



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

UNIQUE in the UNIVERSE

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ FEBRUARY 5, 2012

O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!
Your glory is higher than the heavens.

²You have taught children and infants
to tell of your strength,
silencing your enemies
and all who oppose you.

³When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers —
the moon and the stars you set in place —

⁴what are mere mortals that you should think about them,
human beings that you should care for them?

⁵Yet you made them only a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶You gave them charge of everything you made,
putting all things under their authority —

⁷the flocks and the herds
and all the wild animals,

⁸the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,
and everything that swims the ocean currents.

⁹O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!

Psalm 8 (NLT)

An Overview of Psalm 8

The sacred work of a Biblical expositor or interpreter, as I've been trained to do, requires that I take what is in the Scriptures and help you to see clearly and understand what is actually there, what the text is saying. If I were to stray from the message of the text into my own

thoughts and opinions, I would be doing you a grave disservice. So let me lift out from this ancient poem known as Psalm 8, the primary truths it is presenting to us.

*¹O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!
Your glory is higher than the heavens.*

TRUTH #1: The Universe is immeasurably vast and great. Even 3000 years ago, before the invention of telescopes and complex measuring devices and the launching of satellites and space probes, the poet/king David, gazing one evening through the clear and cloudless sky of the Middle East at the countless millions of stars in space, properly stood in awe. Human beings before and since, of every culture and every generation, have had the same instinctive reaction.

*³When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—
the moon and stars you set in place...*

TRUTH #2: The grandeur and intricacy of the Universe can only be the reflection of the brilliant design and execution of a Master Creator. Things in nature fit together so perfectly, from macro to micro, from the choreographed ballet of the stars and planets to the staggeringly precise work of DNA and the processes within each living cell. The more we learn from our observation and research, the more phenomenal we discover this built-in design to be.

*⁴What are mere mortals that you should think about them,
human beings that you should care for them?*

TRUTH #3: Human beings seem so tiny and insignificant in the vastness of the Universe. We each occupy just a tiny portion of a comparatively small planet lost in immeasurable space; we each live for just a few years compared to the unending eternity of God. How humbling it is to see ourselves in the proper scale.

*⁵Yet you made them only a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

*⁶You gave them charge of everything you made,
putting all things under their authority.*

TRUTH #4: In spite of our insignificance, God has (for unknowable reasons) chosen to bless us extraordinarily. He has given us the mental and physical abilities to be the rulers over all the earth, animate and inanimate. He has allowed us to grow and discover and develop, to make things and to build things—all as reflections of His own work as the Master Architect. He has placed us on a planet perfectly suited for our existence. He has given us a capacity to know Him, our Creator, and to seek after Him. He has equipped us to know right from wrong, and to have the capacity to love. Far from being accidental blobs of protoplasm, we humans demonstrate constantly that we are, as the first chapter of the Bible says, “made in the image of God.”

*°O Lord, our Lord,
your majestic name fills the earth!*

TRUTH #5: The only proper response by humans is to offer to God our heartfelt praise and worship. When we realize our true place in God’s universe and His purpose and blessings for us, how else could we respond? We do not praise God because we are trying to get anything from Him, but out of gratitude for what He has done and continues to do for us. Thus the Psalm takes us back to where it began, the final verse repeating the first. Our very reason for existing is to glorify and honor our Creator and to live in fellowship with Him.

That’s what Psalm 8 is really saying to us. But now let’s process this, and look at it critically and analytically, in light of our society and culture and the prevailing views of our generation. And to do this, I need to get personal and share with you my own inner process.

Cultural Assumptions

From the time I was a boy, I have absorbed and accepted as fact the dominant assumption of both the current scientific establishment and the popular culture that has surrounded me. The conclusion: Surely we are not alone in the universe. Even though we have never actually witnessed or measured or experienced them, there must be hundreds or thousands of planets just like ours out there, with creatures just like us (or even smarter and more advanced). Surely Earth, our home, is

just a tiny and insignificant little planet, and we humans are a limited and irrelevant race of creatures who are just like tiny ants or grasshoppers in the vast backyard of the cosmos.

Science films in my high school classes and shows on PBS made me realize how small we are. I learned that, since the early 1960's, our governments and research institutions have committed millions of dollars annually trying to search via radio telescopes for electronic signals or communications from other civilizations—and any day, we are confident, we'll make contact. We have sent expensive probes to Mars, hoping to find at least some primitive signs of life (but without success). Rumors of flying saucers and space aliens, and of appearances by UFOs that the Defense Department was allegedly covering up, have fascinated the conspiracy theorists. And the movies and TV shows we all have watched further spurred our imaginations: from the early days of *Buck Rogers* and on to *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *ET*, *Cocoon*, *Alien* and, most recently, *Avatar*: Who could doubt that amazing adventures were awaiting us in space? It was only our backwardness and primitive technology that was preventing us from traveling, as Buzz Lightyear would say, "to infinity and beyond!"

Seeming Contradictions

All these thoughts and dreams and fantasies were fascinating to me. And yet, in my mind, they caused some puzzling contradictions. For I had become a Christian, and had begun to read my Bible—an ancient book, not a modern astronomy text, and yet it makes bold claims to speak the truth. And I was convinced in both my intellect and my heart that God was real—for I felt Him, and longed to know Him better. And the more I studied, the more I became convinced that the accounts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth were historically accurate and reliable—and that He really was God in human form, and He really died to be the Savior of our entire race.

But many of the teachings of scripture seemed to be inconsistent with the image being promoted in the popular culture. How could this Book be true if we really were just an insignificant planet and if, by im-

plication, we humans were nothing special? Why, if we are just one of thousands or millions of intelligent races, would a God who is greater than the immeasurable universe ever care about us, let alone go to such trouble to rescue us? Perhaps our human-centered belief that we actually matter is just a primitive delusion. Maybe we've been fooling ourselves and inventing our own myths. How could any Being who created the galaxies know about little me?

In the past 30 years, however, a growing movement among many modern scientists has focused on the evidence for what has become known as Intelligent Design. The conclusions of these researchers were not formed by first reading the Bible and then accepting it uncritically. Rather, they have worked their way to an openness to the possibility of creation and design.

And these researchers have come to their conclusions by following the trail of evidence—the way a detective would trace the clues, detail by detail, before forming a conclusion about the solution to the crime. Admittedly, the scientists who believe in Intelligent Design are not in the majority in the current scientific establishment, and they are often criticized, mislabeled and slandered, even denied tenure and research funding, because they don't follow the “group-think” of academy leaders and politicians. But when you look at the history of science you find that being in the minority is not always a shameful thing. In their own times Galileo and Copernicus were shunned as being out-of-the-mainstream. Medical researchers who first proposed the germ theory to explain illnesses were considered to be crack-pots. Science is constantly changing. Theories that are out-of-favor today may turn out to be right tomorrow.

A Surprising Challenge

What has been most intriguing, and mentally-reshuffling to me, has been a new book published a couple months ago that directly challenges—and perhaps even obliterates—the prevailing pop cultural and scientific assumption that there are millions of intelligent races on millions of planets like our own. Dr. John Gribbin has just written a book called *Alone in the Universe: Why Our Planet Is Unique*. And here's why the book is making waves:

- ♦ It is remarkable because it challenges what most have always assumed: the existence of multiple planets with intelligent life evenly sprinkled across the Universe.
- ♦ It is remarkable because of the high reputation and respect for the author within the scientific academy. John Gribbin is a Cambridge PhD in Astrophysics, the author of a large number of widely-read books on physics and astronomy and numerous scholarly articles.
- ♦ It is remarkable because Dr. Gribbin is not at all a professing Christian, and has never in any of his writings voiced a conviction in favor of Intelligent Design or Creation.

The conclusion that the book *Alone in the Universe* presents is a detailed, voluminously-researched and highly-logical argument. (I must say it is also highly persuasive). Dr. Gribbin is convinced that the Earth is the only planet in all the universe (or at least in the vast Milky Way galaxy that is our home and the only part of the universe we could ever explore and know) that has witnessed the development of intelligent life. Human beings, he concludes, are most likely the only intelligent, self-aware and technological civilization there has ever been, or ever will be.

How can this be, since our telescopes and electronic measuring devices have detected a billion potential planets orbiting stars? But from that vast number Gribbin relentlessly whittles down the odds of habitable life. The vast majority of planets orbit two or three stars, making them too unstable to sustain life. Of the small percentage of planets that orbit just one star, only a tiny fraction of those occur within the “habitable range” of temperature where liquid water could exist—most planets are either too hot (like Mercury and Venus) or too cold (like Mars). Further shrinking the possibilities: most planets are made up of gas, not solid rock like ours. No planet we have yet found has the exact combination of molten core and thin rock surface that ours does to result in tectonic plates that have created the dry land, nor an atmosphere of the correct size and thickness to develop the proper shield from solar radiation and the existence of oxygen and carbon dioxide for animals and plants to breathe. No planet we have found has

a moon as large as ours is in relation to the size of Earth, nor of the perfect distance from us to provide by its gravitational force the tides on our oceans. We have not found a planet tilted at such an unusual yet stable angle to allow for seasons of climate. The seemingly-chance collision of our planet with a Mars-size object 100 million years after the universe began at the “Big Bang” not only produced our moon but created the perfect chemical and biological conditions for life to emerge.

And that’s just the beginning of the sequence of unlikely events, occurring over billions of years. Some primitive one-cell life forms may exist somewhere on another planet, Gibbin acknowledges. But an amoeba is not a human being. The odds of all the events and characteristics we witness on Planet Earth coming together in the way they have to result in **us** are so great that they are literally astronomical. An intelligent person, looking at the evidence, may have to face the startling conclusion that we are, as an intelligent race, truly “alone in the universe.”

To use a casino analogy, what are the odds of a gambler at the craps table throwing a pair of dice a billion times in a row, and every time they come up an “11” —a winning roll; or spinning the roulette wheel a billion times and every time coming up with the exact same number; or playing a slot machine a billion times and every time hitting a jackpot? Would you conclude that maybe the game was “rigged” or influenced by some outside force, rather than those phenomenal results occurring by random chance? Would you be ashamed to announce that you think some “Intelligent Design” was behind those results? Of course not!

Returning to Psalm 8

Which takes us full circle, back to where we began: Psalm 8. This primitive ancient philosopher named David, with none of the tools and benefits of modern astrophysics and geology and biology and cosmology to help him, somehow managed to speak what appears to be the absolute truth about us and our place in the Universe. Indeed, as he said in verses 4-6: *What are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them? Yet you made them only a little*

lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority...

If this planet is, indeed, a very special and unusual place, with none other quite like it in all the immensity of space, and if we are, indeed, special creatures, fashioned by a staggeringly-brilliant Designer to be His greatest work, then the message of the Bible makes perfect sense. Why would God bother to come to Earth, take on human flesh, die a painful and unjust death, and rise again? Perhaps it's because we are unique. Perhaps it's because the Great Artist has chosen to paint his masterpiece on a small canvas rather than a large one. Perhaps, for reasons we will never fully grasp, He has chosen to lavish His love so abundantly on creatures so unworthy.

Not Alone but Unique

John Gribbin, an apparent unbeliever who, nevertheless, fearlessly followed the evidence and boldly presented its logical conclusion, no matter how unpopular or counter-cultural it may be, has stated that we are “alone in the universe.” I would like to humbly disagree with him on one point. While there may be no other life quite like ours to be found on any other planet, **we are not alone**. We have an infinite and eternal God who wants to be our Father, who loves us unconditionally and suffered to save us, who has promised to always be with us and to know us intimately. We are actually never alone. What we are is **“unique in the universe,”** because we are the objects of His love.

And what should our response be to this realization? David shows us that the only proper emotions are gratitude, and wonder, and praise, and submission to our Lord. This is what Psalm 8 proclaims. It is what Jesus taught us in that great model prayer we call The Lord's Prayer: “Our Father in Heaven: We honor you as holy, we surrender to your will, and we place all our needs in your hands, for to you belongs all power and glory forever. Amen.” ■