

Prayer

Great and holy Lord, where can we find the patience, humility and honesty needed for true justice to reign? Establish Your Kingdom rule within my life, and within all who open themselves to Your work and Your Word. May we, Your people, show what Your justice is, and do so with the humility and honesty of our Saviour Jesus. Holy Lord, make us fit for this task we pray; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly theme: Those who struggle with faith

Some struggle with faith because they see evil in the world and cannot accept a God of love as responsible for a world in which such evil exists. Pray that such people might retain their sense of justice, but come to accept that the God who made this world is personally involved in the fight against evil about which they feel so strongly. May they come to know Jesus as Lord.

Meditation

What is it you seek? And are you content with what you find?

Seek peace, and you may be disturbed by what you find;
 Seek justice, and it is likely that you will have to compromise;
 Seek love, and you will probably have to deal with rejection;
 Seek knowledge, and you will only find its limitations;

So turn your eyes to seek the things of God, unconditionally;

Seek the things that are above, where Christ is: (Col 3:1)
 Seek not your own advantage, but that of others: (1 Cor 10:14)
 Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened: (Matt 7:7);
 Seek to do good to one another, and to all; rejoice always: (1 Thess 5:15)

And as You seek, You will find the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6)

For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10)

Bible Study - Psalm 33:1-12

¹ *Shout aloud in praise of the LORD, you righteous;*

it is right for the honest to praise Him.

² *Give thanks to the LORD with the harp; make music to Him on the ten-stringed lyre.*

³ *Sing Him a new song; play with skill and shout for joy.*

⁴ *For the word of the LORD is truly honest, and He is trustworthy in all He does.*

⁵ *He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of His faithful love.*

⁶ *The heavens were made by the word of the LORD, its multitude of stars by the breath of His mouth.*

⁷ *He holds together the waters of the sea, and puts the depths of the sea into storehouses.*

⁸ *Let the whole earth fear the LORD; let all who live in the world abide in Him.*

⁹ *For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it was established.*

¹⁰ *The LORD brings the plans of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the strategies of the peoples.*

¹¹ *But the plans of the LORD stand secure for ever, the intentions of His heart and will, for all generations.*

¹² *Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people He chose for His inheritance.*

Review

Psalm 33 is a wonderfully expressive poem of praise to Almighty God, gathering together four great themes of the nature of God in the Old Testament. These are the word of God (33:4-9), the plan of God (33:10-12), the authority of God (33:13-15) and the strength of God (33:16-19). In our passage today, we will read and study the first two of these, and tomorrow, we will do the same for the last two.

It is obvious from the beginning that the psalm is one of praise and rejoicing, and before we look at the main themes of the psalm there is a fair amount of reference to music and songs. Right at the beginning, the worshipper is called on to shout aloud their praise (33:1), and then there are two calls to testify to God in song in the next two verse (33:2,3). Musical accompaniment is encouraged by means of the harp and an instrument unknown to us, the 'ten-stringed lyre' (33:2), to sing a 'new song' and use skill in music alongside the more spontaneous 'shout for joy' (33:3).

This is one of the few places in the psalms where we have a direct reference to the use of music, but apart from mentioning some of the instruments that were used, it does not add to our knowledge of ancient music, except to highlight its importance as accompaniment for the praises of God. One phrase that attracts attention is the much quoted phrase 'sing to Him a new song'. This verse has frequently been used as a Scriptural argument for the singing of newly written songs in worship instead of older traditional hymns; but this is not what this psalm originally meant by this, and diverts us away from what God would say to us through this psalm. It is about the new situations in which we find ourselves worshipping the Lord rather than the songs themselves, as we will find out through further study. The emphasis is on new experiences of God's great power and guidance, and it has always been true that when God's people experience renewal in their midst, this is naturally expressed in new songs of worship and praise to Almighty God.

Similarly, the four great themes of this psalm; the 'Word', the 'plan', the 'authority', and the 'strength' of God are not just four random ideas thrown together because someone thought they were a great idea. Together, they have a unity and a purpose, and both become clearer as we proceed to study this psalm. All of these themes are supreme and specific examples of the way in which the Lord makes Himself known within the world. The Old Testament describes Him as a 'Covenant' God who is faithful and loving towards His fallen world and especially His chosen people; but this sounds academic, and how do we know it is true? The answer lies in the four great themes of this psalm (Word, Plan, Authority and Strength), for as we read His Word and find it to be true to our lives, we discover that God has a plan for us which makes sense as we live it. Then, if we are prepared to trust Him, our eyes will be opened to His authority within the world and we will discover that He works in strength and power to save us and guide us. The four themes of this psalms are practical truths of God's work in the world, and are good reasons for praising God.

Going Deeper

Because of this, we must not think of this Psalm as simply 'praise' or 'song'. It is theological, and tells us important things about the nature of God, like the great hymns of our Christian tradition. If we read it as such, we will reap the benefits of what it has to teach us.

Sing a new song! (vv1-3)

In worship today, new songs are being written all the time, and it has been the case throughout the history of the church that some are good, and some are not so good. Preachers, worship leaders and musicians choose new songs as they become available, and with the encouragement of this verse of Scripture, ask everyone to keep up with the latest spiritual compositions. Whatever opinion you have of this as it impacts worship in your own church, the emphasis in the psalm is nothing to do with our likes and dislikes of old or new songs, for our singing must always be 'to the Lord' with the purest of motives of worship, and the psalm suggests we sing because it is our duty and our delight (33:1,1)

The idea of a 'new song' in this psalm and in scripture generally is quite different from ours today. Whenever it occurs in scripture (e.g. Ps. 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, 149:1; Isaiah 42:10; and Rev. 5:9), a new song is suggested because God has done something radically new, and this calls for a new composition in order to offer appropriate praise. A new song was called for

when God's people were delivered from Egypt (see Miriam's song in Ex. 15), when the people were liberated from Babylon (Is. 42:10), and in the Revelation of John, where God's creation of a new world order is the reason for a 'new song' (Rev 5:9). All of these were radical works of power by Almighty God which affected all His people and the future of the world.

There is nothing wrong with writing new songs for worship, but there is something special about new songs which are written in such special circumstances. Most of the examples above happened when the Lord acted to save His people because of His 'Covenant' love; His people may not have deserved it, but He nevertheless saved them from dangerous situations because of His love. It is not surprising that there is good evidence in Scripture that God's people were called together on regular occasions to 'renew' their Covenant with Him (Deut. 29, Josh. 24 and 2 Kings 23:21ff, for example) and these were special occasions which may have been suitable for singing a 'new' song according to this Scriptural mandate, for God's Covenant with His people was being 'renewed'. Certainly, in this psalm, there are plenty of references to God's Covenant faithfulness and love (e.g. vv 5,18,21,22).

The Scriptural idea of singing a new song is therefore not driven by music or cultural preferences within worship, but by the Covenant love and faithfulness of God, and specific experiences of the power of God in the life of His people.

The Word of God (vv4-9)

In these verses God's word is celebrated in a way that we have met before many times in the Psalms, for His 'Word' is closely linked with His 'work'. For example, the first half of verse 4 is about God's word, and the second half is about His deeds, which are to be thought of as one and the same thing; 'the word of the LORD is truly honest, and He is trustworthy in all He does' (33:4). The psalm goes on to say that the Lord is a moral God, and what He does is a reflection of His own righteousness, justice and love (33:5). Psalm 33 teaches us that it was in God's nature to be faithful and loving from the very beginning of Creation (see 33:6-9), even before humanity fell from grace (see Gen. 3) and required the saving work of Jesus Christ. The perfection of God is not something that can be found by the investigative methods of science, for how can we find love by looking scientifically at the physical origins of the Universe? However, psalm 33 expresses the firm belief that wherever we go in the Universe we can never be far from the love of God, which is always there to be found because we are spiritual beings.

One interesting thing about these verses is the combination within them of two great creative works of God. Firstly, the power of His word to bring things into being; 'for He spoke and it came to be' (33:9); and secondly, His creative authority over the seas; 'He holds together the waters of the sea ...' (33:7). This combination is often used by the Bible to describe creation, and is true of Genesis 1, and whilst we are used to it within the great creation stories of Genesis, it is nonetheless an odd combination. To ancient pagan people, however, it made much more sense. The Egyptians believed that the gods fused thoughts and words into actions; and it was a Canaanite myth that the gods made the world by conquering the power of the seas. In Scripture, however, we are told that Almighty God did both; they were not done by other gods. By saying this, the Bible says that God is bigger than human thought and imagination, and His moral authority lies behind all His creative work.

We will pick up this important theme tomorrow as we see how the whole psalm comes together at the end, but it is a salutary reminder to us, in days when so many people abandon faith in the belief that they are in full control of their own destiny, both practically and morally. But unless we take God into account we will miss the mark of truth; both philosophically and religiously.

The Plan of God (vv10-12)

The next theme of this psalm of praise is God's 'plans'. These are described in expansive terms, for God is responsible for all history, and as creator of all things He is the director and guide of everything He has made (33:11). The beginning of this section portrays the relative futility of the plans of people and nations (33:10); but over the centuries, God has revealed that His plan for all the world is to remake it in glory after overcoming all evil. In comparison to that, all other plans seem somewhat small; and being the Creator of all things, then His wisdom will always stand above human wisdom.

This is a vital part of our understanding of God. He did not just make everything and then leave

it alone. He continues to be involved with His handiwork, and He is directly involved in the fulfilment of His plan for it, right now. For this reason, the psalm says 'Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people He chose for His inheritance.' In Old Testament times this was the nation of Israel descended from Abraham, but this nation was supplemented by people called 'resident aliens'; people who lived amongst the Israelites within their borders and obeying their laws. There are many laws in the Old Testament which address the needs of such 'resident aliens' (see Ex 23:9f. e.g.), and as years went by, they represented a significant proportion of God's 'nation'. Now, the community of God's people has been thrown open to people of all nations because of the work of Jesus Christ; and all who believe in Him are His holy nation, referred to in Scripture as the Church of God, or the Body of Christ.

Application

The Lord's plan for the whole of His creation is to work through His people, who are now the Church of God. Sometimes, Christian people read the Old Testament and do not realise that all the talk of the 'nation of Israel' now refers to them. They therefore do not necessarily take on board the many great Old Testament promises to 'the nation whose God is the Lord', but they are for us who are the Church! In the West, there are many justifiably negative feelings about the state of the Church, and I have voiced some of these within recent studies. We must not forget, however, that those who belong to the Universal Church of God receive all His great promises of blessing, inherited from the people of Israel of Old Testament times and from two thousand years of the history of the Church since Christ.

Nevertheless, God remains faithful; as it says in 2 Timothy 'if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny Himself' (2 Tim 2:13), and His promises remain sure and absolute for all eternity. This whole psalm celebrates the constant faithfulness of God through His Word which is found within all Creation, and in His work, or plan, of salvation. I am convinced that when the Lord's people take their eyes away from the distractions of the world and rediscover the true perspective on life provided by the evidence of Creation and His saving work in our midst, then we will be empowered to live as His people with renewed vigour and strength. This is His gift, and such renewal is the kind which warrants the singing of a 'new song'!

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How do you respond when asked to 'sing a new song' in church? How many new songs have you come across that have stayed with you over the years?
2. How is God's creative work displayed for us to see today? Where do you find it easy to see God's work, and where do find it hard?
3. How important is it for us to know the history of God's people? Can we be disciples and ignore the history of the church?

Discipleship

When you are asked to give praise to God; what do you do? What words do you use and what do you say about Him? For what do you give Him thanks? Sometimes a worship leader will ask people to shout out their praises to God in a meeting; what things might you say? These questions may seem awkward, for we would all respond differently and as the Spirit leads, in different situations. However, our own language of praise is often very limited, maybe to things the Lord has done for us and our own experience of God. A psalm such as this helps us focus our praises away from ourselves and our own experience, for God is the one who should really be praised, and we do well to learn more and more about who He is and what He has done.

Final Prayer

Hear my prayers this day, O Lord. Look at my life, my work, my play and tell me what You see. Tell me what I need to know to change my life for the better. I am no martyr, I am no Saint, I am no professor or celebrity; but I am one who would be all that You would want of me. Lead me on, Lord Jesus, lead me on. AMEN