

1. God is Great and God is Good: God Keeps his Promises

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[0 : 00] If I were to ask you, and if you were to be honest with me, which you probably wouldn't, if I were to ask you, what particularly annoys you about people?

I wonder what kind of things you would say. One thing I find particularly annoying is people who continually praise themselves, continually draw attention to themselves, continually keep on introducing themselves into the conversation, and making sure that we are never going to forget how truly wonderful they are.

That is a sore trial, and I could see by some of your faces that you know exactly what I mean. Part of the trial, of course, is that deep down we are all like that, aren't we?

The definition of a bore is someone who talks about himself when you want to talk about yourself. But I think we would all agree that there is something, at very least, immature, and at very worst, totally undesirable, about people who are continually asking to be praised.

So why is it that the Lord God, the Creator, God of heaven and earth, is continually asking us to praise him? Why is it that the Bible writers are continually urging us to praise him?

[1 : 25] Why is it that something we dislike and even detest in human beings becomes different when it's applied to God? I want to read some helpful words from C.S. Lewis.

Well, they would be helpful since they are from C.S. Lewis. Let me read them to you. This is in his little book, Reflections on the Psalms, and in a wonderful chapter called A Word About Praising.

This is what he says, The most obvious fact about praise, whether of God or anyone else, strangely escaped me. He was thinking in the terms that we are thinking about, why does God need to be praised?

Well, we don't like human beings who need to be praised. He said, I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. He writes, I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.

Unless, sometimes even if, shyness or the fear of others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise. Lovers praising each other, readers their favorite books, walkers praising the countryside, their favorite restaurant, their favorite holiday place.

[2 : 43] Sometimes, he says, even politicians. That's not common nowadays, but it does happen. And he goes on to say further, the balanced human being finds something to praise in even the most modest of people and situations, whereas the selfish find it difficult to praise at all.

Now, I think these are very wise words. God is not asking us to praise him for his benefit. He's asking us to praise him for our benefit.

We cannot truly be ourselves unless we praise God, unless we enjoy him forever. As John Piper said, God is most glorified when we most enjoy him.

And so it is that in these two great psalms, which are clearly linked together, not just because they're 103 and 104, but by the very beginning of the psalm, bless the Lord, O my soul.

And bless is actually a higher thing than praise because blessing is a product of mind, will, and emotion. And don't misunderstand soul.

[3 : 59] Soul doesn't mean some disembodied entity inside of us. Soul is you. Soul is me. Notice verse, the phrase that explains it.

All that is within me, bless his holy name. Everything I am, praise the Lord. This psalmist is saying to us what the young waitress say to you in a restaurant, enjoy.

This psalmist is saying, there is God, enjoy. That's how we need to approach him. So let's look together at this psalm. The flow of the psalm from the opening statement to the closing statement.

As you'll notice, the opening of the psalm and the end of the psalm echo each other. Bless the Lord, O my soul. It's a wonderful hymn of praise and a model of how to praise God.

And it seems to me to flow in three movements. Verses 1 to 5, we have personal praise. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Then in verses 6 to 18, that becomes communal praise.

[5 : 06] As the psalmist joins his voice to the voices of all God's people. And finally, in verses 19 to 22, we have universal praise.

Praise from the angels, all his works in all places of his dominion. So first of all then, personal praise. And as so often, the psalmist is in dialogue with himself.

That's one of the fascinating things about the psalms as you go through them. Very often the voices change and the psalmist is having a dialogue. Spurgeon writes in his great commentary on the psalms about this phrase, Bless the Lord, O my soul.

There are many who are not on speaking terms with themselves. Who take no interest in their own spiritual life. Who are dull and melancholy when alone.

Now that's very true, isn't it? Because the psalmist isn't saying, Look inside and then you'll be able to praise. The psalmist is saying, have a dialogue with yourself.

[6 : 09] See what is preventing praise. See what is hindering your spiritual life. And so there are two things here then in this personal praise. First of all, the need to prepare to praise God.

You can't just press a button and then it happens. We need to prepare. Now that doesn't mean a series of steps to be rigidly followed. Step 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. But rather, when he says, all that is within me, We bring everything we are to the Lord.

If you're exhausted, bring that to the Lord. If you're frustrated, bring it to the Lord. If you're tired and weary and desperate, bring that to the Lord.

If you're already rejoicing, bring that. But bring everything to him. Bring your temptations to him. Bring your griefs to him. And in that context, in the context of praising him, See these things and see where they fit in.

Incidentally, one of the great blessings of the psalms is they run the whole gamut of human experience And give us words to use. Sometimes in our prayers, we find ourselves struggling To find the right words to say.

[7 : 24] And there are, of course, times when we can't. And Paul assures us in Romans that at these times, The spirit who understands our inarticulate longings, Presents our prayers.

Nevertheless, the psalms give us words. For example, if you're feeling extremely guilty, If you're feeling God can't forgive you, Speak to him the words of Psalm 51, The psalm with which David poured out his heart After the Bathsheba episode.

If you're in despair, use words such as Psalm 77 and 88. The Lord's preserved these in scripture for us. And here it seems to me that this praise has probably come After a time of apathy, After a time of grief, Because he is basically saying, Forget not.

Don't forget. This is positive. It's not just a case of calling them to mind. It's a case of saying, I'm going to praise God. I'm going to bring this into his presence.

So we need to prepare to praise. And by preparing, It means not being dishonest with God. Bringing ourselves as we are, Just as I am, Without one plea.

[8 : 38] That's how we come to God, To praise him. And we need to remember, As we praise him, Who he is and what he does. He is the Lord, The God of the covenant. The God who keeps his promises, Which is my title for today.

God keeps his promises. And it's all summed up in the word benefits, Verse 2. Benefits is perhaps an unfortunate word, Because it does suggest to us social security, Even a certain niggardliness.

But benefits, The word benefits here, Means the amazing, Overflowing generosity of God. Enumerate them. As the old, old hymn says, Count your blessings.

Name them one by one. I haven't heard that hymn for many, many years. But, It's a good thing. Count your blessings. Name them one by one. Speak about them, In the presence of the Lord.

Spell them out. And what's the greatest blessing of all? Who forgives, All your iniquity. All of it. Which iniquities does he forgive? So often, We come into the presence of God, And there are sins, That stand between us, And him.

[9 : 46] Of course there always are. We have to confess our sins. But even when we've confessed them, Sometimes we feel, Well, he can't forgive that. Who forgives? All your iniquity.

Iniquity means the nature, The perverse nature, That leads to sin. And, Sin, The word sin, Means the specific actions. And who heals, All your diseases.

Now let's not misunderstand this. This does not mean, And we know it doesn't mean, That every time we pray, For somebody who is ill, That they will automatically recover. God can do that, In his graciousness, And goodness.

But this is one of the places, Where David, So often as he does, Looks beyond this life, To the world to come. There will come a world, Where we'll have resurrection bodies, Where the wonders of the life to come, Will be fully realized, Where all our diseases, Will be healed.

And that's so important. And negatively, We are free from eternal judgment, Who redeems your life, From the pit. But positively, He crowns you.

[10 : 56] In other words, God treats us as royalty. He welcomes us, Into his presence. The word crowns, Does not suggest anything niggardsly. It suggests his lavish provision.

And he satisfies you, With good. And good in scripture, Means that he fulfills his purposes. The creation story, God saw that it was good.

God said, It was good. He fulfills his, He won't cast you aside, Or get fed up with you. That's one of the problems, About human relationships, Isn't it? We sometimes get fed up, With each other.

We sometimes fall out, With people. We sometimes get tired, Of people. This God, Will never get tired of you. You may get tired of him, He'll never get tired of you.

And your youth, Is renewed. The vigor and excitement. You also get this in Isaiah 40, Mounting up, With wings like eagles. So first of all then, Personal praise, Which we need to prepare for.

[11 : 57] Bringing ourselves, All of us, Into the presence of all of God, So to speak. All here, All his benefits, Satisfies you, With good, And realizing, Who he is.

But that leads on, Secondly, To communal praise, In verses 6 to 18. Here the psalmist, Joins with all God's people, And looks at the sweep of history, And especially, He looks at the exodus.

So often, Throughout the psalms, We read about the mighty acts, Of God. We read about God's intervention, In history, And all was behind that, Is the story of the exodus.

He made known, His ways, To Moses. David stands, In continuity, With Moses. They speak with one voice, And we'll see that in a moment.

But he also looks forward, To the cross, And the resurrection. If you read Luke chapter 9, The transfiguration story, Moses and Elijah, Spoke with Jesus, About his exodus, That he would carry out, At Jerusalem.

[13 : 02] So, The whole, The whole of God, The story of God's dealings, Tells us, The kind of God, He is. And there are two things. First of all, He is a God, Of grace.

He works righteousness, And justice. All justice, All over the earth, Ultimately, Comes from God. One day, It will be perfectly seen, Over the whole world.

But even in this world, There are glimpses. When tyrannical regimes, Are overthrown. When people move, From a time of oppression, To a time of freedom. We get glimpses, Of the world that is to come.

But we know, That's not perfect, In this world. And it never will be perfect, In this world. The Lord, Verse 8, Is merciful, And gracious, Slow to anger, And abounding, In steadfast love.

Now, That's a deliberate echo, Once again, Of the Exodus story. These words are, These words are from Exodus 34, And they follow the incident, Of the golden calf.

[14 : 04] God had revealed himself, To his people. He had rescued them, From Egypt. He had given them the law, And then, There's this almighty crash. It's difficult to exaggerate, How dreadful this was.

Building the golden calf, And saying, This is the God, Who brought us out of Egypt. It's rather like, Somebody who's just been married, Then brings a lover, To live in the family home. That is the kind of thing, That's happening.

It's a horrific, Dreadful, And dire, Rebellion, Against God. In other words, God's not going to, Simply overlook it. There is no, Cheap grace.

But God is not going, To be vindictive either. Verse 9, He will not, Always chide, Nor will he keep, His anger, Forever. What's the problem, With human anger?

Even if it's just anger, It simmers, Doesn't it? It, Breeds resentments. We say we forgive, And then months, Perhaps even years later, We show we haven't forgiven.

[15 : 04] Whereas God's anger, Is totally just, It doesn't simmer, He doesn't bear resentments, He doesn't reward us in kind, He does not deal with us, According to our sins, Nor repay us, According to our iniquities.

He is overwhelmingly generous. When we were still enemies, Says Paul, In Romans 5, Christ died for us.

So you see, This psalm is pointing forward, To that. And, What's it saying? Notice how, Verse 11, As high as the heavens, And as far as the east, Is from the west.

Look around this vast universe, As far as you can. And even to use the telescope, At Jodrell Bank. Look into the depths of space. Look into the sweep of history.

Where has God placed our sins? He's placed them further, Than all that. He has removed them. So there is this tremendous sense, Of God's blessing, Which is as big as heaven and earth.

[16 : 11] Excuse me. And which is as far as the east, Is from the west. Which of course means, An infinite distance. Because there is actually, No point, That we can literally call east, And literally call west.

But notice, It's also an intimate love. Verse 13, As a father, Shows compassion, To his children. This is one of the few places, Actually, In the Old Testament, Where God is called father.

That name is not all that common, In the Old Testament. And indeed, It needed our Lord Jesus Christ, To come and show us, How we could become, God's children, Through grace.

But here is one of the places, God is committed, To his people. He is a big God, But he is also a God, Who cares intimately. So his grace, Only by grace, Can we enter.

Only by grace, Can we stand. Think about it. All the sins, You have ever committed, In your life, Up to now. And all the sins, You ever are going to commit.

[17 : 12] All of these, The future ones as well, Were known to the Lord, When in eternity, He chose a people, For himself. So many of us, And I've said this before, Many of us believe, In grace for salvation.

We believe, We cannot save ourselves. But we really don't believe, In grace for sanctification, For making us holy. We feel now, We are saved, Then we have to strike, Bargains with God.

Which doesn't mean, We live any way we like, And we'll come back to that. But we must, Luxury it in God's grace. Only by grace, Can we enter. That's important.

We become Christians, By grace. But only by grace, Can we stand. We continue Christians, By grace. But the second thing, In verses 15 to 18, Is God's eternity.

Why do we praise this God, Because of his wonderful grace? Why do we praise this God, Because he is eternal? Now that may seem, A fairly abstract doctrine.

[18 : 15] But think about it like this. What else is going to make sense, Of our vulnerable lives? As for man, His days are like grass.

He flourishes like a flower of the field. Verse 16, The wind passes over it, It is gone, And its place knows it no more. What are we going to build our lives on?

Somebody said, This sown, Grown, Mown, Blown, Gone. That is the history of grass, And the history of human beings, Is not much more.

But, Verse 17, The steadfast love of the Lord, Is from everlasting, To everlasting. So often we see in this life, People try to achieve things, And then don't live to enjoy them.

So many endeavors, Seem to come to nothing. What's the answer to that? God's eternity, From everlasting, To everlasting. You see what that implies, It's not just that God, Is from everlasting, To everlasting.

[19 : 19] It's that you and I, By his grace, Will share, In his eternity. We become, We become, Everlasting as well, Because he calls us, Into his kingdom.

But notice verse, Notice verse 17, The steadfast love, To those, Verse 18, Who live any way they like. Of course not. To those who keep his covenant, And remember, To do his commandments.

The covenant is unconditional, Grace is unconditional, But, If we are not responding, We reasonably can ask ourselves, If grace has actually, Come into our lives.

See, It's not a case of, God saying, If you jolly well don't behave, This way, I'm going to cast you off. It's basically, The spirit is saying to us, If there is no grace, In our lives, How do we know, We have received grace?

Excuse me. And, If we haven't received grace, Then of course, We can't keep the covenant.

[20 : 26] We can't live in the way, That pleases him. What does it mean, To keep the covenant? And the psalmist uses, Two words here. He uses verse 17, The word, Fear him.

And then, In verse 18, He uses words like, Keep and remember. Now both are needed. The fear of God, Is the sense of awe and wonder.

The trembling we feel, At the presence of God. John speaks about this, In Revelation chapter 1, When I saw him, I fell at his feet, As though dead.

Peter, At the sea of Galilee, Falls before Jesus, And says, Lord, Apart from me, I'm a sinner. That is fear. This sense of otherness, This sense of wonder, This sense you get sometimes, When you look up at the night sky, Listen to the wind, And so on.

The trouble is, Fear, Without obedience, Easily degenerates into superstition, And idolatry. So we need to keep, His commandments.

[21 : 32] We need both. Because if we try, To keep his commandments, Without fearing him, Without loving him, Without enjoying him, Then it easily becomes legalism. But the two together, Are really part of the life of praise.

You see how this is linked to praise. We are praising him, Not just with our lips, But with our lives. We are praising his grace, We are celebrating his eternity, We are enjoying him, Now, And enjoying him fully, Forever.

So personal praise, Merges into the praise, Of God's people. And finally, There is universal praise. Verse 19, The Lord has established, His throne, In the heavens, And his kingdom rules, Over all.

There is nothing, In this universe, That is not subject, Ultimately, To God. There is no one else, Therefore, Who can be praised. There is no one else, Who can be honoured.

And you see how this is linked, With the rest of the psalm. God's kingdom, Is already there. One day, It will be fully seen. One day, Everyone will see it.

[22 : 36] God will be God, And the world will know it. But here and now, With the praise of our lips, And the praise of our lives, We anticipate, That kingdom coming.

When we praise God, When we live for God, We are already, The life of the world to come, A trailer of it, If you like, A snapshot of it, Is already seen. And you will notice, That he calls on the angels, Bless the Lord, O you his angels, You mighty ones, Who do his word, Obeying the voice, Of his word.

By the way, Don't neglect angels. Angels have suffered badly, In Christian theology. They have either been honoured, And made into kind of gods, Or they have simply been ignored, Or they have been trivialised.

Angels are mighty. Angels are not pretty little girls, With wings. Angels are powerful beings, Who share with God, In the government of the universe.

Many years ago, Billy Graham wrote a book, About angels, Which he called, God's secret agents. That in many ways, Is a very good title, Because unseen by us, The angels of God, Work for God's glory.

[23 : 50] And indeed, As the New Testament tells us, In Hebrews and elsewhere, They are ministering spirits. They help us, In our Christian life. We don't see them, We can't touch them, And yet they are there, Helping us, On the way, To heaven.

But it's not just angels, It's the whole of creation, Which is summoned. Bless the Lord, All his hosts, His ministers, Who do his will. That includes the angels, But also, Probably his human hosts, All his works, In all places, Of his dominion.

When we meet together, To worship God, To listen to his word, Who are we meeting with? Well, We're obviously meeting with the people here. We're also meeting with God's people, Throughout the world, In other places, And in other time zones.

We're also meeting with God's people, In heaven, And with the angels, And archangels, And all the company of heaven. And that, I think, Would give a certain, That, I think, Would give a certain warmth, And depth to our worship.

So often our worship is so horizontal, And missing in this dimension of depth, And wonder. Angels, Archangels, All the company of heaven. Who are you worshipping with this morning?

[25 : 04] Well, One answer is that. Angels, And archangels, And all the company of heaven. So you see, This praise is universal. The other version says, Angels, Help us to adore him.

You behold him face to face. But finally, It ends on a personal note. The same as it began, Bless the Lord, O my soul.

But surely, It's so much deeper, And so much fuller. He's not just simply repeating himself, Nor is he repeating himself in the next psalm, When he uses these words. Let me quote Spurgeon again.

His whole little world, Says Spurgeon, Keeps time in tune, To the spheres, Which are ringing out, The Lord's praise. He has become part, Of the whole praising company, Of God's people, Of the angels, And all God's works, Which praise him.

And that's not something, As I say, Which is confined to church. We love to sing, The praises of God. We'd really be deprived, Wouldn't we, If we couldn't sing, The praises of God. If we were meeting, In a situation of persecution, We had to, And we weren't able, To sing aloud, The praises of God.

[26 : 17] And yet, It's what happens, When we leave. It's what happens, On Monday morning. It's what the Anglican, Poet preacher, George Herbert said, Seven whole days, Not one in seven, I will praise you.

In my heart, Though not in heaven, I can raise you. It's what David is saying to us. And as we think of the Lord, David is saying to us, Enjoy.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Father, How half-hearted we are so often. How, Our attempts to praise, Are so often like a child, Learning to play an instrument.

And yet we know, That is an essential part, Of our Christian discipline, And training. Father, We pray, That we may praise you, With all of our hearts, With all of our lives.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, And all that is within me, Bless his holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen.