

October 24, 2021

ASCRIBE GLORY TO THE LORD

Psalm 29

(5 of 11 in a series of selected Psalms)

One of my favorite lines in a hymn was written by Charles Wesley in the song, “And Can It Be?” Wesley lived during the time of the Enlightenment. It was a period of time when the prevailing thought of the day was that man did not need God or his revelation in Scripture. Gone were the days when we needed to point to some creator to explain what was going on around us. One philosopher famously said that the enlightened man was the man who had thrown off superstition, by which he meant things like pointing to God as the one who is responsible for storms and the like. Consequently, this time also expressed great confidence in man’s own ability. It was said that we could simply use the gift of reason which would lead us to unbiased, objective truth. Instead of doing things like studying our Bibles, we could look at nature, which gave us all the light we needed to understand all we needed. In fact, mankind’s confidence was so great in our own ability, it was even thought that we could use our reason to discover the laws of nature, and once discovered, we could solve every social ill there was and make life better in every respect.

Now, I don’t have to tell you that the Enlightenment project fell far short of all its promises. It’s hard to convince anyone that life has gotten better in every respect over the last five hundred years. On some days it feels like it’d be easier to make the argument we’ve gotten worse in many respects. But back to the hymn. It was in the middle of this heightened confidence in man’s abilities to take the light of nature and solve any issue without the need for God or his revelation whatsoever that Wesley wrote the song, “And Can It Be?” And in one verse he writes this: “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night. Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray. I woke, the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off. My heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.”

Do you see how counter-cultural that writing was? In a time when it was believed that man had all he needed in himself and in the light from nature so that he doesn’t need God, Wesley writes about being bound in sin and nature’s *night*, needing something more than he could provide for himself or nature could provide for him. He needed light that God alone could give, and it was only when the Lord shone in his heart that the sin that bound him was removed. It was only then that he was given life. What might just seem like a fun line to sin in a great song is much more than that. Wesley was pushing back against the God-dishonoring teaching of his day and pointing unbelievers to the truth of Scripture.

I think something like that is going on in Psalm 29. It’s sometimes easy for us to forget that the biblical writers lived in the real world, surrounded by real people, who were really teaching falsehoods that spoke against the truths that God had revealed. But that’s the reality. And Psalm 29 seems to be a psalm that directly challenges the false beliefs of the Canaanites and others who worshiped false gods. To us, it looks like simply a call to worship, followed by a list of

reasons why God should be worshiped—which is indicative of praise psalms. And that is exactly what it is. But, if we know a bit about the false beliefs of Israel’s neighbors, we’ll see that it’s also a repudiation of what they believe. It’s a proclamation of the might of God over against all the false gods that Israel’s neighbors worshiped.

But what we’ll also see in Psalm 29—as we walk through it this morning—is a reminder of why we should trust in our God, even as we walk through what feels like the valley of the shadow of death. We’ll see why we should rest in him though it feels like so much that’s outside of our control affects us daily. We’ll see why we should look to him in prayer before looking to ourselves as our hope for walking through this life well. And so this morning I want us to see just how David both repudiates the falsehoods surrounding him and points us to trust, rest, and seek our God who reigns over all. I want to walk through the psalm in four sections. The first is a call to worship our great God.

A call to worship our great God

As David starts out, he calls for the Lord to be worshiped. He writes, “Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness” (vv. 1-2). One of the things that you find in Hebrew poetry—like this psalm—is that sometimes the author will use lines that parallel each other. It might be like me saying, “Shut the door” followed by a command to “Close the entryway.” Obviously I’m using different words but getting at the same thing. That’s what we see when David repeatedly cries for the heavenly being to ascribe glory to the Lord and then in the last line of verse 2 calls them to worship the Lord. In other words, when we worship the Lord we’re ascribing glory to him. We’re giving him the credit, honor, and praise that he is due. We’re saying about him all that is true and glorious so that we might exalt him and draw the attention of others to focus on his greatness, majesty, goodness, and the like. And so these first two verses are a call to worship the Lord—much as we do with our first Scripture reading every time we gather together on a Sunday morning.

But specifically David calls for the “heavenly beings” to worship the Lord, to ascribe to the Lord the glory that God deserves. And this phrase translated “heavenly beings” is literally “sons of God,” which is a phrase that the Bible uses to refer at times to God’s people (like Israel was called God’s son in Exodus 4:22 and believers are called sons of God in the New Testament) and at other times to refer to angels (for example in Job 38:7). Here, my guess is that it’s referring to angels, with the implication that if even heavenly beings are to worship the Lord, no doubt we are as well. David might even be thinking that God deserves more praise than David himself can give, and this leads him to call even the angels to join in worship. And this idea of angels being commanded to worship God shouldn’t be foreign to us since we sing every Sunday, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here below. Praise him above *ye heavenly host.*”

One reason I think this is a reference to heavenly beings is because to the pagans who surrounded Israel, they would have had a notion that there are many gods (i.e. many heavenly

beings), and so David is calling everything—even what they would recognize as gods (though they are false gods)—to recognize the majesty of the Lord God and worship him as the only one worthy of worship. So this is where the psalm begins. But the rest of the psalm tells us why everyone and everything should worship the Lord. And the first thing David notes in verses 3-9 is that God should be worshiped for the power of his word.

God should be worshiped for the power of his word

In verses 3-9 David pictures the Lord over nature. He will picture a devastating storm, lightning, thunder, an earthquake, and the eventual quieting of everything. He speaks of these things in poetic form, but the key is that God is controlling all of these things simply by his word, his voice, a note that comes up repeatedly. We read in verses 3-5, “The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.”

You may remember from 1 Samuel 7 that Aaron preached last week that one of the false gods that the Canaanites worshiped was the god, Baal. And Baal was pictured as the storm god, as if he was the one who controlled storms. The Canaanites would cry out to him if they wanted it to rain. There were pictures of him “standing on waves of water with a spear of lightning flashes in his hand and a club, for thunder, in the other.”¹ Do you then see what David is saying? He’s sending the message loud and clear that it is not Baal who controls the storm. It is the Lord. Nor does the Lord have to muster up his strength to do so. It is merely by the might of his voice that he who is over the waters, speaks and it thunders, commands and lightning flashes forth. His voice is so powerful that he can merely command the storm and the mighty cedars of Lebanon are blown over. It is the Lord who reigns and is in utter control, even in the details of the storm.

And David continues in verse 6 describing what seems like an earthquake. He writes, “He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.” This is a poetic way of describing an earthquake where the ground begins moving so that the earth itself seems to skip and dance. Then, in verse 7 he returns to the lightning of the storm, noting, “The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.” And the storm is so violent that the earth shakes, as David points out, writing, “The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.”

I remember several years ago I had put in a gutter extension that I buried under ground for a good way out. Well, I wanted to see how well this was working, but I didn’t have a window at that part of my house, so I decided that the next time it rained, I’d go check it out. That seemed, in my mind, the only real way to test and see if all was good. And so the next time it rained, it wasn’t some light rain, it was a thunderstorm. Maybe not quite to the degree we see in this

¹ Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Vol. 1 (1-41)*, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 658.

psalm, but it was powerful. It was the kind where the streets are littered with branches and leaves afterward. Well, I walked out there with my umbrella, which provided only a bit of protection, and I squatted down next to the end of that extension pipe just to make sure everything was running out unimpeded. And in a few seconds, the sky lit up all around me and almost immediately afterward the thunder roared as loud as I'd ever heard it. It sounded like it was right behind me. It felt like everything around me was shaken, and I—almost involuntarily—shot up from my squatted position and ran back into the house as quickly as I could. It was the most all-encompassing sound I'd ever heard.

That's the scene here. The thunder is shaking the wilderness, and it's so violent and so alarming, that David tells us in verse 9, "The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth and strips the forests bare." The sounds and violence cause the deer to go into what is most likely premature labor, even as trees are having their branches stripped off by the wind. This is a terrifying scene as the storm rips through the land—all under the direction of the Lord's voice.

And David concludes, "And in his temple all cry, 'Glory!'" (v. 9). In other words, if you aren't blinded in your hearts, you can see that such a violent storm is the tiniest glimpse of the Lord's might and power. And so those who know this—those in his temple—realize it's an opportunity to reflect on the Lord and worship him. And so they cry "glory" as they worship.

Now, obviously David could have chosen any number of things to speak of the Lord's power. And he may have written this in the midst of witnessing a storm, or he may have written this simply as he was aware of the Canaanite's Baal worship and wanted to remind them that it isn't Baal who has power over the storms, but the Lord himself who controls them merely with his word. Or it may have been that there simply isn't much that compares to the power of a storm. I've been to a concert that left my ears ringing for a few days, but if that thunder I heard in that storm one day had been constant, I don't think my heart could have taken it. And David is reminding us that this points to the power of our God. He has control over the most powerful forces we see on this earth, and he controls them simply by his word. Therefore, he is to be worshiped.

It is worth noting at this point as well that what David testifies to here—that the storm declares the power and might of God—isn't lost on the unbeliever. Paul tells us in Romans 1 that God has made "his invisible attributes" of "*his eternal power* and divine nature" "clearly perceived, ever since the creation on the world, in the things that have been made." Unbelievers see that same storm and they know that the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ exists. They know he deserves honor as God and should be given thanks as God. But they suppress the truth that God has made plain to them, and as they do so they become fools, futile in their thinking, and darkened in their hearts. And they exchange the truth of God for lies. Sometimes those lies are that Baal is the god behind the storms. Sometimes those lies are that there is no god at all and this world is simply working without any need for God. But both stem from the fact that unbelievers are in moral rebellion against their maker and seek any lie they can over acknowledging the truth. And Psalm 29 reminds us why it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of this God. He is not to be opposed, and his wrath is fierce.

And this is one thing we need to make clear as we share the gospel with others. We do not speak of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, exhorting others to repent and believe because we want them merely to have a better life. If that were the case, they might rightly suggest they're content with their lives now. We plead with them to repent and believe so that they might flee from the wrath to come when the Lamb pours out merciless judgment on his enemies, throwing them into the lake of fire.

But as we continue through the psalm, we also see that David reminds us that God is to be worshiped because he reigns over all forever.

God is to be worshiped because he reigns over all forever

In verse 10 David reaches backward and forward in time. He writes, "The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever." This is perhaps a turn we don't anticipate, as David reaches back to speak of the flood. But if his goal is simply to relate cataclysmic events of nature and stress God's control over such events, then this makes perfect sense. After all, there's no "natural" event that did more damage to the creation itself than the flood. But there may also be a mocking of false gods here as well.

After all, other pagan traditions developed their own telling of the flood, which makes sense. I mean, if the worldwide flood really happened—and it did—then you'd expect all kinds of cultures to develop their explanations of why. For example, in the pagan writing *The Gilgamesh Epic*, the gods unleash the flood but then are terrified as it transpires. They "cowered like dogs and crouched in distress" as they "were terror-stricken at the deluge."² But David reminds those unbelievers in his own day that the God who actually created the world and reigns over it sat enthroned over the flood. He wasn't afraid of the flood but was directing it, enthroned over it.

But if David reaches back to the greatest event of nature in the flood, he also doesn't want to leave anything unaddressed that might come in the future, and so he reminds us that the Lord sits as king *forever*. Therefore, every natural tornado, earthquake, famine, tsunami, and the like don't signal that creation is out of control. Rather, they serve as an opportunity to remind us of God's power, to remind us that he is king. When Aaron preached this psalm he suggested gathering your family together in the next violent storm, reading Psalm 29, and giving his praise for his might. Surely that is the right response, which is why David gives us this additional reason for why God should be worshiped. And this brings us to the last verse where David reminds us that God gives his strength and peace to his people.

God is to be worshiped because he gives his strength and peace to his people

² Dale Ralph Davis, *In the Presence of My Enemies: Psalms 25-37* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2020), 86.

The psalm ends with a remarkable benediction. David says that the Lord is willing to give strength to his people. This God who directs the storm, reigns over the flood, and is in control of all things is willing to give strength to his people. He'll give you the endurance you need to press on and the strength to trust him in times of difficulty. Why wouldn't we cry out to him when we sense our own weakness and helplessness? But not only that. He blesses us with peace.

You know what causes us not to have peace? Isn't it the recognition that we're not in control? We're anxious about this upcoming event or that because we don't know how it will turn out and have little or no control over how it does. What peace God has, though. Nothing is out of his control. He doesn't even *react* to anything because he's the one directing all things after the counsel of his own will. Oh what peace we might have if indeed we had that kind of control ourselves. How could we be anxious or lack any degree of peace if all things were under our control? Well, I think I can do one better. What peace can we have if we know that all things are under the reign of one who is infinitely wise, infinitely good, loves us to the point that he did not spare his Son for us, and has made us his beloved children? Your Father, who is almighty and loves you relentlessly reigns as king over all. He knows what is best for us. Therefore, rest in the peace that is ours in Christ.

It's an interesting thing that David does in this psalm. He knows that he writes in the midst of a world where people think there are all kinds of gods. There are the gods of the Egyptians, the gods of the Syrians, the gods of the Canaanites, the god over storms, the god over this, and the god over that. How does the Bible distinguish Israel's God in the midst of a world where there are thought to be all kinds of gods? The OT reminds us that in a world where many believe in a plurality of gods there is only one God who created all things. There is only one God who rules over all things. And therefore there is only one God who is worthy of our worship. This is the God of the Bible, the God whom David reminds us of in Psalm 29 to whom we need to ascribe glory and worship. And interestingly, notice how many times the NT writers teach us precisely who Jesus is by reminding us that it is through him that all things were created, that he upholds the world by the word of his power, and that he is to be worshiped. Interestingly the author of Hebrews even reminds us that when God the Son took on flesh and came into the world, God commanded his angels to worship him (Heb 1:6). And so as we come to the table this morning, remembering that Jesus bled and died for our sins, let us remember that the one who gave himself for us is the one who created all, reigns over all, and is worthy of our worship. He is God the Son. And because he reigns, we can trust in and obey his every word. Let us rest in him now as we come to the table. Amen.