

Prayers

To God

Teach me Your ways, O God, for You are the great lover and encourager of my soul, the energetic creator of my body, the liberating inspiration of my mind and the powerful guiding breath of my spirit. Take my limited resources and weld them into the fabric of Your eternal Kingdom I pray, for I long to be at home in Your glory! AMEN

For myself

Pray in quietness and listen for what God can say to you through the natural sounds all around you. Try going into the garden or to a different space, a park, or a pathway, and listen. The Lord is always ready to speak to us through the unexpected.

For others

Weekly theme: embracing change

Pray about any change you may be facing in your church right now. If you are not a regular church goer, please pray that God's people will face the changes they must make to be His people today.

Meditation

Lord Jesus, how will you speak to me? What sound will I hear?

An explosion of noise which grasps my attention,
and changes my perspective on everything I see?

A quiet voice whispering hidden truths in my ear,
to reveal the secrets of Your glorious Kingdom?

A song of tuneful music, with patterns and rhythms
reflecting the love of Christ that grows in my soul?

A never ending roar like the sound of a motorway,
driving me onwards to declare God's Word?

A cacophony of sound, the pressures of the world,
needing gentle discernment to hear a whisper of grace?

The silence created after God's deafening 'STOP'!

Your divine imperative to rest, and be refreshed ...

Lord Jesus, You speak to me through sounds - so let me hear!

Bible Passage

Psalm 29

A psalm of David.

- ¹ Give to the LORD, you sons of the LORD,
give to the LORD glory and strength.
- ² Give to the LORD the glory of His name;
worship the LORD, draped in holiness.
- ³ The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD thunders over all of the vast waters.
- ⁴ The voice of the LORD in power;
the voice of the LORD in majesty.
- ⁵ The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD shatters the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
Sirion like a wild young ox.
- ⁷ The voice of the LORD strikes with lightening!
⁸ The voice of the LORD stirs up the desert;
the LORD whips up the sacred wilderness.
⁹ The voice of the LORD twists the oak trees
He strips the forests bare.
and everyone in His temple cries out, "Glory!"
- ¹⁰ The LORD has sat in authority since the Flood;
the LORD reigns as King for ever.
- ¹¹ The LORD will give strength to his people;
the LORD will bless His people with peace.

Review

Psalm 29 is an awe-inspiring psalm of praise containing well known phrases used frequently in worship (e.g. Chris Bowater's song '*In the beauty of holiness*' - verse 2). But you will notice that my translation is different from other versions of the psalm you may know. Psalm 29 contains many Hebrew words which are difficult to understand and translate, but it reflects a very different culture to ours. The psalm is ascribed to David, and as we dig deeper we will find that it contains some intriguing thoughts and ideas and some fascinating poetry.

The Lord is Himself the subject of psalm 29. His name is found more than once in almost

every verse. God's sacred name 'JHWH' is used throughout, and we are urged to offer Him the worship and honour He is due. We are reminded that God did not just begin creation, He keeps it going. Psalm 29 describes God's power as active now (e.g. 29:5-9), and proclaims our duty to honour Him for His control and authority over all life (29:9,10). Some find it hard to offer such unconditional praise because their lives are hard, and they want to blame God. But those who follow the advice of Psalm 29 find it presents clear guidance about how to overcome life's problems precisely through honouring the Lord.

Unlike many psalms, this one does not speak about evil, which remains in the background as people are called to worship. After its opening call to praise (29:1,2), most of it paints a picture of the LORD'S commanding authority over the natural world (29:3-9). Early readers knew that one great sin of God's people was their tendency to worship the 'Ba'al' fertility gods who were supposed to have authority in Canaan. Psalm 29 is a denial of all 'Ba'al' worship and a call to honour the true God of Creation!

Towards the end of Psalm 29, the congregation of God's people is called to shout 'Glory!' This is a public display of honour and respect for God, and the psalm finishes with God's promise that He knows our problems and troubles. He will give us '*strength*' (29:11) and bless us with the great gift of '*peace*', or '*shalom*' (29:11). If we worship Him, then he will bless us!

Going Deeper

Studying psalm 29

This is an amazing, yet mysterious psalm which cries out for careful attention. Now it does not take much to understand what might be meant by '*sons of the Lord*' in verse 1, or '*the God of glory thunders*' in verse 2, or '*the voice of the LORD stirs up the desert*'. But as we study these and other words, we will find that as we explore more about the original beliefs which lie behind these expressions, we will add quite amazingly to our understanding of the psalm.

Psalm 29 forms a very clear pattern. The first two verses are the opening call to worship; the centre verses (29:3-9) are further calls to worship which hide a variety of reasons why people should honour the Lord with their worship; and the last part of the psalm (29:10,11), concludes the worship of the LORD. It is a succinct and clear pattern, not always made clear to us in modern translations.

Give to the LORD ... (29:1,2)

The words '*Give to the Lord*' are repeated three times (29:1,2), and such a repetition at the beginning of the psalm should alert us. This is not just repetition to encourage worship, it is a reminder to God's people to do something they were not doing! The psalm speaks to us like this today!

If you read some Bible translations, you will find verse 1 reads; '*Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings ...*' This sounds as if heavenly worship is being offered by angels! But this is not what the Hebrew means here. The Hebrew reads more literally; '*give to the LORD you sons of the Lord*', which means people, not angels. A colloquial and prosaic version of these two first verses would be

'come on, you people of God; you claim to be His people, so give the LORD the honour which is His due. Praise Him because you know His Name and worship Him properly with holiness and respect.'

In poetic form, this is magnificent worship, but the psalm exposes the inadequacy of much that we do in worship. It demands that we put everything aside and look to the Lord God,

which is surely right for people who claim to have a relationship with the living God.

Psalm 29 and worship

Is it often said in church that the 'worship' is not what it should be, and preachers, worship leaders, worship bands and congregations all spend much time and effort trying to make it better. Our route must be to look to God, and for that, we must do what many new songs do, which is to emphasise the majesty and awesome nature of God as part of what is sometimes called 'enthronement' worship. Those who use songs in worship to repeatedly call on the Lord would say the repetition is necessary because this honour of God's majesty has been missing in more traditional forms of service. It is therefore not surprising that many songwriters have turned to Psalm 29!

Looking back to ancient times ... Ba'al gods (29:3-9)

We must now look back at what we know of popular beliefs and attitudes to 'gods' and their worship within Canaan when Israel settled in the land around 1200 BC to 600 BC (from the time of Joshua to the time of the prophets and the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians). This will help us understand the verses which follow.

The Lord (Hebrew JHWH) was worshipped by the people of Israel and Judah principally at the Temple in Jerusalem, but also at other ancient shrines such as Bethel (Amos 7:10,13) or Gibeon (1 Kings 3:3). However, God's people lived in a land which was inhabited by many others who worshipped various gods at the many high places and shrines built on almost every hill top and at every village and town. These pagan shrines were often located at the same places as altars to the Lord (see the practice of King Ahaz, in 2 Kings 15:35). The most common of these gods was 'Ba'al', a fertility god worshipped for his supposed ability to control weather and provide rain for crops.

In the popular belief of ancient people, 'Ba'al' obtained his power by defeating a god of the sea called 'Yam'. Some of the kings who did not worship Yahweh properly encouraged God's people to join in the worship of the Ba'als and built altars to them. This, for example, was the background to Elijah's confrontation of the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 17,18) and it is fascinating to see that Elijah was able to show that God was in control of both the water and the weather, and show that God was the Lord of all things - in the language of the day, he dramatically showed that the claims of Ba'al over Yam were false!

Psalm 29 rejects idolatry and claims God as Lord of all

This is the unhappy truth of the background to our Psalm. Its words proclaim that the 'voice' of the LORD shatters and breaks every image of Ba'al and Yam that were popularly held in ancient times! The word 'Ba'al' meant 'master' or 'lord' in Aramaic and the whole psalm therefore is an appeal to God's people to affirm their allegiance to their true God and not the fertility god 'Ba'al'. The voice of the Lord God is shown to be in control of the weather (29:3,7,8), and in particular the annual storms in the north (coming from Lebanon and Syria) which brought fertility to the northern regions of Israel. These words mock Ba'al, for he was commonly pictured in Canaanite mythology as holding a lightning spear, which this psalm declares to be in the hands of the Lord (29:7)! The voice of the Lord is also said to control the chaos of the seas (29:3) which were popularly believed to be the domain of Yam (29:3,4)!

In addition, the sevenfold repetition of the term 'voice of the LORD' from verses 3 to 9 implies 'completeness'; in other words, the Lord is in complete control of all things in His created world. In Genesis 1, God's voice commanded all things into being, but here in psalm 29, His voice sustains and maintains everything in existence. It is a subtle but important point.

Praise and promise (29:9b,10,11)

It is hard for us to give all praise to God when we feel oppressed by the evils and troubles of our world, and people readily spend their time believing in anything that gives them comfort,

from alternative medicines to the pursuit of wealth and fame. Despite all appearances, there are no solutions to the problems of this world except those found in the heart of its Maker, and when God's people rediscover this everything changes for the better. This truth is symbolised here by the great cry of '*Glory*' (29:9b). We who are the Lord's people are the body of Christ, and we are the Temple whose foundation is the LORD Jesus Christ. When we are united in spirit and cry out to Him and Him alone, we give Him His true honour and glory.

In the final verse of this psalm the LORD offers His people the '*promise of strength*' and the '*blessing of peace*'; and these are the spiritual gifts we inherit through uninhibited faith. Strength to persevere is mentioned frequently in New Testament lists of Christian maturity (Matthew 5:11-13; Romans 5:3,4; 2 Peter 1:6 etc.), and the blessing of peace is the great gift of God for those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1 etc.). When God promises, He does not fail!

It is enough for some to know that the Lord does indeed reign supreme in every event of life, and although they cannot answer all the questions as to why some people suffer or die, they are content that God in His wisdom has eternal reasons for what happens in this life. Indeed, when we accept this, 'the LORD reigns' (29:10). He does not reign in our lives when we doubt Him, He reigns through our faith.

Discipleship

Application

Presenting ourselves well in worship

This psalm contains many useful hints about Christian discipleship. In verse 2, the usual translation is '*worship the LORD in the splendour of holiness*', but the word 'splendour' is used in numerous places in the Old Testament to refer to quality clothing, so I have hinted at this in my translation; '*worship the LORD, draped in holiness*'. This reminds us that we have a duty to present ourselves to the Lord in a manner that reflects our highest standards. Please note, Psalm 29 does not give us any justification for dressing up in church with special clothing, just in presenting ourselves as the best we can be.

Worshipping the true God and not the false gods of the day

It may be that you regard this as trivial, but I suggest that it is not. Psalm 29 challenges us to worship the LORD with every fibre of our being, with every quality we possess, and with all our heart and mind and soul and strength! In worship, faith rises above the problems of this world and finds that the Lord is eternally in control. In our own day, we treat scientists and doctors as 'gods', and avoid talking about God when difficult or unpleasant things happen to us. Science, technology and the media appear to control our very existence, from the computers we use to access the internet, to the gas which comes through pipes into our homes for central heating, to the availability of medical care with incredible cures for many diseases! But these are no gods; they are God's gift by which we share the responsibility of caring for each other.

If we were to re-write Psalm 29 now, we could talk of the voice of the Lord thundering in boardrooms, reaching out into space, touching everyone through satellites and the internet, providing healing in our hospitals and invading the front pages of our newspapers. It would be a reminder that He is there in every part of our world, because He holds everything in existence, for ever. For the Christian, the heart of this is our faith in Jesus Christ, because what He has done enables us to worship God in the midst of all circumstances, and give Him

the glory!

Ideas for what to do

- This psalm is a challenge to worship. What are the features of worship which you find difficult? There are few of us who do not find some aspects of it to be difficult. Why is this so, and why have we allowed ourselves to be in a place where we are troubled by something that should be our greatest joy and the heart of what unites us as brothers and sisters in Christ?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which of the great affirmations of praise to Almighty God in Psalm 29 mean most to you and why?
2. Can you extend the list of 'gods of this age' that appear to stand in the way of people seeing the one true God?
3. What do you think of the issue of what we wear for worship? The Psalm does not say what this should be, so how should we interpret what the psalm does say?

Final Prayer

O Lord God Almighty, empower my heart to praise You in the midst of all circumstances, within even the most heartbreaking things that I can imagine. Give me victory over the enemy who wishes nothing except my downfall, and the courage to persist in the strength of Your spirit within. Thank You, Almighty God, for the peace which this assurance gives; AMEN