

Psalm 33

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like you now to open your Bibles in the Old Testament to the book of Psalms, in Psalm 33, it's on page 560 of the Bible here in the pulpit, which I hope corresponds with the Bibles in the pews. There we have the words of Psalm 33, which we are singing through in our service this morning, and I'd like us to look at this psalm, and particularly at the first verse.

Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous. It is fitting for the upright to praise Him. Now, there are many different categories of psalms, and this is a psalm of praise, a psalm of rejoicing.

There are other psalms, of course, which are psalms of lament. There are other psalms which are primarily teaching psalms, and so on. There are a whole lot of different categories of psalms, but this psalm is a psalm of worship, and I'd like us to think this morning of what this psalm teaches us about worship. Now, worship, of course, is a popular topic, not only in our own denomination, but also there's a great deal of worship talk on the media in terms of how Muslims worship the Lord, worship God, for example. Frequently, we see Muslims bowing at prayer in their mosques or even in the street, and this raises the whole question of what is worship. In a large section of the Protestant church, which is popularly and perhaps very loosely called the charismatic section, worship is spoken of as a singing, and they speak about a time of worship for perhaps 20 minutes at the beginning of our service. And perhaps that is undoubtedly a very restrictive view of worship.

Worship is something that's much broader, much wider, as I hope we will see. And it's not surprising that particularly in the United States, there's been a strong reaction against what's sometimes called charismatic worship by many young people going back into a more liturgical form of worship found in Anglican churches and perhaps particularly in Orthodox churches in the United States. And we see it to some extent in this country, at least in England, where there's a remarkable revival of interest in attending cathedral services in the Church of England. My wife and I were recently in the south of England and we attended a cathedral service with friends who normally attend there. And the church, the cathedral was very well filled with young families, young adults with their children. There's something about the reverence of liturgical worship that seems to attract. Well, what is worship? What are its components? What are its elements? What do we do or what are we to do when we come to worship God?

Well, this psalm gives us an answer. It doesn't tell us all about worship, but it tells us a great deal.

[3 : 3 2] And it identifies, I think, at least three elements or three components of worship. And the first one is identified right at the beginning of the psalm where we read, sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous, praise the Lord with the harp, and so on.

Worship is, first of all, according to this psalm, worship is rejoicing. Worship is rejoicing. Worship is a solemn experience, but it is also a glad experience.

We're encouraged in verse 3 to shout for joy. Worship is celebratory. Worship is having a good time. Now, many people today, when they think of church, they don't think of having a good time. And yet the psalms encourage us again and again to sing joyfully, to shout for joy to the Lord, to praise Him in this exuberant, extravagant way.

Praise is the offering of the whole self to God. And that praise takes place not simply when we sing, but throughout every component of an act of worship. And so the psalmists say, sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous. Now, who does he mean by the righteous? He doesn't mean those who are better than others. He doesn't mean those who have struggled and got to the top of the moral code, as it were. No, he's thinking here of those who are put right. He's not thinking of moral righteousness. He's thinking of those who have been put right with God through the gospel.

He's thinking of those who are put right with God through His grace and through His mercy and through His forgiveness. And it is only they who can worship God in spirit and in truth.

[5 : 38] We're reminded here that God is holy. He is a holy God. And therefore, when we come into His presence, we come to reverence Him. We come recognizing that He is other than we are, insofar as He is not only our creator, but He is totally sinless, absolutely holy. And we are creatures of the dust, and we are sinners, not only in His sight, but in our own admission. And so when we come into the presence of God, we need to come through the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord, says the psalmist, who shall stand in His holy place. It is those who have clean hands and pure hearts, those whose lives have been cleansed and washed in the atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is us, those who have been cleansed and washed from their sins, who can indeed rejoice in the presence of God. But nevertheless, when we come, we must come recognizing that the Lord is a holy God, and that therefore, although there is an element of rejoicing, there is also an element of fear. Let all the earth fear the Lord, let all the people of the world revere Him, the psalmist says in verse 8. So rejoicing in the Lord and feeding the Lord are not opposites for the psalmist. You can do both at the same time, is what he's saying here. You can rejoice in the Lord, you can shout for joy, and at the same time, you can fear the Lord and reverence Him and recognize His transcendence, recognize His awesomeness, recognize His holiness. And this psalm, I think, helps give us a balance and helps us to know what it means to worship the Lord. And he says here that we are to sing to the Lord a new song. Now, the phrase, a new song, occurs several times throughout the psalms, and it again and again occurs, as it does in the opening psalm, Psalm 96 of our service today, in the context of the Lord reigning, the Lord as being sovereign, the Lord as being King of the universe, and not only the Lord of His people.

And this is, if you like, the *raison d'être* of worship. This is why we come to worship the Lord, because we believe that He is reigning. We believe that He is supreme, that although we live in a world that is broken and fractured, a world that is unjust and sinful, there is an overruling, we believe.

God is working, perhaps working underground, but He's working. God is working in the world, and God's purposes will ultimately be fulfilled. And that's why we worship Him as the supreme being.

If that were not the case, He would not be a supreme being. He would be the victim of the circumstances that He Himself has created. But God is the sovereign God, therefore we sing to Him a new song. And so when we come, we come to worship Him as Lord and as King. Psalm 22, Psalmist tells us that the Lord is enthroned upon the praises of His people.

[9 : 18] And so when we come to praise the Lord, we come to enthrone Him. We come to enthrone Him in our hearts and in our lives, in our corporate life as a congregation. We come to enthrone Him and to acknowledge that He is Lord, that He is King, and therefore we rejoice and fear Him at the same time.

But of course we come above all because of God's mercy and of God's grace. And the psalmist comes to this very quickly in verse 5 where he speaks about the earth being full of the Lord's unfailing love.

Now the word translated unfailing love in the old Bible was translated as loving kindness. In some Bibles it's translated as steadfast love. It's God's covenant love. It's God's love for His people. It's God's love for those who are in covenant with Him. And the extraordinary thing that the psalmist says here is that this love is spread over all the earth. God's gracious love.

God's love for us. And the psalmist here is anticipating the words of our Lord when he said, God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life. And so we come to worship the Lord because of His love, because He has poured out His love in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He did not spare His own Son, but give Him up for us all. We come to worship Him because of His love is spread over the earth.

And so God's power, God's sovereignty is not a naked power. It is a power of love, a power of loving kindness, a power of mercy, a power of grace.

[11 : 22] And so this theme of God's unfailing love, of God's special love, goes right through the psalm.

We see it repeated. It's referred to again in verse 18 and in verse 22, and we'll come to these just in a few moments. And this is the theme. And verse 5, some commentators say, is the pivot of the psalm. The earth is full of the Lord's unfailing love. And that is the vision that the psalmist has here. And that's the vision he shares with us today and invites us to make our own.

And so we might ask ourselves this morning, are we rejoicing? Are we having a good time? As we, as we, as this morning, as we come to worship the Lord? Are we praising Him? Are we rejoicing in Him? Yes, we reverence Him. Yes, we fear Him. But are we also rejoicing? That's the focus that the psalmist has here at the beginning of this psalm. And of course, we must remember that the Lord is also rejoicing when His people gather together. Psalm 147 tells us, the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him and those whose hope is in His unfailing love. And it is as our hope, we express our hope in His unfailing love, in His great love and mercy and grace, that God takes pleasure in our gathering. And so He invites us to rejoice with Him. He invites us to enter into the joy of the Lord.

So this note of rejoicing is a keynote at the beginning of this psalm and many others. But the psalmist goes on, having begun rejoicing, he begins to reflect. And so we see the theme of the psalm moving from rejoicing to reflecting. And we see this particularly in verses 16 to 19, which is the main body of the psalm, if you like. The psalmist reflects on how God manifests His sovereignty.

How does He manifest His love? And so the psalmist meditates. The psalmist studies and meditates and reflects. And when we come to worship God, that's very important for us. It's very important for us to use our minds. It's very important for us to reflect on what God is saying to us, to reflect on what God is saying through the Scriptures. That's really at the core of worship. Our rejoicing and indeed our fearing is a response to what God is saying to us. And so God's Word is at the center, as the core of worship. But we're commanded here by the psalmist to reflect and to think through what it means. What does it mean for the Lord to be sovereign? What does it mean for the Lord to be Lord of the universe and of the earth? And the psalmist goes on here in a whole series of situations. He envisages the Lord's sovereignty. First of all, the Lord is sovereign in nature, verses 6 to 9. God's Word has brought the creation into being. We read in verse 6. And in verses 8 and 9, he says, this should be our response. Let all the earth fear the Lord. And he says, God's Word, which created the world, is a manifestation of His love and of His grace. It's not just a manifestation of naked power. It is a supremely moral power that God has exerted and is exerting in the creation and maintenance of the world. Then the psalmist moves from nature to the nations in verses 10 to 12.

[15 : 36] He moves from creation to history, from God's Word to God's will. We read in verse 10 that the Lord foils the plans of the nations. The Lord is influencing international relations in the world in which we live today. Now, it's sometimes very difficult for us to believe that. It's very difficult for us to accept that. But the psalmist is affirming that very strongly, that the counsel of the Lord stands forever, that His will will be done. The plans of the Lord stand forever, the purposes of His heart, through all generations. And there is a sense in which God's will is being done in spite of all the injustice, in spite of all the wickedness, in spite of all the evil that exists in the world.

And so what the psalmist is saying here, that the ultimate power in the world is not the power of the nations. It's not the power of governments. It's not the power of kings or of emperors.

It is the power of the Lord. The Lord foils the plans of the nations. And if you look back over the history of the human race, you see nations and civilizations and empires rising and falling.

I've been reading recently Neil Ferguson's excellent book, *Call Civilization*, the West and the Rest, in which he highlights how the Chinese civilization rose to a peak, the Islamic civilization rose to a peak, and then fell. And he's raising serious questions as to whether our Western civilization is about also to fall. The Lord could be foiling the plans of our nation, because our nation does not honor the Lord as it ought to. The Lord is active in international affairs. This is the vision that the psalmist has. The Lord foils the plans of the nations, but his plans stand forever. But the Lord's sovereignty is not simply a macro-sovereignty. It's also a micro-sovereignty, as we see in verses 13 to 15, where the psalmist begins to deal or to consider not simply the nations, but he's thinking here of individual people. From heaven, the Lord looks down and sees all mankind. From his dwelling place, he watches all who live on the earth. He who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do. He is a God who's concerned about our circumstances, our individual circumstances, our family circumstances. He is concerned about the little details of our lives. He is concerned for us. The very hairs of our head are numbered, says Jesus.

He is concerned for us. He knows us. He's concerned about our circumstances. He considers everything we do, the psalmist says, in verse 15. And so his sovereignty is not simply universal. His sovereignty is particular and personal. He is the one who is the sovereign Lord of our individual lives. And so Jesus teaches us in the passage which we read, that if we fear the Lord, we don't need to fear anyone else.

[19 : 27] The Lord is taking care of our circumstances. The Lord is looking after us. It's not just a question of the Lord dealing with the nations. He's dealing here with individuals. He's dealing with people.

He's dealing with you and with me. He's looking after us. That's what the psalmist is saying here. He considers, he considers everything we do.

And so as the psalmist continues to reflect, he reflects on what we might call today politics. We see in verses 16 and 17, no king is saved by the size of his army.

No warrior escapes by his mighty strength. The horse is a vain hope for deliverance. Despite all its great strength, it cannot save. Now what the psalmist is saying here is that ultimate power does not lie with governments, with kings or emperors or rulers.

It does not reside in military might. Now we find that very difficult in the world in which we live today. One American commentator on this, Sam, makes this comment. He says, we do not believe that nations are saved by great armies and that security is found in the implements of war. He says, we live in a secularist society which believes in the power of war. We see that in the world in which we live. Although, fortunately, the Cold War has come to an end. Nevertheless, there is a strong dependence on military power. We think of the power struggle that has been taking place even in these days between parliament and sections of the media in our own country and in other countries. It's a power struggle. And what the psalmist is saying here, that power does not lie with a media mogul or with the president of the most powerful nation of the world. Ultimate power lies with him.

[21 : 45] And therefore, we worship him. Therefore, we acknowledge him as our Lord and as our God. And the psalmist continues to reflect. He goes on in verses 18 and 19 when he says, the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those who hope in his unfailing love to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him. The focus here is on the church. Now, sometimes we think the church didn't exist in the Old Testament, but it did. In fact, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word for church is there.

It simply translates the word congregation. The word congregation or assembly in our Old Testaments is the church. It's the Old Testament church, not the New Testament church, but it's the church.

And here what the psalmist is saying is that the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, are on the church. He may watch over the world, but his eyes are upon the church. The eyes are upon his people. They are the apple of his eye. And so, the Lord has a special interest in his own people, those whose hope is in his unfailing love. And his people acknowledge, as the psalmist does here, that life itself is God's gift, and it is not a human achievement. And so, the psalmist reflects.

He reflects on what the sovereignty of God means in practice. And he's doing this. His mind is working. His mind is, things are rolling, taking over. And I think he's giving us a pattern here that when we read the Word of God, when we hear the Word of God, when we worship together, we are to be actively reflecting, thinking what are the implications, working it out as the psalmist does here.

And in this way, we are called upon to develop what today people call a biblical worldview, to help us to see the world as God wants us to see it.

[23 : 57] You remember what Paul said writing to the Romans in chapter 12, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, and what is good and acceptable and perfect.

So, what the psalmist, I think, is helping us to do here is to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, is to reflect on God's Word, to reflect on what it is telling us, so that we develop, we develop a Christian point of view, so that we develop a Christian worldview, so that we are not conformed to the world. And it's so easy to be conformed to the world today by the media that are constantly beaming into our lives in voice and in vision and in print.

It's so easy for us to, for our understanding, for our opinions, for our interpretation of the world, to be determined only by that. Now, what the psalmist is challenging us to do is to allow the Word of God to become the dominant element in our thinking, so that although we take into account what the media and what others may say, it is the Word of God that directs us, the Word of God that guides us, it's the Word of God that influences us, so that our thinking becomes biblical. And God is asking us today to develop a biblical mind, a Christian mind, not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And that's part of worship. When we come to church, we come to church to be transformed in our minds. But we must be active. We must be involved. Worship is not a spectator experience. Worship is an active experience. Worship is not passive. It is active. And it's so important for us to have this biblical perspective. And we will get that as we reflect upon God's Word. And as we use the Scriptures to, as Calvin said, as spectacles to help us to look out on the world in which we live.

And I like that idea of spectacles, because spectacles, those of us who wear them know that without them we find it difficult to see clearly. And many Christians today don't have spectacles, biblical spectacles, and therefore they're not able to see clearly. And God has given us His Word to give us, to become a lens which will enable us to see the world as He sees it, a world which He loves and in His mercy wants to save. He wants us to see the world like that. But there's a final element which I just mentioned briefly in the last three verses of the psalm. The psalmist is here rejoicing, he's reflecting, but finally he's requesting. He's asking. He says, We wait and 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. And so the psalmist comes to ask, not simply to rejoice, he comes to ask.

And perhaps we might just in the closing moments of this service reflect on this for a moment and say, What have we asked of the Lord so far in this service? What have we asked? What have I asked? What have you asked?

[27 : 57] Jesus said, We have not because we ask not. And here the psalmist is asking that the Lord would pour out His love into His heart.

That love which has been shed abroad on the world, He wants that love to be poured out into His heart, into His very being.

So He comes to the Lord to make this request. Now we have other requests, I'm sure, but this perhaps is the most fundamental request of all, that God's love may be poured out into our hearts, as Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans.

And so the psalmist offers this prayer for what he earlier had affirmed fills the earth. He prays that the love with which God has loved the world may be poured out afresh into upon His people.

And that's the psalmist's prayer here at the end. May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord. And may we leave this service absolutely thrilled by the fact that God loves us.

[29 : 18] God just doesn't love the world en bloc, en masse. God loves us as individuals. And this is what thrills the psalmist. This is why he rejoices with such fervor and such extravagance at the beginning of the psalm.

The psalmist, of course, recognizes that his prayer will not be answered completely immediately. Because he says, we wait in hope for the Lord.

He is our help and our shield. He recognizes that he is living in a fallen world. But he anticipates that day when there will be a new heavens and a new earth, a new order, in which God's will will be done perfectly.

We wait in hope for the Lord. Another key focus of worship is that we are a community of hope, believing that the Lord is in control of the future, and that He goes before us into the future, and that He will come again and establish a new order here, on earth and in this universe, in which His will shall be done.

And so there is this focus. This focus also on the end times. This focus on the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that surely also ought to be a focus of our worship today.

[30 : 53] And so the psalmist is teaching us here what worship is. He's asking us, first of all, to rejoice.

To rejoice with a holy rejoicing. To rejoice in His love. To rejoice in His grace. To rejoice in His mercy.

Secondly, he's asking us to reflect. Asking us to develop, under the power of God's Word, a biblical view of the world.

Referred earlier to Neil Ferguson's book, and just let me refer to it again in closing. I mean, Neil Ferguson is an atheist, but his analysis of modern China is absolutely fascinating.

And he highlights there the remarkable resurgence of Christianity in China. He visited China last year. This is a book which was published a few weeks ago.

[31 : 50] And he met there some academics in China. Not all of them were Christians, but there was one Christian academic that he met, and he said this to him. He believes that Christianity is offering China a new, what he called, common moral foundation, capable of reducing corruption, narrowing the gap between rich and poor, promoting philanthropy, and even preventing pollution.

God is at work, helping His people in China to develop a biblical view of the world. And it is as they reflect, and as we reflect, that that will be possible.

But finally, this final element of worship that is highlighted here is that we request that we come to ask God, to ask in faith.

We come to trust God. And so, the final note of the psalm is a note of trust. And the challenge as we come to the close of this service is, are we trusting the Lord?

Are we asking the Lord? What are we asking Him for? Are we trusting Him today? Are we trusting Him to meet our need? Are we trusting Him to bless our families?

[33 : 09] Are we trusting Him to bless our nation, to bless our congregation, to bless our church, to bless our nation? Let us ask, because those who ask shall receive.

Let's bow heads in prayer. Thank you, and thank you.

Here we go.