

PRAISE BE TO GOD

Psalm 33

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At the beginning of a worship service—notice we almost consistently do that on Sunday morning and often on Sunday nights—we want to make sure that, first and foremost, our attention is centered upon the Lord and not ourselves. We're inviting Him to be present in our midst, and we're opening our hearts to Him, and therefore, the invocation is very brief and succinct, and it's calling our awareness of who we are as a worshipping people and who it is that we are worshipping.

In this invocation of praise, we're right away called to liveliness in worship. "Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous" (Psalm 33:1). This admonition reminds us that we enter into worship and give an invocation of praise to God, whether it's through prayer or song. And that there are some ways in which we may do that that don't necessarily invoke God's blessing upon the occasion. Four things, I think, are not good to begin with in any kind of worship, whether it's personal or corporate. The psalm does not begin by saying "Sing listlessly to the Lord." Not have any life or sparkle in what you're doing. It does not say, "Sing mumbling to the Lord." It does not say, "Sing expressionlessly to the Lord." Nor does it say, "Don't sing at all." Some people have the view that real worship doesn't begin until the preacher preaches, and everything else is preliminary to that time. I don't believe that's a fitting understanding of worship—certainly not from this psalm.

Someone has said that what songs are is really words that are dancing. Therefore, the reason why we sing words is to give a lilt and a lift to what we're expressing.

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The invitation to sing at the beginning of this psalm is extended to the righteous, which of course defines those who are in the community of faith, who belong to the Lord. God has justified us or made us righteous through faith. We're in that community. God has given the righteous a song to sing, a song that is independent of our own particular experience at any given moment. We're invited to sing because of who the Lord is. We, therefore, have been given a song.

The New Testament admonishes us to speak to one other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs and sing and make music in our heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19).

I. These first three verses of invocation to praise to the Lord.

These verses actually tell us four rules for singing.

A. The first we've already looked at. That is, to sing exuberantly or joyfully. To put expression to our singing. To concentrate.

B. The second admonition we're given is to sing with instruments. Instruments were encouraged to accompany the vocal music. If under the old covenant they could sing that way, how much more when we have a new song under Christ should we use the instruments to blend in with the voices? In those days, they didn't have a piano or organ. They had the guitar, the harp and the lyre. The harp, then, was nothing like what we have today.

C. The third thing we are told to do is to sing to Him a new song. That probably was meant to introduce, first of all, Psalm 33, when it first began to be introduced in worship. It was at that moment when it was first introduced—a new song. By inference, it is a reminder to us that it's never sufficient just to sing to God the old songs. Part of the Christian life is continuing to take that which gives new expression to our faith and new vitality. My life would be so impoverished if I weren't continuing to learn those new songs to the Lord. They have freshness.

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D. The fourth thing we are told, in regard to worship, as part of the invocation, is that we're to worship with excellence. We're told "Sing to him a new song. Play skillfully and shout for joy" (Psalm 33:3). There is room for good music in the church, for people who are well-trained vocally, who are well-trained instrumentally, and who can offer that in praise to God. We must not get into the mistaken notion that good music is only that which sounds the tune or melodic sequences we particularly like. The Lord, I think, is delighted with many different forms of music, and it's important that we do the music which we do with the best excellence we can bring to it.

That's the invocation. Sing joyfully, sing with instruments, sing with a new song, worship with excellence.

II. What is the substance of our praise?

The substance of our praise is found broken up in several different categories, from verse 4 through verse 19. We'll look at several different categories which constitute the basis of our praise.

A. First, our praise is in the Lord's Word.

"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. By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses. Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Psalm 33:4-9, NIV).

The psalm is meaning to say to us that God's Word was the agent by which creation came into being. It was through speaking the Word of God that the chaos of creation was brought out and it

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is that same Word which was used in the creation that brings order and productivity and effectiveness to our own lives. Whenever God speaks, it is not a capricious or a careless word, but He has intentionality to what He says. The Bible is saying that the God who ordained the heavens and the earth is a moral God. He is right and true. He is filled with holiness and unfailing love.

To me, verses 4–5, before verses 6–8 are beautifully brought together. Because, before the psalmist really celebrates the power of God’s Word which made the creation, he celebrates the character of God, who brought the creation into being. He brings the two greatest attributes of God together in a collection of verses (4–5) where he suggests that God’s quality is both righteousness and justice, His majesty and holiness. And then His unfailing love is the second majestic quality. God is righteous and God is loving.

God’s law and His love are equally strong. In the ark of the covenant, He says, “I choose to elevate My love, even over My law.” So instead of having His law and His love, side by side, in the ark of the covenant, He chooses to show us—in instances where we cannot decide what is the proper administration between love and Law—that we do well to elevate love above the Law. God himself does this when there is a repentant heart.

The Lord’s power is such in the making of creation that He even handles the waters in the heavens and the waters in the oceans like a traveler storing his water in a leather flask. That’s the idea of jars here.

Our response to the powerful effect of God’s Word—which brought water into being and brought the worlds into being—is reverence. “Let all the people of the earth revere him” (Psalm 33:8). A society that does not teach reverence for God is headed for big, big trouble.

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In Romans 1:20, Paul tells us that, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened...[therefore God] gave them over to a depraved mind” (Romans 1:20–21,28, NIV).

The psalmist is looking to the moral system within the nation of Israel and saying that the creation ought to do something for us. It ought to make us reverence God and respect Him, because the foundation of all moral ordering of life flows out of that.

He celebrates God’s Word, God’s Word that is effective in creation and God’s Word that produces reverence in us.

B. The next thing that is the substance of praising God is the Lord’s plan. “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” (Psalm 33:10–12, NIV).

We switch from talking about creation, in the earlier verses, now to talking about human history. What the psalmist is saying is that God’s purposes for the human race are as invariable as His natural laws. He has plans for the ordering of society and the ordering of human life. They’re just as unbreakable as the laws of gravity. The nation whose God is the Lord, who keeps these laws, will be a blessed nation.

Verse 12 initially referred to Israel, the nation whose God is the Lord. But I think it can be appropriated by any group of people who will make God the Lord. Why would a nation whose God is the Lord be blessed? A lot of things would be different.

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“Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD.” We’re so used to the kind of culture in which we live, but how different it would be if everybody made the Lord their God. We’re going to have to wait until we get to heaven. How do you bring that about? You can’t—except by individual conversion and individual righteousness. Then, by individual Christians working to be salt and light in our communities. But no matter how much effort we give to being righteous and spreading righteousness, ultimately, there is going to be an ungluing of our society and our world, because “The heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). Not a really encouraging view of human history, is it? I think that’s what the Scripture teaches.

The Lord’s plan, though, was for Israel to be that nation. Someday, God will restore it and bring it back and fulfill the purpose for which He intended it.

C. The third reason for praise in Psalm 33:13–15. “From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth—he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do” (Psalm 33:13–15, NIV). God is watching. That’s a comfort. But I’m not sure that’s always a comfort to us. God is seeing everything we do and there’s nothing hidden from Him.

The psalmist is not intimidated, because to him, it’s a comfort to know that God is watching. Someone has said there is such a thing as watching and then watching.

Remember the comment of the small boy who said, “Teacher watches me at school so that he can catch me doing wrong. Father watches me on the beach, to see that I don’t get in too deep.” I like father’s kind of watching. That’s the kind of watching reflected in verses 12–15. Father is not watching over us to catch us doing something wrong; but watching over us to help us if we get into water over our head.

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D. We celebrate the Lord's Word, the Lord's plan, the Lord's eye, and the Lord's might. "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. 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" (Psalm 33:16–19, NIV).

No president is saved by his military forces. No missile is a hope for deliverance. Despite all of its great strength, it cannot save.

By the way, the psalmist does not say, "Do away with horses and do away with prepared warriors." There are those who hold to the name of Christ who are Christian pacifists—I think that's a legitimate area Christians can disagree on. There would be some who would say, "Throw away the warriors and throw away the arms and just trust in Him completely." But never in this psalm is the nation told to dismantle its defenses. It's just told that that's not its ultimate source of salvation. That's not its ultimate defense. A nation can have all the greatest defenses in the world and be penetrated. If its hope is not in God, it's all worthless. "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 to keep them alive in famine" (Psalm 33:18-19, NIV).

I think these verses are gravely needed in our own country today, to remind ourselves that we're not saved by our vast military defenses.

III. The psalm comes to a conclusion in verses 20–22.

"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" (Psalm 33:20–22, NIV). That keeps us from being negative. The psalmist didn't have to be negative, because at the time this psalm was written, I think, the nation was clinging pretty

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closely to God. I think that's why the mood is so upbeat. It's the kind of psalm that you could expect to be written in the Great Awakening in America, when there was tremendous revival and people's hearts were right with God.

It was the kind of psalm you could expect to hear sung triumphantly in Wales, in the early part of the century. Psalm 33 is obviously written in a time, in the psalmist's experience, when the nation is doing great. He says, "We wait in hope for the LORD" (verse 20). That's something we can always do on an individual basis. "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."

The psalmist is sure that God is not going to change. God is not ready to walk off the job of being God. He's still waiting to be our help and He is always our hope. And our hearts rejoice in Him. His love rests upon us, as we put our hope in Him. A beautiful combination. We do not experience the love of God unless we ourselves reach up to Him. But when we reach up to Him, His love is always displayed upon us as well.

Praise be to God, who speaks His Word, His plan—whose eye watches over us and whose heart is directed towards us and in whom there is great strength. The Lord's might is upon us as we put our hope in Him. A beautiful combination. We do not experience the love of God unless we ourselves reach up to Him. But when we reach up to Him, His love is always displayed upon us as well.

"Praise be to God who speaks His Word, His plan, whose eye watches over us and whose heart is directed towards us and in whom there is great strength. The Lord's might is upon us."

Closing Prayer

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Lord, You've invited us to come to You and sing joyfully in Your presence. In the midst of praising You, You fill the content of our praise with a description of Your power and Your glory. You, the Lord of all the earth, do right and are true. You'll be faithful to us in whatever situation we find ourselves tonight. Your unfailing love will be upon us. You made the stars and the sun and the planets with the breath of Your mouth. You also have made us. You've made us in microscopic proportions of what You made the universe, but You put just as much planning and intention into us. You've called upon us to acknowledge you as our Lord and we've done that. We acknowledge You. We want to thank You that Your plan for us stands firm. That Your plan is that we enjoy life everlasting with You. That we realize the highest and the best in this life, that no matter what we go through, You're seeking to perfect us and make us after Your own character and likeness. We want to thank You for always watching over us. Even in the moments we would prefer to hide from You, we're glad that You watch over us. And in the moments when we think that You've forgotten us, we're glad that Your eye watches over us. Your eye is on the sparrow, and You watch over us. Teach us anew, in our own life, the straight matter of trust. Even as the nation's trust is not in its military preparedness, so our personal security is not in what we have financially. It's not in our hearth. It's not in our home. It's not even in our family or our children or our parents. Nor is it in our friends, nor is it in our church. Our real hope and our source of security are You. For it is in You that we live and move and have our being. We too wait in hope for the Lord. My hope is fixed on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. Your unfailing love rests upon us, Lord, and we hope in You. Thank You for Your Word this evening. Through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.