

Psalm 104

Singing the Creator's Praise

1. Theme

Psalm 104 deals with God's work of creation more clearly than any other. It draws heavily on Genesis 1, and yet differs from it in a number of significant ways. For example, while Genesis 1 is sequential narrative (i.e. Day 1, Day 2, Day 3, etc.), Psalm 104 is poetic and non-sequential (i.e. the events of the days of creation are intermixed). Also, Genesis 1 describes the creation of the pristine, unfallen world, but Psalm 104 is written in the context of a fallen world in which Man must labour (vv. 14, 23), of which death is an aspect (v. 29), and from which the sinful will be removed (v. 35). Moreover, while Genesis 1 is concerned with origins, Psalm 104 is also concerned with the LORD's ongoing activity in making the world work. Michael Wilcock comments that "an account of a past event is exactly what 104 is not. Certainly it looks back to what happened at the beginning, but really it is celebrating the way creation works now. That is why its proportions differ from those of Genesis 1."

Psalm 104 tells us that

- although God is exalted far above creation, yet he is intimately concerned with creation;
- God placed Man in an orderly, well-stocked creation, for which he has provided liberally;
- the right response to this glorious and generous God is worship: "Bless the LORD, O my soul!"

Patrick Miller: "As the most extended explication of God's work of creation outside of Genesis [Psalm 104] deserves a central place in any attempt to think about God as creator and about the doctrine of creation."

2. Structure

A (vv. 1-4)	Bless the LORD, O my soul! God makes his abode in the heavens.
B (vv. 5-13)	The Earth and the Sea are formed. The Earth is provided with water and trees and is satisfied.
C (vv. 14-23)	Man opens and closes this section, but is not central. It describes ecology. Plants are provided for food; the Sun and Moon mark the day and night shifts of the animals.
B' (vv. 24-30)	The Earth and the Sea are filled with an extraordinary range and variety of the LORD's creatures. God satisfies all his creatures with food.
A' (vv. 31-35)	God's presence causes the Earth to tremble and smoke! Bless the LORD, O my soul!

3. Commentary

The structure of the psalm is like three concentric circles:

(a) The Creator

In the outermost circle (AA') is focused on God.

Vv. 1-4 look at heaven, and describe God in transcendent terms. Heaven's creation is described like the building of a dwelling (it is stretched out; its beams are laid; its inhabitants are made); John Goldingay writes, "As king, God...constructed a palace to live in, a palace within the cosmos, as if wanting to be in a position to be involved with the world on an ongoing basis."

Vv. 31-35 concern the earth. God's presence is more than Earth can bear; sinners must be driven from the earth.

(b) Sea and Earth

The middle circle (BB') depicts the Earth and the Sea, the domain created for plants and animals.

Vv. 5-9 describe the creation of sea and dry land; while vv. 10-13 speak of provision: the watering of the dry land to make it the home of birds and beasts.

Vv. 24-26 focus on the sea and the great sea creatures, and the swarming sea creatures, and the ships of men.

Vv. 27-30 speak of providence: the cycle of life is in God's hands.

A key word in section BB' is satisfy. God satisfies the created needs of his creatures: he is the generous, giving God.

Water is mentioned repeatedly – it is a creature (not a wild, chaotic, independent power); it is limited; and it is harnessed.

(c) Man and Animals

The innermost circle (C) draws on the vocabulary of Genesis 1 to show that God provides for the needs of Man and the animals.

The section opens and closes with Man (Man is only mentioned in these verses) – but Man is not central – the Psalm appears to be more interested in the whole ecology of the world.

The Sun and the Moon (vv. 19-23) mark the day and night shifts for Man and the animals, and demonstrate the regularity of God's creation: God is the God of order.

4. Application

The "bookends" on the Psalm declare "Bless the LORD, O my soul!" God is the One for whose praise we were created. This is a call to commitment to the Creator who has been described as King, Controller, Gardener and Craftsman.