, trees and cattle to praise the Lord who made them – who made them for his glory?

As we, under the direction of our risen Lord, call all of creation into the praise of its creator, we anticipate the great crescendo of praise that will mark Christ's return. As we read in Revelation 5:11-14:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying:

‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honour and glory and praise!’

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honour and glory and power,
for ever and ever!’

The four living creatures said, ‘Amen’, and the elders fell down and worshipped.

What a day that will be. In that day our call for all creation to praise the Lord will receive its resounding response.

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