

Psalm 33

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 December 2018

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] So, we've reached the last Sunday of 2018. I don't know if for you that is a cause for jumping for joy or collapsing in a heap, and I guess that will depend, at least in part, by what kind of year it has been for you, and we're all different, and the years that we have had will also have been very different, I'm sure. What is, I think, beyond doubt is that the close of one year and the imminent dawn of another is cause for praise, praise directed to our triune God.

What I want to do today is focus on what we might call two staples of the Christian life, praise and prayer. Holidays, as many of us are enjoying over these days, maybe a time for R&R;,, for rest and relaxation, but the whole of life for the Christian is a time for P&P;,, for praise and prayer. And we'll think about prayer this evening, but this morning I want to think about praise, and I want to explore this matter of praise by considering the psalm that we have read, Psalm 33.

Now, there's a lot in the psalm. We want to cover it in its entirety, and there is a lot in it. So, the manner in which we'll have to consider the psalm will be in somewhat broad brush terms, as we explore the who, the how, the what, and the why of praise. So, we want to think about who is to praise God, how we are to praise God, what is the content of our praise, and very fundamentally, the why of our praise. Why do we praise God at all? And that final question will occupy most of our time. As we consider the psalm in this way, maybe I could ask you to listen and engage with what is being said by reflecting on the year that has passed, and reflecting in what measure the praise that you have offered to God has been in line with, what we discover in God's Word concerning praise.

So, an opportunity for self-examination concerning the year that is coming to a close, but not only to look back and examine, but also to look ahead and resolve in the year that is about to begin, that the praise we offer to God would be pleasing to God, would be praise that is in accord with what we discover in this psalm as to what constitutes God-pleasing praise, and indeed the causes and the reasons why we are to praise God. So, that gives us all a task, I think, as we participate in this part of our worship service, gathering around God's Word, and particularly this psalm. So, we'll begin by posing the question and looking for an answer to the question in the psalm, in the very beginning of the psalm, the question, who are called to praise God? And we'll find the answer there in the very first verse of the psalm, saying, joyfully to the

Lord, you righteous, it is fitting for the upright to praise Him. Now, before identifying, and it's not a difficult task, what this verse tells us in answer to the question, it is worth making the point, taking a step back, as it were, and making the point that all ought to praise God.

[4 : 0 3] Everybody has reason to praise God. Now, not all do praise God, but there is a very real sense in which there is an obligation. It ought not to be seen as a burdensome obligation, but nonetheless, an obligation on us all to praise God. But while that is true, it's also true that not all are able to praise God.

And the call here in verse 1 is directed to those who have been, we might put it in this way, to those who have been spiritually enabled to praise. And who are they? Well, the way they're described in this verse is as the righteous, and then another almost synonymous word there in the second half of the verse, the upright, saying, joyfully to the Lord, you righteous. You see, this is not an indiscriminate call. It is a call directed to the righteous and to the upright. Now, the French reformer, John Calvin, comments on this verse in the following way. He says, the psalmist addresses believers or the righteous because they alone are capable of proclaiming the glory of God.

There's a recognition that to praise God as we ought is not something we can do naturally. There is a spiritual enabling that is necessary, a work of God in our hearts that enables us to acknowledge the rightness of praising God and indeed to praise Him as is pleasing to Him. Praise is a spiritual activity and can only be offered by the enabling of the Spirit of God. Just as we are to pray in the Spirit, to use the language of Paul in the New Testament, so we can also say that we are to praise in the Spirit, enabled by the Spirit of God. But even as we acknowledge that the call is directed then to those who are spoken of as righteous and upright. That also raises perhaps a question for us.

We might ask, well, is that me? Can I be described in this way? Am I righteous or upright? Maybe immediately we're conscious that in some ways and in a very real way, we're not. We're not righteous.

We're sinners, all of us. We're not altogether upright. We only need to look back a day and examine yesterday and examine yesterday and it wouldn't take very long to discover that we have fallen short in any number of ways, even in the course of 24 hours. But of course, the language here is being used not in the sense of describing those who are without fault, those who are perfect, but rather it is describing those who have been set apart by God. The righteous are the holy, those set apart by God for Himself. Sinners set apart by God for His service and His praise.

[7 : 17] To use New Testament language or to understand this language in the light of the New Testament and the work of Jesus, we can think of the righteous as those who have been made righteous in Christ.

A righteousness not our own, but a righteousness that has been given to us by Jesus. And we offer up our praise in the name of Jesus and clothed in His righteousness.

So who are called to praise God? Oh, God's people. And maybe this is a good moment for us to reflect for a moment. If we are among God's people, are you one of God's people? Are you trusting in Jesus as your Savior? Because it is only those who are among God's people who are able to praise God in the manner that we are directed to do at the very beginning of this psalm. So who are called to praise God? But let's move on and ask and try and answer a second question. How are we to praise God? The first three verses of the psalm deals with that question or answers that question in a number of ways. And the most obvious answer to that question is that we are to praise God in song. We are to sing to God. Verse three begins, sing to Him a new song. The very first verse begins with the verb, the very first word, sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous. We speak of, in our church tradition, we speak of praise as an element of worship. So when we gather for public worship, there are different elements of worship. There's the reading of scripture, there's prayer, there is the preaching of God's word, there will be on occasion the celebration of the sacraments, and there is praise. We praise God and this is an integral, an essential element of worship. And our praise to God is to be sung. Now that's not exclusively the case. We can praise God in prayer. We're going to be thinking a little bit more about prayer this evening. But in a very particular way, and in a very special way, our praise is directed to God in song. Now why is that? I wonder, have you ever wondered why it is that God has so determined that God's people should praise Him in song? We could just speak our words of praise. The very words that we sing, we could speak them and direct them to God. The content would be the same. In some ways there would be no difference in the sentiments being expressed, and hopefully in the heart from which they are being expressed. The mode of expression wouldn't change that. And yet, we are called time and time again to direct our praise to God in song. Now I wonder, why is that? Well, I think one of the reasons is that song is pleasing. Song is beautiful. Song is enjoyable to us, those who sing, but also to God who hears our singing and receives our sung praise. And so how are we to praise God? Well, we are to praise God in song. This is an integral element of our worship to God. But not only in song, but the verses there at the beginning of the psalm go on to explain in greater detail. We are to sing in joyful song. Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous. Now this is spiritual joy, the joy of our salvation, the joy of belonging to God's family, of being sons and daughters of God. And the language that is employed here makes it very clear that this singing is to be visibly joyful and exuberant. It won't do to simply say, well, I'm joyful in my heart, though that, of course, maybe, and I hope is true. There's a very real sense in which the psalmist is calling us to visibly joyful song directed to God. In song, in joyful song, but also, interestingly, and we might say intriguingly, and maybe even surprisingly, we're told that we are to sing

in skillful song. There in verse 3 it says, sing to Him a new song, play skillfully, and shout for joy. Now, I think the skill that has been spoken of here in this verse applies to our voice. Our voice is, after all, the one instrument that we employ, but also the accompanying instruments that are used to direct the praise of God's people. And there's this call, this encouragement, this urge laid upon us to employ these faculties, these instruments, skillfully. Now, all are to sing, including those who are not particularly skilled, but even those of us, and I would very much include myself in this category, those of us who are, let's say, musically challenged, will still endeavor to sing as well as we can.

Now, we can't do more than that, but certainly we are to do that, to sing as well as we can. Indeed, as congregations, we should be concerned to organize our sung praise in such a way that it is as skillful as it is able to be. It's not a professional performance, it ought not to be that.

[13 : 08] But we are to use the gifts God has given us to their uttermost, but we are to do the best we can. And I say that in the best meaning of that expression. It reminds me of applying from another occasion in the Bible, it reminds me of what Jesus said of Mary. You remember when Mary anointed Jesus and the disciples were very scandalized by what she had done. And one of the things that Jesus said of Mary is this, that she did what she could. She did what she could. And I think in this matter, that is a principle that applies. When we're called to sing skillfully, we are to do what we can, as we sing joyfully and skillfully to God. And the song also, I think, can be described as exuberant in character. We are to shout for joy. Immediately following this call to play skillfully, you have these words, and shout for joy. The 19th century Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, comments on this verse, and he says as follows, well-bred whispers are disreputable in praise. I don't know what you make of that. Well-bred whispers are disreputable in praise. Well, never mind Spurgeon. I wonder what

David would make, or the author of the psalm, whoever the author may have been. I wonder what the author of the psalm would make of our praise. We have praised God this morning. I wonder what opinion that the author of the psalm would have of our praise, or perhaps more importantly, not perhaps, much more importantly, what does God make of our praise? Is our praise in some measure matching up to what this psalm describes as the praise that we are to render and offer to our God?

Let's move on to the third question that we want to pose, and this one we are going to deal with much more briefly, and it's simply this, what are we to sing? So, the content of our praise, and here I'm going to limit myself just to one thing that is said in verse 3 that is also perhaps intriguing, and it certainly isn't an exhaustive answer to the question, what are we to sing, but simply these words in verse 3, sing to him a new song. It's his call to God's people to sing a new song.

No, I don't think the idea here is principally the idea of a new composition. The psalmist isn't encouraging us to get our pencils out and start composing songs of praise, though of course we can certainly do that. It's a perfectly good thing to do if we have the gifts to do it, but I don't think that's what the psalmist has in mind, but I think rather the psalmist has in mind that the praise that we offer should be characterized by a freshness in our offering of praise, that even when we sing words that have been sung so many times, you know, we began our service this morning by singing Psalm 100.

Now, some of you will have sung that psalm hundreds of times, and yet the call is to sing it with that freshness as if it were the very first time, as if it were, in a sense, a new song that we are offering to God, as the truths of the psalm take on new meaning to us, not a different meaning, but new light is shone upon them in the light of our own life and experience. Again, let me just read something that Spurgeon has to say on this call to sing a new song. He says this, our faculty should be exercised when we are magnifying the Lord so as not to run in an old groove without thought. We ought to make every hymn of praise a new song. Let us not present old, worn-out praise, but put life and soul and heart in every song. I think that's what singing a new song involves, putting life and soul and heart into every song, however well known, however often we have sung the words. But let's move on to the final question, one where we'll spend a little bit more time, and that is answering the question, why are we to praise God? Now in the very first verse we are given, in some ways, the key answer to that question.

[17 : 44] I'll then explain how we can develop the answer as we look at the rest of the psalm. But at the very beginning of the psalm, we find a key word employed by the psalmist. We read there in verse 1, sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous, and then we read, it is fitting for the upright to praise Him.

It is fitting for the upright to praise Him. And so there you have an answer to the question, why are we to praise God? Well, because it is fitting. Now what does that mean? The King James version employs the old-fashioned word, well, it wasn't at the time that the Bible was translated, but it is for us now, the old-fashioned but very beautiful word, cumling. And the expression there is translated in that way, it is comely for the upright to praise. That is a beautiful word, indeed it's a word that can, in certain contexts, mean beautiful, that which is cumling. But in this verse it is used in the sense of becoming or fitting, to use the word that we have in the church Bible.

It is fitting for the upright to praise Him. Why are we to praise God? Because it is becoming, it is fitting, it is altogether appropriate, it is the right thing to do. It is what we ought to do as those who have been created by God, as those who have been redeemed by God, as those who have been adopted by God, as those who have been provided for by God. It is fitting, the right thing to do.

You know, it's a bit like, you know, if your child, and it doesn't need to be a child, it could be a grown-up, but receives a gift at Christmas. It is fitting that they say thank you. It's the right thing to do. It's appropriate that they respond with words of thanks to the one who has given them a gift.

And in that same way, but magnified a hundredfold, it is fitting for us to praise the one who has provided so generously and lovingly for us in so many ways. So why are we to praise God? Because it is fitting. But then we could ask the question, although I guess in a way we've answered it in a measure, why is it fitting? And really the rest of the psalm from verse 4 onwards provides an ample answer to the question as to why it is fitting to praise God. Indeed, verse 4 begins with the word for. Notice there in verses 1 to 3 you have this call to praise, very particularly to some praise, and then verse 4 begins, for the word of the Lord is right and true. And I think that the weight of that word for carries forward throughout the psalm. And so really what the psalmist is saying is, I'm calling you to praise God. I'm calling you to shout for joy. I'm calling you to sing skillfully, to do all of these things. Why? Well, listen to all of this. For. And then there is this presentation, this portrait of God that is presented in what remains in the psalm. And a portrait really that includes two elements. First of all, who God is, and secondly, what God has done or what God is doing.

[21 : 03] And of course these two are intimately connected, but we can distinguish them. In verses 4 and 5, there is this portrait of who God is, what He's like, His character. And then from verse 6 through to the end of the psalm, a description, a presentation of what God has done and what God is doing on behalf of His people. And these are the reasons that we are to praise Him as we consider who He is and what He does. And let's just notice, and here we really will be using very broad brushstrokes, let's notice what is said under these headings of who God is and what God does. First of all, who God is. Well, let's read what it says in verses 4 and 5. 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. So why are we to praise God? Because the word of the Lord is right and true.

Because He is faithful in all He does. Because He is a God who loves righteousness and justice. Because the earth is full of His unfailing love. The word of the Lord is true and right. This points to God's character, to who He is and what He is like. God's words and His acts will always reflect His character. God always speaks and acts in character. We praise God because of who He is. He is faithful.

He is righteous. He is just. He is love. And God's affections, where He speaks of the Lord, loves righteousness and justice. His words, His acts all reveal who He is. This God who is full of unfailing love. Even when we don't see it. Even when we imagine that His love doesn't appear to have extended to us in a given circumstance. Yet we are assured that the earth is full of His unfailing love.

And so that certainly reaches to each of us. So we praise God for who He is and the wonders and the excellencies of His character. But we also praise God for what He has done and what He continues to do, which as I've noted will always reflect who He is and His character. But as we think about what God does and what God is doing, we can maybe order that in three ways. Because in the Psalm and what follows in verses 6 and following, God is presented first of all as the creator of all things, but then also as the king over all things, and then very especially as the savior of His people. And our praise to God is directed to Him because of the manner in which He acts in these three ways, as creator, as king, and as savior.

[24 : 02] What do verses 6 to 9 say? We can simply read the verses without commenting on them. They speak for themselves. 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. Why are we to praise Him? Because He is the creator of God. He spoke and it came to be.

Now this reality, how is it to inform or mark or mold our praise? Well, in the light of God's power and authority, our praise is to be marked by awe and reverence. In verse 8, let all the earth fear the Lord. Let all the people of the world revere Him. And it's important to note that the joyful exuberance of verses 1 and 3 ought to coexist with this awestruck reference. In verse 8, the psalmist isn't speaking to different people. He is acknowledging that in our praise to God there is to be exuberance and joy and celebration, but combined with this respect and reverence for the powerful creator God.

And so we praise God as the creator God, but also as the sovereign king. In verses 10 and 11, we read of God's sovereign and providential ordering of all things, of history itself.

The Lord foils the plans of the nations. He thwarts the purposes of the people, but the plans of the Lord stand firm forever. The purposes of His heart through all generations. And the contrast is really striking. We think of our own nation. And regardless of what your thoughts and opinions might be on the big political questions of the day and our relationship to Europe and Brexit and all the rest of it. And as I say, regardless of your opinions and what the desired outcome might be, what is evident is that the purposes of the nations can be so easily thwarted that the plans that rulers make often do not come to fruition. We can plan and yet we are so often frustrated in our plans for good or for ill. But in great contrast, the plans of the Lord stand firm forever. The purposes of His heart through all generations. And so we praise God because He is the sovereign king who is ordering and governing the nations of the world and our own individual lives in all their minute details and ordering them for our good and for the fulfilling of His purposes. And so we praise God for that. We praise Him.

[26 : 57] As our sovereign king. God is ever acting to ensure that His perfect plans are not thwarted. And that is a source of great comfort for us. As we maybe see our lack of power, our lack of capacity to order our own lives in the way we would like to order them. Yet we serve a God and we praise a God who orders all things for good. God's plans stand firm forever. This reality of God as the sovereign king, how does that or how might that mark or impinge on or influence our praise? Well, our praise is secure praise. We praise God in the security that He is in control and that He exercises His control with a view to our welfare and blessedness.

But then finally the psalm presents God as our Savior God. And the reality of that also being a cause, a reason for our praise to Him because He is our Savior.

From verses 12 to 19 we have this presentation, this portrait of God as the Savior of His people. And the manner in which the psalmist presents this portrait is that He paints this picture of God looking down from heaven.

Verse 13, from heaven the Lord looks down and sees all mankind. He sees all of mankind. He sees all the nations of the world from His viewpoint there in heaven. All is revealed, all is evident and visible to Him.

But though He sees all of mankind. Though He sees all of the nations. There is one nation that captivates His attention in a special way. In verse 12 we read, Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people He chose for His inheritance.

[28 : 55] And then in verses 18 and 19 also there is this focusing in of God's sight of all on a particular people. But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear Him.

He sees all but He focuses His attention in this paternal and special way on His own people. On this special particular nation. Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.

Now that verse 12 is one that is quite often quoted. And I think often torn from its context in an attempt to apply it to a given nation state.

And so it's a verse that I've heard often employed in relation to our own country of Scotland. Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord. And when it's employed to describe our own country, the country that we live in, I think often, at least today, when we would employ it for that purpose, if we do, we're doing so with perhaps nostalgia-tinged spectacles.

And so we look back and we say, Oh yes, what a wonderful nation Scotland was when we served God. When this was true of us. Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord. Now I wonder if that was ever true of us.

[30 : 08] And yet that's somehow how the verse is applied. Or curiously, for myself, having lived in Scotland about half my life, and the other half of my life in Peru, the verse is also often employed in Peru.

And it's more with, I would call them not nostalgia-tinged spectacles, but aspiration-tinged spectacles. And the idea of, wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if the nation of Peru became this nation?

If only we had more people converted, if the church could grow that little bit more, maybe that could be us. This could be our nation. Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord. But that's not what the psalmist is speaking about.

That's not the nation the psalmist is speaking of. He's not speaking about Scotland or Peru or any other nation. He's speaking about God's people. Now in the Old Testament, that was Israel and all those who became part of Israel.

But of course, today in the New Testament, that is the church of Jesus Christ. This is the nation that God looks down on with special, paternal, loving attention and care.

[31 : 09] The nation is Israel, and its New Testament equivalent is the church of Jesus Christ. Why does this nation so captivate God's attention?

Well, God Himself can give us the answer to that question in words that we read in Deuteronomy 7, verses 7-10. And what do we read there? The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath He swore to your forefathers that He brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God. He is faithful, the faithful God, keeping His covenant of love to a thousand of generations of those who love Him and keep His commands.

And it goes on. God sets His paternal loving eyes, very especially on His own chosen and delivered people.

[32 : 13] He delivers His people, as the psalm indicates, from death. Then in verse 19, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. Now perhaps the psalmist, as he wrote these words, had particularly in mind deliverance from physical death, from the hands of His enemies.

But we know that God's deliverance from death is in every sense, from spiritual death, from eternal death, and ultimately from physical death as well.

And we know how God has secured this deliverance for His people by the saving mission of His Son, Jesus, who died to deliver us from death.

At the cross, we witness the death of death in the death of Jesus. How are we to be the beneficiaries, as it were, of this saving work, of this delivering work of the eternal Son of God?

What do we need to do? Well, the psalmist gives us the answer. 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.

[33 : 18] We are to hope in God. We are to trust in God. We are to cast ourselves on God's mercy that He might be our God and Savior. And He will save us. And He will deliver us.

How does this reality inform or mark our praise? Well, our praise is ever to be marked by deep gratitude for God's electing and saving love.

And so the psalm gives us so many reasons why we are to praise God in song, why we are to sing to Him a new song, why we are to play skillfully and shout for joy because of who God is, because of all that God has done and continues to do on behalf of His people.

Well, as we bid farewell to 2018 and as we gingerly tiptoe into 2019 or perhaps rush headlong into the new year, may this be our firm resolve to praise God in the manner that we are urged and encouraged to do as we ponder on and reflect on and give thanks for all that He is and all that He has done.

Now, let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You that You are indeed the God who is worthy of all praise. We acknowledge that it is becoming, it is right, it is fitting for us to praise You.

[34 : 46] Forgive us for our rebellion when we refuse to praise You, when we refuse to serve You and seek to live our lives as we see fit.

Help us to see that for what it is, an act of rebellion against You. And help us rather to joyfully and gratefully bow down in joyful praise to You, our God and Deliverer.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.