

PSALMS

Chapter 104

O LORD My God, You Are Very Great

Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, 2 covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent. 3 He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind; 4 he makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire. 5 He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved. 6 You covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. 7 At your rebuke they fled; at the sound of your thunder they took to flight. 8 The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that you appointed for them. 9 You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. 10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills; 11 they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. 12 Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell; they sing among the branches. 13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. 14 You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth 15 and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart. 16 The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. 17 In them the birds build their nests; he stork has her home in the fir trees. 18 The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the rock badgers. 19 He made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. 20 You make darkness, and it is night, when all the beasts of the forest creep about. 21 The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. 22 When the sun rises, they steal away and lie down in their dens. 23 Man goes out to his work and to his labor until the evening. 24 O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. 25 Here is the sea, great and wide, which teems with creatures innumerable, living things both small and great. 26 There go the ships, and Leviathan, which you formed to play in it. 27 These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. 28 When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. 29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. 30 When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground. 31 May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works, 32 who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke! 33 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. 34 May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD. 35 Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more! Bless the LORD, O my soul! Praise the LORD!

Ps 104 A hymn to the Creator. Obviously influenced by Ge 1, the preexilic author has adapted that account to his different purpose and has subordinated its sequence somewhat to his own design (see next paragraph). Whereas Ge 1 recounts creation as God's first work at the beginning, the poet views the creation displayed before his eyes and sings the glory of its Maker and Sustainer. Surprisingly, he only hints at the angelic world (v. 4) and mentions man only in passing (vv. 14, 23); his theme is the visible creation around him, which he views as the radiant and stately robe with which the invisible Creator has clothed himself to display his glory. (See introduction to Ps 101.) (CSB)

Following his one-verse introduction, the poet designed the main body of his poem concentrically, with stanzas of three-five-nine-five-three verses. The first stanza speaks of the celestial realm (vv. 2–4) and the fifth of the nautical (vv. 24–26)—the two realms that bracket the “earth” of his experience. The second sings of the earth’s solid foundations and secure boundaries (vv. 5–9) and the fourth of the orderly cycles of life on earth governed by sun and moon (vv. 19–23). At the center a nine-verse stanza (composed of three triplets) celebrates the luxuriation of life in the earth (vv. 10–18). To the poem’s main body he added a four-verse stanza that recites how God maintains life on earth (vv. 27–30), a two-verse conclusion (vv. 31–32—which together with v. 1 frames the whole), and a three-verse epilogue (vv. 33–35). The outer frame (“Praise the LORD, O my soul”) was probably added by the editors of the Psalter when they inserted the Book division after Ps 106—thus concluding Book IV with doxologies (see the liturgical frames added to Ps 105–106 and the similar conclusion to Book V: Ps 146–150). (CSB)

As in Ps 103, the psalmist summons himself to praise the Lord. The focus, however, is on God as Creator and Preserver of creation. Gn 1 is background, but the orderly description of creation from Gn becomes a more spontaneous display of the wonders of God’s creation. “He causes all created things to serve for the uses and necessities of life” (LC II 14). The psalm became part of the temple worship and could have been used on a festival day, such as the New Year. (Similar themes are found in the Egyptian Hymn to the Aten.) Chemnitz: “There is a progression in creation, as indicated by the distinction noted in Genesis 1. No more appropriate division of the process of creation can be developed than the six day cycle of Moses” (*LTh* 1:162; comparison between Gn 1 and Ps 104 follows, pp 162–64). (TLSB)

Format: Vv 1–4, extol the wondrous God; vv 5–13, God set the waters into place; vv 14–23, human life crowns creation; vv 24–26, God’s creative power on both land and sea; vv 27–30, a confident confession; vv 31–35, joyous praise for God’s glory revealed in creation. (TLSB)

This psalm is arranged according to the days of creation in Genesis 1. However, it directs our attention not so much to the creation as to the creator. (PBC)

104:1 *clothed*. With his first creation God clothed himself with the manifestation of his glory. (CSB)

Clothing in the Bible often is used to describe the nature of the person; clothed with filthy garments signifies a sinner, clothed with white raiment indicates a saint. Here the meaning is that God is majestic. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

104:2–4 The celestial realm. (CSB)

Poetic imagery and vivid comparisons give a glimpse of God’s majesty. (TLSB)

104:2 *light*. Cf. the first day of creation in Gen 1. (CSB)

Light in the Bible is symbolic of many things, including holiness, understanding, joy, and life itself. The Lord is everything that light is (see also 1 John 1:5 and John 1:4-9); and according to this verse it is he who covered himself with light. Because light is vital to life, and the one who is the true light created light first. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

People wear clothes; God is dressed in dazzling light. Cf Rv 21:23; Mt 17:2. (TLSB)

heavens. Cf. the second day of creation in Gen 1. (CSB)

The point to be made from this passage is the ease with which the Lord did this, simply spreading it out. This too reveals his sovereign majesty. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

The heavens are called the floor of God's dwelling, since he dwells above and beyond this created universe. (PBC)

like a tent. Over the earth and the luminaries that give it light. (CSB)

God creates the heavenly realm as easily as lifting the flaps of a tent. (TLSB)

104:3 *chambers.* Vivid imagery for the heavenly abode of God (see v. 13). In the singular, the Hebrew for this phrase usually refers to the upper-level room of a house (as in 1Ki 17:19; 2Ki 1:2). (CSB)

In the culture upper chambers were above the main house, and they were known for their seclusion and privacy. The palace of the heavenly king is high and inaccessible to mankind. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

the waters. The waters above the "tent" (v. 2; see Ge 1:7), from which, in the imagery of the OT, God gives the rain. (CSB)

clouds his chariot. A poetically heightened description of the majesty of God displayed when he opened a way through the Red Sea. Ex 14:19 speaks only of God's cloud, not of a thunderstorm or earthquake, but the Hebrew poets often associated either or both with the Lord's coming to effect redemption or judgment—no doubt because these were the two most fearsome displays of power known to them. For Christians the display of God's power in behalf of his people now includes the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (CSB)

104:3–4 *clouds ... wind.* A king may ride in a chariot, but God's majesty is portrayed by His riding these high and lofty elements of nature. *chariot ... messengers ... ministers.* Each can refer to the cherubim or angels. Some rabbis concluded from these verses that angels were created along with other elements, prior to the creation of Adam and Eve on the sixth day. *flaming fire.* Possibly lightning bolts. (TLSB)

104:4 *winds ... flaming fire.* The winds and lightning bolts of the thunderstorm, here personified as the agents of God's purposes (see 148:8; cf. 103:21). (CSB)

This verse could also be translated, "He makes his messengers winds, his servants flames of fire." (PBC)

104:5–9 The earth realm made secure (vv. 5, 9 frame the stanza, highlighting its two main themes). (CSB)

Cf Gn 1:6–10. Mighty waters rush with chaotic and devastating power at the beginning of creation. Here, the psalm pictures that same time of creation, as God controls even the "deep" (waters) to "set the earth on its foundations." Continents and land formations are not eternal, but God has so securely and firmly built them that even the chaos of the waters must stay in their designated places. Cf Mk 4:39. (TLSB)

104:5 *earth*. Land in distinction from sky and seas, not the earth as a planet (see Gen 1:10). (CSB)

should never be moved. Firmly founded (see 93:1; 96:10), it will not give way (cf. v. 9). (CSB)

104:7 *rebuke*. His word, when predicated of God, usually refers to either (1) the thunder of his fierce majesty by which he wields his sovereign control over cosmic entities or repulses his enemies, or (2) the thunder of his wrath.). (CSB)

The control of the sea is one of the most awesome displays of God's power. (PBC)

waters fled. Cf. the third day of creation in Gen 1. (CSB)

104:9 *set a boundary*. So that the land ("earth") will never be overwhelmed by the sea (cf. v. 5; see 33:7. (CSB)

104:10–18 The earth a flourishing garden of life—the center of the psalm and the focal point of the author's contemplation of the creation (the earth, bounded by sky, vv. 2–4, and sea, vv. 24–26). Cf. the third and sixth days of creation in Ge 1. (CSB)

104:10–13 God's power turns the waters to beneficial uses, watering the earth to sustain life. Though gravity was not fully understood, its force was recognized and attributed to God's care for the earth. (TLSB)

104:10–12 The gift of water from below—watering the ravines of the Negev. (CSB)

104:13–15 The gift of water from above—watering the uplands of Israel with their cultivated fields. (CSB)

104:13 *the fruit of Your work*. Augustine: "Let no man glory in his own works.... With Your grace he is satisfied, when he is satisfied: let him not say that grace was given for his own merits" (NPNF 1 8:513). (TLSB)

104:14–23 In Gn 1, creation proceeds with vegetation on day 3; stars, sun, moon, and other heavenly lights on day 4; birds and sea creatures on day 5; and animals and humans on day 6. The psalm pictures these days of creation in everyday scenes. A man cultivating the fields, birds building nests, goats in the mountains, and the other scenes from these verses all show God's creation in its beauty and activity. God's sustaining and ordering hand is behind the inter-relatedness of creation. (TLSB)

104:15 *oil*. Olive oil. (CSB)

Olive oil was used to clean and restore the face as we use lotion or ointment today. (TLSB)

Wine, olive oil and bread were the three basic foods of ancient Israelites. (PBC)

make his face shine. As food (see 1Ki 17:12), causing man's face to glow with health, and/or as cosmetic (see Est 2:12). (CSB)

104:16–18 Well-watered Lebanon, with its great trees, its hordes of birds and its alpine animals, the very epitome of God’s earthly parkland (see 72:16; 2Ki 14:9; 19:23; Isa 10:34; 35:2; 40:16; 60:13; Jer 22:6; Hos 14:7). (CSB)

104:16 *cedars of Lebanon*. Tall and strong due to extensive rainfall. Pictures a place bursting with life. (TLSB)

104:18 *rock badgers* – This is an animal that looks somewhat like a badger or prairie dog. (PBC)

104:19–23 The orderly cycles of life on earth, governed by the moon and sun. Cf. the fourth day of creation in Gen 1. – The psalmist also observes how these heavenly bodies signal the beginning and ending of periods of activity for the inhabitants of the earth. (PBC)

104:20 *make darkness*. Along with “the sun rises” in v 22, the rhythms of daily life as marked by day and night are portrayed (Gn 1:14–19). (TLSB)

104:21, 23 *lions ... man*. The one (representing the animal world), lord of the night; the other, lord of the day. (CSB)

104:23 People generally lived in walled villages and worked during the day in the surrounding fields. (TLSB)

104:24–26 The nautical realm. Cf. the fifth day of creation in Ge 1. The realm of the sea is structurally balanced with the celestial realm (vv. 2–4) as the other boundary to the realm of earth. (CSB)

In wisdom. Creation is not by chance or randomness. God’s wisdom alone has made such an intricate world teeming with life. (TLSB)

Leviathan. Frightening sea creature (cf Jb 41), seen here as just one more created life, made by God to play in the ocean. The alternate reading has God playing with Leviathan, much like a pet. (TLSB)

104:24 A pause to recapitulate before treating the sea. (CSB)

104:26 *leviathan*. That fearsome mythological monster of the deep is merely God’s harmless pet playing in the ocean. (CSB)

104:27–30 By God’s benevolent care this zoological garden flourishes. Cf. the sixth day of creation in Ge 1. (CSB)

The psalmist emphasizes the way in which God provides food and life to His creatures. God gives food as the normal way of sustaining life, but we are not to forget that life comes from God. God breathed the breath of life into Adam and He returned Adam to the dust again. God gives life to each new generation, and he calls each generation back to dust again. God is the life-giver, God is the life-sustainer – this is the key theme of Psalm 104. (PBC)

104:27-28 *all look to You*. All are dependent on God for food and everything else needed to sustain life. Ps 145:15–16 repeats this firm conviction. See Luther’s Daily Prayers (SC, p xli–xlii). “Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means by which God gives all things. So He gives to the mother breasts and milk to offer to her child, and He gives corn and all kinds of

produce from the earth for nourishment [Psalm 104:27–28; 147:8–9]. None of these blessings could be produced by any creature of itself” (LC I 26). (TLSB)

104:29-30 *You take away their breath.* As in Gn 2:7, God gives and sustains life. His Spirit creates and renews each generation of all that lives. All living things would “return to their dust” if God were to withdraw from His creation. Hence, God also holds every individual’s life and death in His wise and caring hands. (TLSB)

104:30 *created.* Brought into being by God’s sovereign act. (CSB)

104:31-32 This prayer, that all creation will continue to show God’s glory so that He is pleased with it, reflects Gn 1, when God first saw His creation and proclaimed it good. In addition, the psalmist confesses that God’s power is so incomparably beyond creation that a simple look or touch overwhelms even the mighty mountains. (TLSB)

104:31 *glory of the LORD.* Such as is displayed in his creation. (CSB)

104:32 He is so much greater than his creation that with a look or a touch he could undo it. (CSB)

104:33–35 Pious epilogue. (CSB)

104:33 A vow to praise—here attached to a hymn of praise. (CSB)

104:34 *my meditation.* Translates Hbr *hagah* and *siach*, terms about speaking. A person holds his attention by uttering words of Scripture or prayers to focus his thoughts. The Israelites meditated on God’s Word by reciting it. The believer explores God’s Word, since “there is always something left over to understand and to do. Therefore you must never be proud, as if you were already full” (Luther, AE 11:434). Chemnitz: “Each person, in whatever station or calling he has, may meditate on the law of the Lord and speak of His testimonies” (*LTh* 2:380). Luther suggests that this verb recalls the singing of the birds, “so the church continuously fills its mouth with preaching in joy and gladness like that of the little birds” (AE 11:437, n 23). (TLSB p. 842)

104:35 May the earth be purged of that which alone mars it (cf. Rev 21:27). (CSB)

Let sinners ... be no more! Somber note at the end of a high hymn of praise. Every evil, wickedness, and sinful disobedience that mars God’s creation needs to be eradicated so that only joyful praise is heard from God’s creation. (TLSB)

bless the LORD (last occurrence). Probably belongs to Ps 105. (CSB)

Ps 104 More and more, we hear about nature with no mention of the Creator. Visit a museum, read a science textbook, or watch a nature program, and you will see everything explained as some incredibly long process by which all life has evolved into what we see today. Yet God is indeed Creator of all. He continues to care for His world. Remember the word Jesus spoke over a violent storm: “Peace! Be still!” (Mk 4:39). And all was calm. Even death cannot compare to God’s power, as a stone obeyed His command and rolled away from the tomb on Easter morning.

- Lord, we make the bold confession that You in Your wisdom made the earth and all its creatures and continue to sustain it. Praise the Lord. Amen. (TLSB)