

My Controller

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together. Father, we thank you that as we come here to look at your words, that we can sing that you are the God who goes before us, the one who stands behind, the one that is by our side.

And so, Father, we pray that you will open your words to us, that we might hear what you would have us hear from it. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

In our office, we have a tradition, which I think is really very good, of us all going out on the last Friday of the month for lunch together. I think it's really good and healthy for the team, particularly for the directors socialising with us mere mortals.

There is, however, one thing that makes it difficult. In a relatively small company, we have two vegans. Now, one of them is quite pragmatic, and will quietly find something suitable to eat without making a fuss.

The other one, however, you can guarantee, if you're sitting near to him, he will take it as an opportunity to try and persuade you that he's right, that you're wrong, and that ultimately, everyone will be vegan in the future, and why are we not just getting on with the agenda?

[1 : 30] But that's the same with all of us. People go on and on about the things they care about. Whether it's Nicola Sturgeon, who can't help turning every subject into an excuse to promote Scottish independence, or whether it's the guy at work who's always going on about the quality of the ingredients he uses in his pop-up pizza business, or John Piper, always returning to his catchphrase of God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him, or Tom Wright talking about life after life after death, or our own Ali Jay, who unfortunately isn't here tonight, talking about the persecuted church in China, or Michael Ponton on our complete inability to comprehend the wonder of our salvation.

The things we care about are the things that we keep coming back to again and again. And so it is with the Psalms. Many of the Psalms begin with a call to worship.

On a quick scan through, I found 24 of them starting with an explicit command to praise God in the first verse. That's ignoring any others that get to it later on or are not quite so explicit.

Among all the wide-ranging subjects and emotions the Psalms cover, almost one in six of them begin in this way. Psalm 66, shout for joy to God, all the earth.

Psalm 95, come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation. Psalm 103, praise the Lord, O my soul, all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

[3 : 27] Psalm 136, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his love endures forever. Psalm 149, sing to the Lord a new song, and so on, on and on.

And so obviously, to the Psalmists, this was an important subject, such an important subject that they didn't think, yeah, I've written a song about that, I can move on to something else now.

They keep coming back to it again and again. Why? I think the answer, shocking as it may sound, is this, praise doesn't come naturally.

Praise is something that we find really difficult. Although, it's the primary thing that we were made for. As the Catechism says, man's chief end is to glorify God, yet, in our fallen state, this side of eternity, praise is something we struggle with.

Sometimes, yes, it naturally, spontaneously pours out. Sometimes, a glimpse of God's goodness, his glory, his majesty, is seen, and we respond spontaneously.

[4 : 44] It may be in nature, as we've sung about, whether something spectacular, or just a sunny day, rare as those are. It may be the actions of a fellow human, of another bearer of God's image.

It may be something in our circumstances, a new job, the birth of a child, or something trivial, like a lovely meal. It may be some piece of art, music, literature, or in my case, architecture.

Something that just, our heart catches on to a glimpse of God's glory. And then, sings my soul, my saviour, God, to thee.

And those times are wonderful, whether they're days, months, or just minutes. But often, it's hard. We forget how good God is. We forget all we know about him. We forget all he has done for us. And we have difficulty seeing him.

[5 : 53] For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror. the transient, superficial things of this world seem to have so much more substance.

They cloud our eyes. They distract our attention. They capture our affections. And also, worse than that, there is still that rebellious element in our hearts that doesn't want to acknowledge that we are not the greatest.

That he is worthy of all praise and not us. And so, the psalmist, knowing both how important it is and how difficult we find it, repeatedly return to the subject, writing psalm after psalm, reminding us to praise.

In fact, they know the struggle themselves. And so, for instance, David in Psalm 103 addresses the psalm to his own soul. He's talking to himself.

And he's exhorting himself to praise because he knows exactly how easily he forgets. Praise the Lord, O my soul, all my inmost being, praise his holy name, praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

[7 : 16] I know, even as I was writing this, how much I was struggling to focus, to concentrate, to be excited by something as important as this.

To be honest, I feel a bit of an imposter standing up here telling you to praise God when, really, I'm not feeling it. Not for any particular reason, just, I'm not.

But that's exactly the point of these psalms. That's exactly who they're written to. We don't need something telling us to praise God when we feel like it.

We do it, naturally. We need something to tell us to praise God when we don't. As one song says, it doesn't depend on the circumstance, the strength of my arm or my voice.

It doesn't depend on the way I feel for I've made up my mind and I'm going to rejoice. And so, in general, we see all these psalms follow a similar structure.

[8 : 25] They start with an exhortation to praise and then they continue by telling us why. By setting out some of the things that we should praise God for.

For his character, for his deeds. And this psalm is exactly the same. We see the first three verses exhort us to praise God.

The next 16, 4 to 19 tell us why. And then the final three tell us how we should respond to this. And so, our psalm here starts with a call to sing for joy to the Lord.

Or as some other translations put it, shout, rejoice, exult. Which of those is more accurate? I don't know, but they pretty much get the same concept.

That we have to bring praise joyfully to God. But we see that it's a call to you righteous, righteous, to those who seek to follow God.

[9 : 39] Not to those who are perfect, but to those who recognize their weakness and look to God for his righteousness, the righteousness that comes by faith.

It's pointless as being in open rebellion against God and singing to him. As Salty, the singing song book in the Kids Praise album that some of you may remember from your childhood says, you can sing Christian songs till you're blue in the face, but if it's not from the heart, it's not praise.

But we see also that for those following God, it's not just possible, but it's fitting. It's the right and proper thing for them to do. It's not just an optional extra for those who like that sort of thing.

It's the proper response of those who are the righteous. I don't know if there's any particular significance in the instruments mentioned in verse two.

The harp and the ten-stringed lyre. Maybe one's a simple folk instrument and one's a more complex professional instrument.

[11 : 00] Maybe one's a strummed rhythm instrument one's more of the melodic lead. I don't know, but whatever they are, we're called to use everything we have at our disposal to praise God.

But then verse three tells us three important things about our praise. It should be new, it should be skilful, and it should be loud. We are to sing a new song.

I did wonder about just telling the band that tonight we were singing songs that to be written for tonight we would sing them once and never sing them again, but maybe not.

But the important thing here is we're not to be just going through the motions, but we're to have something fresh to sing about, something about what we have learnt from God, what we have learnt about God.

We should not be just repeating what was once meaningful to us, but is now routine. There is nothing wrong with old songs.

[12:12] Many of them are wonderful. I love them. I love the deep poetry of the words, the anthemic tunes, how they speak of great truths, songs, but why are we singing them?

Are we singing them for yesterday's reasons or for today's? Are we singing them to recapture what we felt sometime in the past or are we using them to express the reality of today?

But then we're to play skillfully. Praising God is something that we have to do to the best of our ability, however much or little that is.

We shouldn't be half-heartedly just trying to get away with the bare minimum. Yeah, that will do for God. We should be bringing God the first fruits, the best that we have.

Here we have a band of skilled musicians who put a lot of work into helping us in our worship, and we often take them for granted. We only comment when they don't do things quite the way we'd like them to do.

[13:22] But it's right that we should put that much focus on it, because it is important. Our worship is for God, and therefore it matters.

But our worship's not just to be skillful. We're called to give loud, joyful shouts. It's to be passionate and energetic.

It's all too easy to have music that's skillful. It's perfect, smooth, polished, but dead.

This is something I struggle with. There is a lot of music that I love to listen to, particularly Renaissance choral music, music written for the worship of God, that's so often performed beautifully, with exquisite skill, and lacking any passion.

With no sense that the people singing it have any idea what they're singing about. And then there's much of modern worship music that, quite frankly, I don't really like.

[14:43] Often, and I'm sure I sound like a real old fogey here, it sounds like noise. But, it's a joyful noise to the Lord. I know what I like, but I know what should be better worship.

And so, why does the psalmist call us to bring this new, skillful, loud, joyful song of praise? He gives us the reason in verses 4 and 5.

In fact, I think most of the rest of the psalm is just examples of this first reason. The reason is this. He is faithful.

He is just. He is loving. He is righteous. His words are true. He is a good, good God. And everything he has made is filled with his goodness and love.

This is the primary reason that God is worthy of all our praise. Not because of anything he has done, but because of who he is, because of his character.

[15:57] But we see that character displayed in everything that he does. We see that character displayed in our experience as we follow him.

both as individuals and as a church. As a church, see, we're celebrating 50 years of God's faithfulness. As individuals, whether we've been following him for 80, 90 years or a day.

As we sang this morning, through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come. 'Tis grace has brought me safe, thus far, and grace will lead me home.

And so we can see his faithfulness, love, beauty, in so many things. But the psalmist wants us to think of two particular examples.

disciples. The first of these is given in verses 6 to 9. And it's the same reason that Peter brought to us from Psalm 19 a couple of weeks ago.

[17:11] we see here that we should praise God because he is the creator. And emphasis here is that he created by his word.

He has the power and authority to speak a universe into existence. How crazy is that? And it's repeated four times.

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made. A starry host by the breath of his mouth. Verse 9. For he spoke and it came to be.

He commanded and it stood firm. We see here an amazing, awesome, powerful God that can just speak and the universe becomes.

Now, I know in a church like this there will be many different and probably strongly held opinions on the details of when and how, of how literally, how poetically we should take the first chapters of Genesis.

[18 : 25] And I think these are very important questions that actually display quite a lot of things of what we think about God. But the main focus here is that it did not happen as a result of some impersonal force or some random chance, but at the divine command of God and that it displays the character and nature of God.

When we're interacting with non-Christians around us, sometimes, sometimes, it may be appropriate to get into some of these details, as long as we keep the emphasis not on the when or how question, but on the who question.

What matters is not that they agree with us about the details, but that they come to acknowledge the one who called the whole universe into being.

I know I have been involved in plenty pointless discussions that got caught up in scientific details, that probably both sides of the conversation really were out of our depths and didn't know what we were talking about, and yet, they completely missed the point.

They got caught up in the details of creation and missed the creator. And, but then verse eight tells us that when we recognize him, there is only one appropriate response.

[20 : 12] Let all the earth fear the Lord. Let all the people of the world revere him. The only suitable response is reverent fear and worship of our awesome creator.

when we recognize that all the glories of the world around us, not just the nice, romantic, picturesque parts of creation, but every part of it, the air we breathe, our bodies, the very solidity of objects, the fact that there is a sheer existence of anything, that all of that comes from him, then we must worship him.

And so then the psalmist continues on to the second example of how God's character is displayed, when we see that God is not just creator, but he is in control.

See this in verses, where are we, verses 10 to 19, basically, it's all on this subject, because God is not an absentee landlord.

God is not the watchmaker who created a wonderful watch, wound it up, and left it to run on its own. God is involved with his creation.

[21 : 47] He's not just standing back and looking on disinterestedly. And so in verses 10 to 12, we're told that his plans will be fulfilled.

It's sheer arrogance to accept that God is the almighty creator, and then think that we can just go ahead and make our own plans, in spite of him, in spite of what he says.

Here specifically talks about the futility of nations making godless plans. Psalm 2 says, why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth rise up, the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.

The one enthroned in heaven laughs. the Lord scoffs at them. God's plans, God's purposes will be fulfilled, and those who try and stand in his way will be pushed aside.

[23 : 05] But if there is a warning to those nations who would try and stand against God, the reverse is also true. in verse 12 we read of the blessing to the nation whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance.

In the context of the Psalms, the nation in question is Israel. But there are many nations since then who have claimed this position for themselves.

Britain certainly thought, it had that position. And many in the USA today would claim it. If you do an image search for the nation whose God is the Lord, basically almost everything that's returned is an American flag with this verse emblazoned across it.

One article I read states, Psalm 33 verse 12 may be the most misappropriated verse in the entire Bible. Question that because there are many others that probably could compete for that title, but it continues, there is no such thing as a Christian nation.

There is not now, nor has there ever been, a nation on earth that collectively bowed its knee to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Satan, who insisted that Christ might bow the knee to him, is the present ruler of this world.

[24 : 51] And so, if there is no such thing as a Christian nation, who is this I'm talking about? I think 1 Peter would bring some light on this, when it says, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a

holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

And further down in Psalm 2 that we read earlier, addressing God's chosen king, I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.

No longer is this blessing, this promise, this inheritance attached just to one earthly nation, but to a kingdom which includes all from every language and tribe and people and nation who acknowledge that Jesus is Lord.

And as such, just as the blessing is attached to individuals, so too is the warning. As James would write, now listen, you who say today or tomorrow, we'll go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.

[26 : 29] Why? You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You're a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.

Just to get this clear, this does not mean suffixing our announcements with DV or God willing and continuing to make all our plans ignoring God. It means recognizing that God's ways are not our ways, that he is the one that is in control.

Not that we shouldn't make plans, but that we should be seeking to make them according to what we know of God's will, and fully accepting that God may turn around and say, no, no, that's not what I've planned for you.

I've got another plan. You thought this was good? You thought this was the life you wanted? I have other plans, better plans. You may not like the sound of them, but trust me.

And so carrying on in verses 13 to 17 and verses 18 to 19, we get two contrasting pictures. Both of them speak of God watching.

[27 : 58] In verse 13, we read, from heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind. From his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth.

But in verse 18, we read, the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love.

In the first passage, God is watching all of mankind. He sees, he knows everything that goes on. Nothing can be hidden from him.

He knows their hearts. He knows the depths of their hearts, because he made them. as Psalm 103 says, he knows how we are formed.

He remembers we are dust. But in the second passage, God is watching those who fear him. And we see here that there's a huge difference.

[29 : 05] He looks down on mankind and sees the futility of the things they trust in to save them. Verse 16, 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. And even today, we see rulers hoping to be saved by their military might.

we recently saw images of North Korea parading their armies, their weapons for all the world to see.

We also saw America firing off dozens of missiles at Syria and dropping the quite arrogantly named mother of all bombs in Afghanistan.

And while we may take a certain amount of comfort in our nation's army, I doubt that that really is what most of us are trusting in for our security.

[30 : 18] But we may be trusting in equally futile things. Are we trusting in our income, our pension, our family, our friends, our health?

are we trusting in our own ability to cope with whatever life throws at us? Are we just gritting our teeth and singing into the storm, I will survive?

None of these things are secure. All of them are good, or maybe good, but none can be relied upon. But for those who fear him, for those who trust him, for those whose hope is in unfailing love of the Lord, everything is different.

Because we read in verse 18 and 19, 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.

Because they are not trusting in what they have. They are not trusting in their own might. They are trusting in God. They are trusting in something, in someone that is secure, that can be trusted, that is reliable.

[31 : 49] One who Psalm 62 would tell us is loving and is strong. One who wants to save us from whatever comes our way, but is not just willing, but is able, is powerful to save us completely, is able to take us through the storms of life, whatever they might throw at us, and to take us safely home.

I seem to be quoting a lot of old hymns for a psalm that talks about singing a new song, but as we often sing, here I raise my Ebenezer, here by thy great help I've come, and I hope by thy good pleasure safely to arrive at home.

we know he is trustworthy, and therefore we trust him. And then in the final few verses, we get three ways of how we should respond.

How we should respond to this display of God's character, both in his works of creation and in his ongoing control and care for it.

Firstly, in verse 20, we wait and hope for the Lord. He is our help and our shield. We wait.

[33 : 24] We trust him. We rely on him. We put our hope on him. We know he is faithful, and therefore we commit our lives, our plans, our hopes, our futures to him.

And then verse 21, in him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. Because we trust in him, we rejoice.

We have learned to know the wonder of his character, and therefore we rejoice. And then finally, verse 22, may your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord, even as we put our hope in you.

We pray to him. Because we have trusted him, because we have put our hope in him, we pray that his unfailing love will be with us.

We wait on him. We sing our praise to him, and while we wait, we ask that he will act in accordance with the character that he's revealed to us. Not that he could ever be unfaithful to his character, but by doing so, we show our dependence on him.

[34 : 52] We ask him to act, and we trust him to do so, not because of what we want, but because of who he is. Will we listen to the exhortation of the psalmist?

Will we be those, the righteous, who trust and wait on the Lord, and worship him afresh, with skill and with passion, whether we feel like it or not, but because he is worthy to be praised.

Thank you.