

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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Psalm 104 — Praise for the Creator

1.0 Introducing Psalm 104

- Book 4 of the Psalter concludes with four psalms calling on God's people to bless or praise Him. For their similar beginnings and endings, see the chart in "Introducing Psalm 103."
- Psalm 104 might be considered an expanded commentary on Psalm 19:1, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands."
- It echoes Psalm 8 with its focus on the glory of God and His providential care for mankind. The Creator is in control and He cares.

2.0 Reading Psalm 104 (NAU)

- 104:1** Bless the LORD, O my soul!
O LORD my God, You are very great;
You are clothed with splendor and majesty,
- 104:2** Covering Yourself with light as with a cloak,
Stretching out heaven like a *tent* curtain.
- 104:3** He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters;
He makes the clouds His chariot;
He walks upon the wings of the wind;
- 104:4** He **makes** the winds His messengers,
Flaming fire His ministers.
- 104:5** He established the earth upon its foundations,
So that it will not totter forever and ever.
- 104:6** You covered it with the deep as with a garment;
The waters were standing above the mountains.
- 104:7** At Your rebuke they fled,
At the sound of Your thunder they hurried away.

- 104:8** The mountains rose; the valleys sank down
To the place which You established for them.
- 104:9** You set a boundary that they may not pass over,
So that they will not return to cover the earth.
- 104:10** He sends forth springs in the valleys;
They flow between the mountains;
- 104:11** They give drink to every beast of the field;
The wild donkeys quench their thirst.
- 104:12** Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell;
They lift up *their* voices among the branches.
- 104:13** He waters the mountains from His upper chambers;
The earth is satisfied with the fruit of His **works**.
- 104:14** He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
And vegetation for the labor of man,
So that he may bring forth food from the earth,
- 104:15** And wine which makes man's heart glad,
So that he may make *his* face glisten with oil,
And food which sustains man's heart.
- 104:16** The trees of the LORD drink their fill,
The cedars of Lebanon which He planted,
- 104:17** Where the birds build their nests,
And the stork, whose home is the fir trees.
- 104:18** The high mountains are for the wild goats;
The cliffs are a refuge for the shepherds.
- 104:19** He **made** the moon for the seasons;
The sun knows the place of its setting.
- 104:20** You appoint darkness and it becomes night,
In which all the beasts of the forest prowl about.
- 104:21** The young lions roar after their prey
And seek their food from God.
- 104:22** *When* the sun rises they withdraw
And lie down in their dens.
- 104:23** Man goes forth to his work
And to his labor until evening.
- 104:24** O LORD, how many are Your **works**!
In wisdom You have **made** them all;
The earth is full of Your possessions.
- 104:25** There is the sea, great and broad,
In which are swarms without number,
Animals both small and great.
- 104:26** There the ships move along,
And Leviathan, which You have formed to sport in it.
- 104:27** They all wait for You



- To give them their food in due season.
- 104:28** You give to them, they gather *it* up;
You open Your hand, they are satisfied with good.
- 104:29** You hide Your face, they are dismayed;
You take away their spirit, they expire
And return to their dust.
- 104:30** You send forth Your Spirit, they are created;
And You renew the face of the ground.
- 104:31** Let the glory of the LORD endure forever;
Let the LORD be glad in His **works**;
- 104:32** He looks at the earth, and it trembles;
He touches the mountains, and they smoke.
- 104:33** I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.
- 104:34** Let my meditation be pleasing to Him;
As for me, I shall be glad in the LORD.
- 104:35** Let sinners be consumed from the earth
And let the wicked be no more.
Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Praise the LORD!

3.0 Understanding Psalm 104

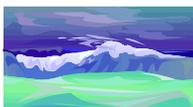
3.1 Outline

- I. The Creator's Praise (vv. 1-4)
- II. The Creator's Preparation of the Earth (vv. 5-13)
- III. The Creator's Provision for Mankind (vv. 14-23)
- IV. The Creator's Possessions on the Earth (vv. 24-30)
- V. The Creator's Praise (vv. 31-35)



3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “Bless the LORD, O my soul!”
 - Such similarities with Psalm 103 do not necessarily indicate that they both have the same author. The similarities may have caused the editor of Psalms to place them back-to-back.
- **v. 3** “His chariot . . . He walks”
 - Some commentators believe that the psalmist borrowed his description of the theophany (= appearance of God) from Canaanite literature about the god Baal.
 - ✓ The same commentators also tie verses 6-7 to mythology. They associate “the deep” (Hebrew, *tehom*) with either the Canaanite (Ugaritic) sea god Yam or the Babylonian goddess Tiamat. Both



rebelled against a superior god and were defeated in battle: Baal defeated Yam and Marduk defeated Tiamat.

- ✓ These myths represent the conquest of chaos. Thus, some biblical commentators, appropriating extrabiblical mythology, see in the Genesis creation account a similar motif. The more evangelical of these commentators claim that Moses (in Genesis) and the psalmist (in Psalm 104) were employing familiar myths either for purely descriptive purposes (ideas the average Israelite would understand) or to highlight the contrast between the myth and the biblical account. It does not mean that the biblical writer believed the myths.
- ✓ However, it is not necessary to accept this association of the biblical text with myths. *Tehom* is not the exact equivalent of either Tiamat or Yam as a word, much less in its immediate reference (which is quite literally deep water). As an analogy, think about this: If a man refers to his wife as “Babe,” it is not evidence that he is saying that she is a blue ox—nor does he intend any association whatsoever with the mythical Paul Bunyan.
- ✓ Many scholars also identify parallels between Psalm 104 and an Egyptian hymn to Aten in the time of Pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV; early 14th century B.C.). Compare the following excerpt with verses 28-30:

<Those on> earth come from your hand as you made them,
When you have dawned they live,
When you set they die;
You yourself are lifetime, one lives by you.
All eyes are <on your> beauty until you set,
All labor ceases when you rest in the west;
When you rise you stir [everyone] for the King,

It is probably best to understand the apparent parallels as indicating similar concepts and themes common to all ancient near eastern cultures, rather than any direct dependence or relationship.

- v. 4 “makes”
 - The Hebrew root word that forms the basis for “make” and “works” occurs in strategic verses that divide the psalm into stanzas.
- v. 7 “At Your rebuke”
 - “Rebuke” seems to indicate that verses 7-9 refer to the Flood. The English translation and the Hebrew seem disharmonious with the Creation account, since the verb often implies anger (Isa 51:20; cp. 54:9). A speaker intends the rebuke to instill fear in the hearer (Isa 30:17).
 - ✓ Some scholars think that “rebuke” is actually a war cry and refer to the Babylonian and Canaanite chaos myth (see comments on v. 3).

- ✓ Other psalms employ the same verb in contexts dealing with the parting of the Red Sea's waters (Pss 18:15; 106:9; cp. Nahum 1:4), resulting in judgment upon the Egyptians and deliverance or safety for the Israelites.
 - See, also, Luke 8:24 when Christ stilled the stormy Sea of Galilee.
 - **v. 8** "The mountains rose; the valleys sank down"
 - This verse "is to be understood in terms of disorganized movement helter-skelter, back and forth, as they [the waters] leave the mountains (v 7)."—Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1983), 27.
 - Does this verse refer to Creation or to the Flood?
 - ✓ *Creation* — The order of created entities in Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 appears to be the same:
 - Day 1:* light (Gen 1:3; Ps 104:2)
 - Day 2:* heavenly waters (Gen 1:7; Ps 104:3)
 - Day 3:* draining water off the earth and appearance of landforms (Gen 1:9; Ps 104:7-8), vegetation (Gen 1:11; Ps 104:14)
 - Day 4:* sun and moon (Gen 1:14-16; Ps 104:19)
 - Day 5:* sea creatures (Gen 1:21; Ps 104:25-26)
 - Day 6:* provision of food (Gen 1:29; Ps 104:27).In addition, the description of boundaries for the waters is reminiscent of Job 38:4-11.
 - ✓ *Flood* — Psalm 104:9 seems to echo Genesis 7:20, 9:21-22, and 10:12-15: "You set a boundary that they may not pass over, So that they will not return to cover the earth." The apparent creation order in Psalm 104 ignores the disharmonies in the psalm:
 - "Light" (v. 2) covers God rather than illuminating the earth.
 - God creates the earth (v. 5; cp. Gen 1:1) after the light (v. 2; cp. Gen 1:3).
 - Light exists before waters cover the earth (v. 6; cp. Gen 1:2).
 - Birds (v. 12; cp. Gen 1:20) precede vegetation (v. 14; cp. Gen 1:11) and the sun and moon (v. 19; cp. Gen 1:14-16).
 - Wild donkeys (v. 11; cp Gen 1:24-25) precede birds.
 - Mankind appears (v. 14) before the sun and moon.
- Nearly every scholar who denies a reference to the Flood in verse 9 depicts the waters at creation as chaotic, raging, and dangerous—waters needing to be tamed—thereby making a clear association with Canaanite mythology.
- ✓ *Both* — Clearly, Creation is a major theme in Psalm 104. However, it also seems clear that verse 9 refers to the Noachic Flood (David Barker, Boice, Travers, VanGemeren).



- **v. 9** “a boundary that they may not pass over”
 - The parallel reference in Jeremiah 5:22 is in a context (vv. 18-25) echoing phrases and concepts from Genesis 8:20–9:17.
 - Although clearly referring to Creation, Job 38:10-11 uses totally different terms in the Hebrew.
 - **v. 15** “wine . . . oil . . . food”
 - Since the Hebrew for “food” is literally “bread,” this is a potential reference to the three staples of the ancient Israelite economy: wine, olive oil, and grain (wheat, barley, and rye). See Deuteronomy 7:13.
 - **v. 26** “Leviathan”
 - Leslie Allen writes, “Leviathan functions here not as the Canaanite chaos monster, not even as a captive prisoner, but simply in a demythologized capacity as a created being, a marine creature . . . , perhaps a whale.”—*Psalms 101–150*, 27.
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- **v. 30** “You send forth Your Spirit”
 - The same Spirit of God active at creation (Gen 1:2) continues to be active in sustaining life on the earth.
 - Some scholars translate “Spirit” as “breath,” since the same word is translated “breath” in verse 29. Some do so because they do not believe that the Old Testament clearly speaks of the Spirit of God.
 - ✓ See Genesis 6:3; Exodus 31:3; Numbers 24:2; Judges 3:10; 1 Samuel 10:10; 16:14; 2 Samuel 23:2; Psalms 51:11; 139:7; Isaiah 63:10-11, 14; Joel 2:28-29; Ezekiel 37:1; Nehemiah 9:30.
 - ✓ Compare Job 33:4.
 - ✓ The Father sends the Spirit in John 14:26; 15:26; and 20:22.
 - **v. 31** “Let the LORD be glad”
 - The Lord’s joy with His creation is echoed in the psalmist’s own emphatic declaration in verse 34: “As for me, I shall be glad in the LORD.” Thus, the joy is mutual.
 - **v. 32** “it trembles . . . they smoke”
 - Earthquake and volcanic activity often accompany theophany in the Old Testament (cp. Exod 19:18; Ps 144:5).
 - **v. 35** “Praise the LORD!”
 - Literally, “Hallelujah!”—the first in the Psalter.
 - Cp. Revelation 19:1-6—likewise associated with judgment of sinners.

4.0 Singing Psalm 104

O Worship the King

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| <p>1 O worship the King, all glorious above,
O gratefully sing His power and His love;
Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,
Pavilioned in splendor, and girded with praise.</p> <p>3 The earth with its store of wonders untold,
Almighty, Thy power hath founded of old;
Established it fast by a changeless decree,
And round it hath cast, like a mantle, the sea.</p> <p>5 Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
In Thee do we trust, nor find Thee to fail;
Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end,
Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.</p> | <p>2 O tell of His might, O sing of His grace,
Whose robe is the light, whose canopy space,
His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds
form,
And dark is His path on the wings of the storm.</p> <p>4 Thy bountiful care, what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air, it shines in the light;
It streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,
And sweetly distills in the dew and the rain.</p> <p>6 O measureless might! Ineffable love!
While angels delight to worship Thee above,
The humbler creation, though feeble their lays,
With true adoration shall all sing Thy praise.</p> |
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— Robert Grant revision (1833) of lyrics by William Kethe (1561)
— Music by Johann M. Haydn (1737-1806)

5.0 Praying Psalm 104

- Oh Lord, You are very great and majestic. [v. 1]
- Help me to see Your creation and to give You all the praise. [vv. 5]
- Thank You for the food I eat. [v. 14]
- Thank You for giving me work. [v. 23]
- Father, make my meditation on Your creation pleasing to You. [v. 34]



6.0 Applying Psalm 104

- Praise is due to God as both Creator and Sustainer of all things.
- Creation reveals the great power and wisdom of the Lord.
- We ought to rejoice in the Lord's works.
- We ought to entrust ourselves "to a faithful Creator in doing what is right" (1 Pet 4:19).

Today, vast stress is laid on the thought that God is *personal*, but this truth is so stated as to leave the impression that God is a person of the same sort as we are—weak, inadequate, ineffective, a little pathetic. But this is not the God of the Bible! Our personal life is a finite thing: it is limited in every direction, in space, in time, in knowledge, in power. But God is not so limited. He is eternal, infinite, and almighty. He has us in His hands; but we never have Him in ours. Like us, He is personal; but unlike us, He is *great*. In all its constant stress on the reality of God's personal concern for His people, and on the gentleness, tenderness, sympathy, patience, and yearning compassion that He shows towards them, the Bible never lets us lose sight of His majesty, and His unlimited dominion over all His creatures.

— J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 74