

Westgate Church

*Walking with God in the Meantime:
The Christian Life through the Lens of the Psalms*

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August 14, 2011

Praise Befits the Upright

Psalm 33

If you're just joining us this summer, we've been looking at selections from Psalm 1-41 in a series called, "Walking with God in the Meantime: The Christian Life through the Lens of the Psalms." The Psalms are songs and hymns in the Old Testament that teach us about walking with God in a broken world, living between the sure promises of God—his rule, his promise of deliverance—and the fulfillment of those promises when Jesus returns. And so we find psalms of lament—cries that acknowledge how messed up things are. We find psalms of instruction, that show us how to live. And psalms of praise and thanksgiving, that thank God for who he is and what he's done. Psalm 33 is such a psalm—a psalm of praise, as is evident from the opening three verses:

Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous;
it is fitting for the upright to praise him.
Praise the LORD with the harp;
make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully, and shout for joy. (Psalm 33:1-3)

Psalm 33 picks up right where Psalm 32 left off: with a call to praise. Several weeks ago when we looked at Psalm 8, we talked about how praise in the psalms is almost always *vocal* (something we say), almost always *public* (something we say in the presence of others), and usually either declares what God is like or describes what he's done. It's making much of God and his reputation. That's the *what* of praise—what we're being called to, and the same is true of chapter 33. The *whom* of praise, as with Psalm 8 and every other praise psalm, is the LORD—the one true God of the universe who made himself known in covenant to Israel, and who has made himself known preeminently through his Son, Jesus Christ. The LORD—God—he is the proper object of our praise, the *whom*.

The *who* of praise here—the ones doing the praising—are the "righteous," or the "upright," which is shorthand here for God's covenant people. It's not saying that you have to be perfect to praise God; it's saying that if you belong to God, if he is your God and you are in a right relationship with him (which is ultimately possible only through faith in Christ, as we saw with Psalm 32 last week), then you owe him your praise. And not only God's people, but really everyone on earth. Look down at v. 8: because God alone is the creator of the universe, everyone ultimately belongs to him, owes their life and existence to him, and ought to respond to him in submission, worship, and praise. So the *who* of praise is ultimately everyone.

The *how* of praise is described quite colorfully here: sing joyfully, use the harp, break out the lyre (an ancient guitar), sing a new song (which is not necessarily a song that's never been sung before, but that our singing be fresh, alive, creative), and play skillfully—give God your best.

And don't be afraid to get *loud*. We are making much of God here. As v. 1 says, "praise befits the upright;" "it is fitting for the upright to praise him."

Now, the idea of praise is not foreign to our culture. You pick up any book at Barnes and Noble and the back cover is plastered with a list of praises for the author and their work. On any given day of the week you'll find stadiums crowded with roaring fans, praising the athletic prowess of their teams or swooning over their favorite bands. Even our homes are filled with praise (hopefully), from congratulating a toddler for using the potty to thanking your spouse for making a meal. But what's strangely and so often missing in a culture filled with praise is that praise which is directed to the one Person who deserves it infinitely beyond anyone else. There is a strange vacuum of praise to God. And I'm not just talking about people no longer showing up for church; I'm talking about what happens in our hearts and with our mouths even when people do show up for church, and especially as we live out the rest of the week. We generally have no problem telling other people or other objects of creation how great they are—even less problem receiving praise, but so often we have a hard time telling the God who made it all and who rules sovereignly and mercifully over it all how great he is. This is tragically inappropriate. "Praise befits the upright;" it's our proper and appropriate response. Yet we struggle with it. We deprive God of the praise due his name. We give his glory to something else, something less. And we have to ask the question, Why? Why don't we praise God? And why should we?

Why do I stand here sometimes in the pew Sunday morning, and the music's going, people are singing, and I'm just daydreaming. I'm thinking about my work schedule, I'm thinking about the argument I had last night, I'm thinking about the Red Sox game, whether I've got enough food for the people coming over. I might be thinking about that girl over there, or that guy. *Why should I praise God* when there's so much else to give my attention and affection to right now?

Maybe I'm thinking about what other people are thinking about me. My buddy here, he's not singing. Maybe I shouldn't sing; what will he think of me if I sing? Is it not cool to sing? Maybe I'm disenchanted with all this because I stand here and I just see a whole bunch of hypocritical people: they're here and they're singing and smiling and clapping—singing their little hearts out. And I know what they said last week. I know what they did to that person last year. How can they? How dare they sing like that? *Why should I praise God* if he's pleased with people like that?

Or maybe I'm just thinking about my sin. How I blew it again this week. And every week I come in here, hoping it's going to be different, and I'm just filled with guilt, and there's all these expectations that I'm never going to be able to meet, and I just don't feel like singing to God right now. *Why should I?* What's he ever done but remind me how bad I am?

Maybe I'm wondering what sense any of this Christianity makes. Who in their right mind, if they get out of bed early on a Sunday morning, would waste their time coming to church, especially in New England? We grew out of religion a long time ago. We have new gods—sex, money, education, recreation. If I'm getting up on a Sunday, then I'm going to the beach, or the gym. *Why should I praise this God?*

Whatever the particular reason we withhold our praise, we do so ultimately *because we're not convinced God is worth it*. We're not convinced God is worth it. We don't value him enough to praise him. When you go to the store and you see a shirt on sale, or you get on to Amazon and you see a book you like, how do you decide whether to spend that money? It all depends on how

much you *value* owning that shirt or that book. *Is it worth it?* That's what we say. And so when I'm weighing whether or not I'm going to spend my attention and affection on making much of God verbally and publically, then question that I finally have to answer is this: is he worth it? Is he worth it?

Why should we praise God? That's a big question. And the whole purpose of vv. 4-19 is to answer that question—the basis of our praise. Verses 1-3 were a call to praise; vv. 4-19 provide the basis. Here's the reason, and it's in three parts which declare to us that *God, our Creator and King, is uniquely and supremely worthy of our praise.*

First, vv. 4-5 give us a general reason to praise God, and it's focused on God's character as it's expressed in his Word and his Works—what he says and what he does. Verse 4: “For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love” (vv. 4-5). Now, vv. 6-19 are going to take this general comment and flesh it out for us in a couple of specific ways. But the first reason we praise God and make much of him is because of his worthy character—who he is, as seen in what he says and what he does. Listen to the words that describe him: right, true, faithful, righteous, just, unfailing love. All this is perfectly true of God, and no one else. No one else is always right, always true, always faithful. No one else is flawless in their love for righteousness and justice; no one else's love never fails. We can trust God because of his character.

Now that doesn't mean we always understand what he's doing, or that he always makes sense. Sometimes, frankly, it doesn't, and life can be pretty painful. It doesn't always make sense. But if there's one overwhelming shred of evidence that moves me to believe that God's character is always righteous and pure; that he's always working good for his people (those who love him, cf. Rom. 8:28), it is this: *it's the grace and love of God expressed on the cross.*

God did not have to save sinners. He was not obligated to have mercy on us humans who constantly disobey his rule and deprive him of the glory due his name. He would have been perfectly righteous to take the whole lot of his rebellious creation and damn the whole thing to hell. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were *still* sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). If God is willing to love someone so undeserving to that extent—by sending his perfect, eternal Son to bear the full brunt of his holy anger against all sin and evil, *not because they were worth it, but because he loved them in his grace*—then I'm willing to give the benefit of the doubt to his character when other parts of life don't make sense. I'm willing to trust that he is righteous, faithful, just, and loving, and therefore infinitely worthy of my praise.

And that general basis of God's character is then fleshed out in two specific ways. Verses 6-9 tell us that we should praise God because his is the all-powerful Creator of the universe. Here his work is accomplished by his Word. Verse 6: “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.”

Now our great temptation is to dismiss God's power and therefore withhold his praise. And our culture has done an amazing job of this. It has been the assumption of the academy and education system for the last two centuries that there is no Creator; that all we have is nature and natural processes; nothing is *above* nature, nothing *supernatural* (like God), at least nothing that

the scientific approach can account for, since as a model of experimentation it is limited to working with nature. And this is convenient, because if we can explain God's existence away, then we don't have to be accountable to him. We don't owe him anything; we're free to pretend that we run the world, and to do as we please. And yet, science is not a comprehensive system of knowledge. It's not the only way you can know something. It can tell us a lot about what *is* and how things work, but it can't tell us anything about where all this came from (the stuff and matter that science works with), nor can it tell us where we should be going as a people—how things *should be* in terms of morality and ethics.

Now of course this is a much larger conversation, and I'd be happy to sit down for coffee and talk further. But I submit to you that the reason science can't account for everything is because not everything fits into the realm of nature. There is a God who above nature, who created nature—the whole universe, and according to Psalm 33 he did so by his Word—his powerful Word. Imagine simply saying something, and knowing that is your very words that take something that does not exist and make it exist. That's what God did in creation. And if that's true—if the air you breathe and the life that animates your body and your body itself, along with everything else in creation, comes from God, then you owe him your life, including your praise. That's the implication. If God is our creator, then (v. 8) we should fear him: we should bow before him in humble submission and joyful reverence, acknowledging him for who he is and what he's done. We should obey vv. 1-3 and make a joyful noise to the Lord.

So one of the specific reasons we should praise God is that he is our all-powerful Creator. Second, vv. 10-19, he is our Sovereign and Merciful King. And this flows directly out of the first. If God made us, then he owns us, and he has the right to rule us. And as our sovereign and merciful king, he deserves our praise.

But the world we live in has taken up a loud protest to this claim. Think back to Psalm 2 and how the nations saw God's rule as oppressive; they wanted to break off his chains. So they protest: they don't want God to be sovereign, and they don't think they need his mercy. They deny his rightful rule and depend upon themselves instead of turning to and trusting in him. And as long as we tarry in this world, in this meantime, there is a corner of our hearts that join in that protest. This is illustrated in a poem I read yesterday:

I am the sovereign I want to serve.
I am the king I want others to obey.
I am the lord I want to rule my days.
Yes, it is true, Father, I want to be You.¹

That pretty much sums it up: we want to be God—individually, culturally, nationally, globally. And if we're in charge, there's no need to praise God. But look at how God's sovereign rule is displayed in vv. 10-12, and listen particularly to how God is contrasted against the nations and peoples:

The LORD foils the *plans* of the nations; he thwarts the *purposes* of the peoples.
But the *plans* of the LORD stand firm forever, the *purposes* of his heart through all generations.
Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance. (33:10-12)

¹ Paul David Tripp, *A Shelter in the Time of Storm* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 83.

Whether we like it or not, God is sovereign. He has both the authority to decide how to run the world and the power to make it happen. He's not like the "chairman" in the recent film, *The Adjustment Bureau*—some quasi-divine figure who has so little control over the world that he has an army of neurotic angel-like agents running around frantically trying to keep everything "on plan." No, God has both authority and power to control the world. Verse 13, he has constant watch over everything: "From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind." Verse 15, the one who made us knows all we do: "he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do." Our sovereign king has both authority and power to control the world, and that is *good news* for the people he has chosen and saved by his grace. It is a *blessing*, v. 12: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance." God's sovereignty is good news for us, because he's not just a sovereign king; he is a merciful one. In his steadfast love he watches over his people.

We want to run the world ourselves; we don't want to need God's mercy and help. But the reality is we do need it, and we should praise him for it. Our own strength is insufficient to deliver us from worldly trouble, let alone eternal. Listen to vv. 16-17: "No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save." It's not what we can do in and of ourselves to save ourselves from either worldly trouble or the eternal trouble of God's wrath—his holy anger against sin. It's what God has done by his grace and according to his sovereign plan to come down and rescue us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; to give us new life and faith by his Holy Spirit, not because we deserve it, but only by his grace. Our sovereign and merciful God is able to rescue us and to take care of us. Verse 18: "But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine." God, our all-powerful Creator and sovereign and merciful King, is uniquely and supremely worthy of our praise.

But praise does something to God's people. It's interesting to see how this psalm ends. It starts off with the call to praise, then spends most of its time on the basis for praise, but then ends with what I think is best described as the *fruit* of praise. Verse 20:

We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.

In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.

May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you. (33:20-22)

Praise makes much of God—that's its aim, but it also does something to God's people. It changes us as we believe what we're saying. As Paul Tripp describes it, "Corporate worship is designed to make Jesus more attractive to you than any idol in creation that you could ever serve."² As we gather and rehearse the greatness and glory of our God, how trustworthy he is, how magnificent his steadfast love is for us in Christ—by the grace of God the truths we sing with our lips sink down into our hearts, and bear the fruit of patience, trust, joy, and hope. The praise of our gathered worship fuels the ongoing worship of God in our lives the rest of the week. Worship is bigger than praise. Praise is worship, but worship is so much more. Praise is professing with our lips what we believe in our hearts; worship is living our whole lives in accordance with what we believe, in accordance with God's unique and supreme worthiness.

² @PaulTripp, www.twitter.com/PaulTripp (July 17, 2011).

So back to our question: Is God worth it? Is he worth us taking the time to gather and praise him when I could be at the lake or shopping or sleeping? Is he worthy of me laying down my entire life every day to serve him and his purposes? Is God worthy of my undivided attention and affection and satisfaction and joy and trust and hope? Is he more worthy than what others think of me? Is he great enough for me to take my eyes off my sin and put them on the cross where he has dealt with my sins and forgiven my sins that I might be free and rejoice in him? Is God really uniquely and supremely worthy as the all-powerful Creator, as the sovereign and merciful King of the universe? And the answer is YES! Yes, God is worth it.

Let's pray and praise him.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (Psalm 103:1-5)