

Prayer

Loving Lord, when life is filled with too many complicated things, please help us find our way through the maze. And if we do not understand all the reasons why different things happen to us, grant us those Gospel qualities of patience and endurance which will see us through our trials. Lord Jesus, You know the depth of our need. Thank You. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly theme: Those who struggle with faith

Many people in our churches are confused about matters of faith because they have heard the preaching of different pastors and ministers over the years, and have become genuinely confused about the heart of the Gospel. Their personal faith has been compromised by irresolvable questions. Pray for those who are so troubled, and those who preach to them.

Meditation

May every step I take
be walked upon Your pathway;
May every conversation I have
be blessed by your presence;
May every journey I make
be covered by Your protection;
May every word I say in discussion
be subjected to Your wisdom;
May every living breath I take
be infused with the living Spirit of God;
Almighty God, my Comforter ...
be my Guide, my Teacher, my Saviour and Friend.

Bible Study - Psalm 33:13-22

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| <p>¹³ <i>The LORD looks down from heaven,
and sees everyone;</i></p> <p>¹⁴ <i>surveying all who live on the earth
from the throne of His dwelling-
place.</i></p> <p>¹⁵ <i>It is He who fashions the intent of all,
and discerns everything they do.</i></p> <p>¹⁶ <i>No king is saved by a great army;
no warrior survives by his great
strength alone.</i></p> <p>¹⁷ <i>A horse is a false vain hope for safety,
and despite its great strength it
cannot save.</i></p> | <p>¹⁸ <i>But the eye of the LORD is on those who
fear him,
on those who have hope is in His
faithful love,</i></p> <p>¹⁹ <i>to deliver them from death
and to keep them alive in famine.</i></p> <p>²⁰ <i>Our souls wait on the LORD;
He is our help and our shield.</i></p> <p>²¹ <i>Our hearts rejoice in Him,
for we trust in His holy name.</i></p> <p>²² <i>May your faithful love rest on us, O
LORD,
even as we hope in You.</i></p> |
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Review

Psalm 33 is a Psalm of Praise, and today's reading is the second half of the psalm. Yesterday, we read the first twelve verses which spoke of praise to God for His work of Creation. This was celebrated in a 'new song' (33:1-3), and featured the 'Word of the Lord' (33:4-9) and also His plan for the peoples of the world (33:10-12). There are a number of psalms which offer praise to God for His creative power (psalms 8 or 24, for example) but they do not develop anything like the range of ideas we find within this psalm, which is a reminder to us of how the praises of God can lead us into thinking about many different aspects of our life and our world.

The verses of Psalm 33 in our reading today contain a powerful affirmation of the Lord's authority (33:13-15) over all the people of the world, which is followed by a passage which praises God for His strength in winning battles (33:16-19). Both themes are fascinating, for the first one introduces the idea of God looking down on creation and observing everything that happens on earth, and this then follows on through the psalm to introduce the 'eye of the Lord' (33:18) which is on 'those who fear Him'. This is an illustration of the faithful Covenant love of God (33:19) which is the Lord's motive for everything He does in the world. His words and deeds, His plans for the nations, His authority in the world and manifest power and strength are all directed towards the salvation of His people; 'to deliver them from death ...' (33:19).

The psalm finishes with a triplet of sentences which offer praise to God, and this praise is offered by His people in gratitude for all He has done for them. The psalm has now come full circle. Just as it began with praise, it now ends with praise, for the God who made all things is the same one who loves and saves His people from the perils of the world in which He has set us. He is responsible for this world and everything in it, but He is not responsible for the evil which has been made out of His good creation; the arrogance of people and the plans of the nations (33:10 etc.) or the wars and deeds of nations and kings (33:16,17), and He uses His power and authority to safeguard His people.

Ultimately, this is a powerful reason for all of us to give thanks to God. Throughout the history of the world, there have been all manner of tumultuous events that have powerfully affected everyone who lives on the planet, perhaps none more so than the scheming of leaders and autocrats which have created war and mayhem, letting loose the most inhuman features of the human character, justifying murder, pillage and genocide. Sometimes within the history of the last two thousand years, Christians have been a part of that terrible story, demonstrating their flawed and sinful nature. However, people of faith who know the Lord, His justice and His love, know that He has a far better plan for His people. Through Christ, no-one is barred from being one of His people who praise Him even in the midst of the awful things happening in the world; 'our souls wait on the Lord; He is our help and our shield ...' (33:20f.)

Going Deeper

Psalm 33 is a wonderful example of a psalm which begins with praise (33:1) and ends with praise (33:20-22), and the verses in between tell us so much about why we should offer this praise. As we study them, they speak of human experience through thousands of years, and have more to tell us than we can imagine from a brief reading.

God's Sight and His Power.

The opening verses of our passage today give a picture of God that frightens many people. God is described as all-seeing; He is aware of everything we do, like George Orwell's 'Big Brother' (copied and parodied by the television programme of that name). Past generations of Christians called this God's 'Omniscience', a Latin word meaning 'all-knowing'; because whatever happened, God knew everything.

It is too easy to be dismissive of this part of God's character without further thought. Surely everyone who has loved someone else has wanted to know everything there is to know about them, and that love bears fruition if the feeling is mutual. Of course, a mature relationship between two people involves setting boundaries, but true love exists where there is no hiding, and no shame in knowing everything there is to know about another. If this describes a mature loving relationship between people, how much more should this be true of our relationship with God, who has made us and loves us that passionately? The only question remains, do we return the love that God offers us?

It is a complete contradiction in terms to be a follower of Jesus Christ having been saved by His grace and come to know it, and then to keep some part of ourselves back from Him, as if we needed to hide some parts of our being from the One who has made us and saved us! What is there to hide from our Saviour? Why should we want or need to hold anything back? If we wish to preserve our humanity or privacy in some way, then I suggest we have misunderstood all that we mean by being a Christian. The truth is clearly told us in this psalm. God knows everything. In Old Testament times, the psalm talked of His 'surveying all who live on the earth from the throne of His dwelling place ...' (33:14), but since God sent His son Jesus, there are

many Scriptures which describe Jesus as His 'dwelling place', for in Christ, God 'dwells' with His people (John 14:10). He sees us through Jesus, and we see God through Jesus.

Now, not only does God see everything, but He acts within the world according to what He sees. Unknown to all people, He is able to manipulate the affairs of nations and of all people if by so doing He can change what is happening in the world in order to do something He wants to do. This was a hard lesson for the people of the Old Testament, for they discovered that when they sinned, for example, by worshipping other gods, then the Lord overturned their nations which were overrun by the Assyrians and the Babylonians in succession (this is the general story plot of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles). Then, when the people thought they would never be saved, He installed a new Emperor in Persia, king Cyrus, who liberated the Jews from Babylonia (Is 45:1f.). Just as this psalm mocks the rulers and authorities of the day with their armies and horses (33:16,17), the whole Bible testifies to God's ability to use the affairs of the whole world to do His will, if He so chooses. Our problem, more often than not, is to understand what He is doing.

The deliverance of the Lord

The prime concern of God, however, is His own people, and His authority and His strength are used to guide them through the turmoil of this life. A great contrast is drawn between the affairs of nations, of battles and wars, armies, warriors and war-horses (33:16,17) and the needs of God's people at times of famine (33:19). This contrast shows that God, in his 'omniscience' is concerned to do what is right for His people and use everything else He has created to do His will for them.

Verses 18 and 19 would have reminded an ancient reader of the famous stories of the forefathers. One of the first things that happened to Abraham when he came into Canaan was that there was a famine (Gen 12:10f.) and this made Abraham journey through Canaan and on to Egypt where he learned a painful lesson about honesty and obedience to the call of God. Famine was also the reason why his son Isaac very nearly did the same thing, but showed faith by staying in the south of Canaan living peacefully with the Philistine people who lived in the region at that time (Gen 26:1f.). Then, when there was severe famine in Canaan later on in the life of Jacob, his son Joseph had already made a strange and memorable journey to Egypt and become the effective right hand man of Pharaoh, able to provide for the young families of the infant 'people of God'. Other famous stories of God's people centred around famines; Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), and many of the stories of Elisha (2 Kings 4-8). Each of these stories were dramatic reminders of God's control of the world He had made; 'the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him ... to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.' (33:18,19).

Salvation from famine in the Old Testament is also what is called a 'Messianic' theme, for it tells us of God's ability to save from death, a key theme in a number of psalms, including the famous psalm 22; 'I am poured out like water ... my mouth is dried up like a potsherd ... you lay me in the dust of death' (22:14,15), and this is evident here in verse 19 of our reading today. Famine may not be something that most people in the world have to worry about, but some do, and whenever we are shown picture of it, we are reminded of its terrible effects upon individuals and communities.

Praise to the Lord

These themes within the psalm all remind the reader of God's control of nature and of human affairs which He guides for the good of His people. This is what is praised in the last three verses of the psalm. They are a threefold classical Hebrew expression of what we call faith today; firstly submission to the Lord who is our 'help and our shield' (33:20), a phrase which acknowledges the Lord's might and authority. Secondly, the confidence and joy of a relationship with God based on trust (33:21), which is an expression of confidence in what God has already done rather than a vague hope that God might somehow do something different for the age in which we live! Finally, confidence in God's 'Covenant' nature, which means as appreciation of His essential nature of love and compassion which never changes, because it is entirely dependable; 'may Your faithful love rest on us, O Lord, even as we hope in You' (33:22).

The last three phrases of praise to God link us back to the beginning of Psalm 33 'Shout aloud in praise of the Lord, you righteous; it is right for the honest to praise Him' (33:1); for whilst the intervening verses of the psalm have told us about singing new songs to the Lord, the heart and soul of this psalm is praise. It celebrates His creative power and His plans, it rejoices in His authority and power over the affairs of the world, and the salvation of His people. The last three

verses form a complete and attractive 'song' in their own right which could be used by God's people for praise or for blessing. Certainly, I would love to see these verses form the basis of a good song of praise to God, but I would equally love to see them used as a form of blessing, for they lift the worshipper into the Lord's presence with a tremendous sense of eternal confidence.

Application

It has always appealed to me that one of the clues to a great law of science, physics or mathematics, is that the law does not change. It is part of the enigma of modern science that we search for the absolutes of the Universe without really finding them, but on the way, science creates the possibilities of incredible technologies which change people's lives; electricity, the internet etc.

Theologically, we must never fall into the trap of trying to follow the same path. Humanity is not trying to discover the essentially unfathomable, for God has made Himself known absolutely in Jesus Christ. His creation, His plans for it, His authority over it and His power to save are all found in Jesus, and we are limited not by God's desire to hold anything back, but our inability to grasp the full extent of the majesty of what God has done. The entire Universe, Big Band and all, is encompassed within His mind and His plan.

I write this purposefully, because I know that some have real difficulty with these things. God and religion are like another 'thing' to be investigated amongst many others in the world we experience, and they cannot escape an essentially academic and scientific methodology for exploring what we know of God. Unfortunately, this will never yield us the smallest understanding of the God revealed to us in the Bible and in Jesus Christ. He comes first, not us or the world we live in, for by definition, He made everything and has authority over it; there is no sense in talking about God in any other way. Because this is so, the best place we can start to explore Him is through praise, not through the application of the human intellect, although that has its own important place.

Psalm 33 is a wonderful example of praise in the Old Testament, and its verses tell us a great deal about the God we worship through our praise. Praise itself is a special gift of God; the awakening of the heart to the reality of its existence and the reality of its Maker. This is a truly precious gift, for we can know that God is present and interested in all the minutiae of our everyday lives as well as His greater plan for us as individuals and His plan of His salvation for all. Moreover, praise is a personal thing, something that expresses love and trust in God; for although He may be so vast as to be beyond our comprehension, He has made Himself known to us in Jesus Christ. This is the glory we celebrate.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you find the idea that God knows everything troublesome? In what ways is this so? Can your concerns be addressed by faith in Christ?
2. What limits does God place upon what He does? Try to think of some examples (start with Jesus being 'limited to human form')
3. Has this Psalm opened your eyes to the greater task of praising God than you had previously imagined. Outline in what ways.

Discipleship

Have you ever tried to discuss your faith with someone who thinks that science holds the answers to everything? It can be a difficult task, but one we should be prepared for, and I hope you find some clues about how you might handle this within the study of Psalm 33. I suggest that the real challenge of this psalm is exactly as it begins and ends, which is with praise. Praising God is something we can too often take for granted as consisting of being happy and singing a few songs on Sunday at Church. But real praise is something that goes far deeper. It is the result of the presence of God in the heart of the believer. Make sure you know Him and give Him all the honour in all you do; let praise well up within your heart as you do this.

Final Prayer

Creator God, display Your works, we pray, so that all may see Your majesty. Show us in greater clarity the plan of salvation that You have for the whole of Your Universe; demonstrate Your presence amongst us by Your Holy Spirit, and act with power and authority to save us, we pray. All praise be to You, God of all and great Sovereign Lord. AMEN