

OpenTheo

December 31st: Psalm 148 & Revelation 22:6-21

December 30, 2020



Alastair Roberts

A creational choir. The final word.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 Psalm 148 base voices of the sea, you great sea creatures and all deeps, enter the song, and then the soaring altos of the sky, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word, to be joined in their turn by the rich earthy baritones, mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars. The four divisions of the animal creation, beasts and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds, are now brought into the swelling chorus, and finally the cosmic music rises to its height as the voices of humanity in its various divisions are introduced. Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth, young men and maidens together, old men and children.

As humanity, organised according to its various people groups and their respective

kings, princes and judges, joins its voices to the choir, a great wall of majestic praise rises up from the undivided creation, as if a wave about to break, to flood all with the glory of its creator. The lower voices of the young men unite with the higher voices of the maidens, the weighty and the seasoned voices of the elders, with the fresh and unbroken voices of the youths. The rich yet ordered diversity of the creation and humanity finally achieve their elusive unity in this grand cosmic liturgy.

All their divisions and alienation washed away in the overwhelming beauty of its common song. Humanity is structured according to distinct peoples and their respective polities, by sexual difference and by generational divides. The glorious cosmic worship described here highlights the beauty of this differentiation and unity.

Each group has its own unique set of voices, whose distinct glory appears when heard in its fitting juxtaposition with others. Like the wider creation within the creational choir, humanity is not an undifferentiated and amorphous mass, but a glorious earthly host, structured and ordered both by and in fitting response to its creator. The vision of this psalm is a remarkable one, with much to teach us.

It offers us an account of the creation and of humanity's place within it, that sharply contrasts with many of those that hold the greatest imaginative purchase in contemporary Western society. The unifying purpose of the entire cosmos, animate creatures and inanimate bodies alike, is the worship of the Lord. Where William Paley imagined the world as if a finely designed timepiece, and more modern thinkers may regard it as a temporary emergence born of random fortuities, doomed to collapse under entropic forces in its time, the psalmist invites us to think of the world as if a mind-bogglingly vast liturgical assembly, transcending and traversing the vast reaches and divisions of time and space, gathering together the stars and their courses, and the movement of subatomic particles.

Creation is united in expressing the glory of its maker, the Lord, bound together in its beautiful and joyful witness to his greatness. Within such a world, humanity is, as Alexander Schmemmann has observed, not primarily homo sapien, not even the man who makes things, or the man who acts economically, or even the man who is acting politically, but the man who worships. Our knowledge, our creation, our economics and our politics are all subordinate to the greater end of the worship of the Lord.

The place of kings, peoples, princes and judges in the psalmist's account also merits our attention, whereas all of the other divisions of the creation and its creatures to which the psalmist appeals are naturally occurring divisions. These divisions are unique in being divisions established principally through human agency, divisions originating chiefly in humanity's formation of various distinctive polities and people groups. It is a striking fact that such human political divisions are presented as standing in some continuity with the natural divisions of the wider creation.

Humanity is not summoned to the worship of the Lord as an assemblage of detached individuals, nor even just according to the fundamentally natural divisions of sexes and generations, but has structured societies and polities. Even in the eschatological visions of Revelation, such human divisions continue to be granted significance. Humanity is not an undifferentiated mass but an ordered multitude of nations, tribes, peoples and languages.

The psalmist's juxtaposition of the order of creation within the order of human society valorises the polity itself as a reality that can glorify the Lord. A well-structured human society can be some reflection of the divinely ordered society of the host of the heavens and the earth in their array, just as the very being of the mountain, the abyss or the cedar bring glory to the Lord. So the very existence of good human society, the very activity of political order can be a form of praise.

In many respects, humanity stands at the pinnacle of the creation. In humanity, creation's praise reaches its greatest height. Yet there is something distinct about human society too, something that stands in contrast to the inanimate and lower creation.

Human beings praise the Lord not only in the beauty of diverse being and operation according to divine command, but in self-conscious and loving declaration of his worth. In humanity the wider voice of creation finds its truest and fullest expression. As typified by the psalmist himself, it is humanity that stands in the midst of the cosmic liturgical assembly and actively unites its voices.

Furthermore, whereas the rest of the creation worships God primarily in the course of their naturally established operations, humanity's worship has an inescapably moral dimension. The exercise of human rule itself may be glorifying to God, as humanity was created in large part for this end. Yet the divine commands to which human rule answers are very different to those placed upon the fire, hail, snow, frost and wind in verse 8. The appropriately worshipful response to the creator required of human rulers is found in justice, goodness, wisdom, prudence and the establishment of peace.

Within the psalmist's vision of creation, certain things come into clearer view. God is praised not only in the formal liturgical celebration, where the great unifying end of creation is rendered explicit, but also in the daily operation of human image bearing as we exercise dominion and represent and reflect God's rule in the earth, appropriately expressing the glory of what we were created to be. A question to consider, where else in scripture do we get some sense of the way that the wider creation is involved in the worship of the Lord? Revelation chapter 22 verses 6 to 21 And he said to me, These words are trustworthy and true.

And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one

who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me. But he said to me, You must not do that.

I am a fellow-servant with you and your brothers, the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God. And he said to me, Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.

Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy. Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers, and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches.

I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star. The Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let the one who hears say, Come.

And let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who desires take the water of life without price. I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book.

If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city which are described in this book. He who testifies to these things says, Surely I am coming soon.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.

Amen. We now arrive at the conclusion of the book of Revelation, and with it the conclusion of the entire New Testament, and the conclusion of the Bible as a whole. John has just finished describing his vision of the new heaven and the new earth, and the descending holy city and its glories.

The glory of the bridal city is consummation of the glory of Jesus in the Spirit, as the woman is the glory of the man, so the church formed by the Spirit is the glory of Jesus. Now we step back from the immediacy of the visions, and the character of John as the witness-bearer and the angel communicating the visions to him come into view. From immersion in its contents, the importance of the book itself, the book we are studying, is brought into focus, and with it our place and our responsibility as its readers.

By the time that we arrive at its conclusion, it might be easy to forget that Revelation began as a letter to Christians in the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia, and by extension to other Christians both in the first century and in later centuries that would read its words. When reading the New Testament we can often read it as if its words were inert, perhaps as if they were dehydrated truth in plastic packaging that needed to be unwrapped, mixed with water and microwaved to make it edifying for us, or maybe even processed and reconstituted into something rather different in order to be relevant and have application to our lives. Yet, like most of the rest of the New Testament, Revelation is not teaching abstract truths about theology in some detached fashion.

Rather, it is directly speaking to flesh and blood persons in their very concrete situations and difficulties, addressing them with trustworthy and true words by which they can live. Its words are addressed to us too. The words of the prophecy of Revelation are words that, according to these final verses, must be kept.

The fact that the words of the prophecy are described as faithful and true should also remind us of the use of that same language with reference to Jesus himself, and the fact that Jesus has also been spoken of as the word and as the embodied testimony. The book is titled The Revelation of St John. Many mistakenly call it Revelations, as if the book were a series of mysterious oracles about future world events.

But the book is the revelation of Jesus Christ. It is the unveiling of the exalted Son. To keep the prophecy of the book is to keep hold of him by a confident faith through the struggles of this life, whether of persecution or prosperity.

In chapter 19 verse 10, John fell down to worship the bowl angel, presumably because the angel spoke such divine things, and he was rebuked in an almost identical way to that in which he is rebuked in this passage. As Austin Farrer observes, in the former passage he was immediately directed to the one called faithful and true on the white horse coming from heaven. Here, however, the angel is not eclipsed by a Christophany, but Jesus speaks through him as his mouthpiece, much as he does through the apostles and prophets.

In concluding, the book of Revelation returns to the note on which it began. Revelation opened with the statement, The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. In verse 6 of the concluding chapter we read, And he said to me, These words are trustworthy and true.

And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. Reading the rest of the opening three verses of the book, further elements are recalled in the concluding chapter. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. In chapter 22 verses 7-10, John is once again presented as the witness and as the servant. A revealing messenger is once again present.

There is another blessing declared, this time upon the person keeping the prophecy of the book. The written words of the prophecy are once again focused upon. There is a testimony recorded in the book, which itself serves as a witness and as a word of address.

Finally we are once again reminded that the time is near. There are other parallels between these two chapters, such as in the title of Christ as the Alpha and the Omega. Indeed the claim that Jesus is coming soon rings as a refrain throughout this final passage of the book.

Verse 7, And behold I am coming soon. Verse 12, Behold I am coming soon. Verse 20, Surely I am coming soon.

Back in Daniel chapter 12 verse 4 the prophet was instructed, But you Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the end. Revelation chapter 12 verse 10 strikes a sharply contrasting note. Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.

Studying the book of Revelation, the book of Daniel has always been in the near background. Revelation is largely an account of the way that the prophecy of Daniel is fulfilled. Indeed we have argued that the sealed book that the Lamb opened is likely Daniel's prophecy concerning the last days.

The contrast between the statement given to Daniel and the statement given to John concerning the sealing of the prophecy is instructive for us. If it were the case that we still awaited the fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel and John, the contrasting instruction given to the two would not make much sense, as the great intervening time period would dwarf the period between their two prophecies. The shortness of the time is further confirmed in the statement of verse 11, which confirms evil doers, the filthy, the righteous and the holy, in their current state.

The last grains are falling through the hourglass, and people's various courses have already been decided. There is neither time nor opportunity remaining to reverse direction. For these and many other reasons, it makes much more sense to read the prophecy of Revelation as referring to the dismantling of the old covenant structure and the unveiling of the structure of the new covenant, through the ascension of Christ, Pentecost, the spread of the gospel through Israel and the wider Roman Empire and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

Indeed these are the events that are prominent in the rest of the New Testament, particularly in Jesus' Olivet Discourse. Judgment is about to come and everyone must brace for it. In the descending holy city, the awaited future's presence is already felt in the middle of history.

This is the case for the reality of judgment too. The shadow of the very final judgment hangs heavy over Jerusalem in AD 70, as people's final destinies are at stake in how they stand relative to what is happening at that juncture in history. While every one of us must stand before the judgment seat of Christ, there are moments in history when decisive judgment falls upon a civilization, a nation or a larger body of people and the gravity of a final end is felt most keenly.

The judgment upon Jerusalem in AD 70, as presented by the book of Revelation, is part of a larger transformation of the heavens and the earth achieved through Christ's work both on earth and in heaven. The gravity of the future that we await can be experienced here and now in the life of the church. We are invited to enter the holy city as we wash our robes in the blood of Christ.

In the waters of baptism, for instance, God seals his promise of a free forgiveness of all of our sins on account of Jesus. In the Lord's Supper, the gift of the true tree of life, the living Jesus, of whom those who eat will live forever, is graciously extended to us and received by faith. We are already enjoying a foretaste of the awaited new heaven and new earth in the present.

However, the negative aspect of the future is also already felt. The church is a realm of participation, but is also a place that excludes. It excludes those who love and live by lies.

It excludes the sexually immoral. It excludes murderers and idolaters. It excludes all others who act contrary to Christ and to his gospel.

Such people have not yet been consigned to the lake of fire that we read of at the beginning of chapter 21, but their exclusion from the life of the church should be a serious advance warning. The significance of the events described in Revelation, like many of the events recorded in the scripture, is not chiefly visible to natural sight. Rather, their significance is only truly perceived when we are granted to see above the firmament, where a great heavenly liturgy is playing out.

In the heavenly visions of John, we perceive what was really taking place in the middle decades of the first century AD, events that provide the foundation of the reality that the church is living out right now. We are experiencing the binding of Satan, the thousand year reign of the saints, and the already but not yet descent of the holy city to earth. In fulfilment of the prophecies of Daniel, we are witnessing the rock that is growing into a mountain that will fill the entire world.

Looking at the messiness of our situations, this can all feel very strange and foreign to the reality that we inhabit. But we are called to live by eyes of faith that perceive God's reality-filled promises of the awaited glories of the new creation already at work among those of us who believe. We are supposed to recognise that the truest and most determinative reality operates above the firmament, in heaven.

One of the things that the book of Revelation does then, more than any other book of the New Testament, is to take us above the firmament to see Christ's heavenly work, completing and fulfilling what was begun in his earthly ministry. Peter Lighthouse notes that this passage is structured in a fourfold parallelism, each of four sections with a speaker or speech with some form of he said, verses 6-9, 10-16, 17-19 and 20-21. Each of the four sections contains Jesus' claim that he is coming quickly, save for the third which has the corresponding call of the Spirit and the Bride and the faithful hearer of the prophecy to Jesus, come.

This statement is followed by a blessing to the faithful. The first three sections each end with a testifying statement, of John, of Jesus and then of John again, alongside the testimony of the Spirit and the Bride. The book thus ends with an accumulation of witnesses and their testimony.

With solemn testimony, witnesses and blessings and curses, it is also clear that we are operating in the territory characteristic of covenant. In verses 13 and 16 Jesus declares himself in a series of titles. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the Root and the Descendant of David.

All is contained, summed up and sustained in him. He is the bright morning star, the one whose rising heralds the eternal day. The book ends with the voice of the Bridegroom and the Bride in conversation.

The Bridegroom announcing his coming and the Bride with the Spirit seeking to hasten it. The hearer might recall the closing words of the book of Song of Songs, O you who dwell in the gardens, with companions listening for your voice, let me hear it, make haste my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices. The Spirit stands with the Bride, addressing the Bridegroom.

The Spirit forms the Bride and the Bride is formed in the Spirit. The Spirit is the one by whom Christ dwells in his Bride. We might also recognise a close affinity between the Bride and the Spirit in other respects.

The Spirit is the one by whom we are begotten again. The Spirit is the one who makes God's home with us. The Spirit is the one who glorifies and brings life and communion.

As the last Adam is awaited from heaven, the Spirit is present with the new Eve. In opening his Gospel, John echoed Genesis 1.1 speaking of Jesus as the Word who was in

the beginning, the one through whom all things were created. Here at the end of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, Jesus is the awaited one, the one who comes at the consummation of all of history.

Between its beginning and its end, the Bible bookends the entirety of cosmic history. And this entire history is bookended by, and upheld in, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the root and the descendant, the chief cornerstone of the foundation and the glorious capstone of the entire edifice.

He is the opening word and the final word. Everything that comes in between is grounded and secured in him. He is the key to it all.

This book has been the revelation of Jesus Christ. But not just this final book. All of the books of the Bible contain a united, unified revelation, in many voices testifying to Jesus Christ.

He is the subject matter of them all, the one who holds them all together. A question to consider. John warns every hearer of the book against adding to the words of the book of his prophecy, in verse 18.

Would it be appropriate to broaden John's warning to refer to the testimony of scripture more generally? If so, how might we make that case?