

The spiraling intensity of lament and praise requires from time to time an emotional rest. Our cry for help, our call for vindication, our need to be heard, and our yearning for God's presence must temporarily cease. The rhythms of grace provide a break from the usual pace. The Holy Spirit says, "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10). Vital worship in the first person is invited to take a knee. Instead of confessing, repenting, pleading, and praising, we are summoned to behold and to listen. The creation psalms are designed to provide that rest. Psalms 8, 19, and 29, reboot true spirituality. They re-calibrate the soul. They refresh the worshiper. There is a reprieve from the usual demands of the soul. Just for an interlude personal intensity is not front and center. The right and true use of "I" and "me" and "my" is eclipsed in a worship experience that is allowed to dwarf us, engulf us, and overwhelm us. We are invited to "worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness" (Ps 29:2). Worship is never passive and rarely a spectator experience, but when the voice of the Lord breaks the cedars it takes our collective breath away. Worship is never consumer-oriented but Psalm 29 shows us just how entertaining true worship can be.

Psalm 29 centers on the Lord, whose "I AM" Name is lifted up eighteen times in eleven verses. The opening and conclusion of the psalm, verses 1-2 and 10-11, form an inclusio, each contains sixteen words in the Hebrew text, and four of those words in each section are the divine name Yahweh.¹ The three-fold repetition of "Ascribe to the Lord," and the seven-fold repetition of "the voice of the Lord" intensify the psalm's advancing parallelisms. The eyes of the worshiper never wander from Yahweh.

Give God the Glory

*Ascribe to the Lord, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.*

Psalm 29:1-2

The call to worship does not go out to the people of God, but to "heavenly beings" or "mighty ones." These "angels" are summoned by an unnamed source to give God the glory.² The curtain is lifted and our praying imagination beholds the cosmic realm of worship. We stand outside the picture as observers of a command performance. We are invited to be spectators to a drama beyond our usual sphere of reference. The allusion to these supernatural beings suggests to some scholars a Canaanite background to the psalm.³ If this is true, the expression "sons of God" may refer to "the pantheon of the gods" and serve as a polemic against pagan mythology.⁴ The summons to give God the glory resounds throughout the cosmos. All the heavenly host, even pagan deities, which are non-gods, are commanded to give to the Lord the glory due his name. Yahweh is arrayed in holiness and worthy of all praise. The apostle Paul's early Christian hymn

¹ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 191.

² See, Ps 89:6; Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7.

³ Craigie, *Psalms*, 245.

⁴ Ross, *Psalms*, 656.

corresponds to this imperative, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).

The impact of this worship experience is bound to impact our understanding of worship. The summons to bestow on Yahweh the honor due his name, to bow low to Yahweh in his holy majesty, and to ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name, reorients our motives and feelings. The call to worship is extended to the people of God implicitly. Mark Futato writes, “Although Psalm 29:1-2 summons the angelic hosts to worship the Lord, the summons is rightly extended to humans, since Psalm 96 does just this.”⁵ Yahweh does not need our worship and when we worship Yahweh, we are not alone. The heavenly host rocks the landscape with, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). We are like the shepherds just trying to take it in. Worship does not meet any need in the Lord for praise; worship meets our need to tell the truth about God. We have not come to “worship” to get something out of it. We have come to give God the glory. We are not religious consumers looking for a spiritual high to get us through the week. We are worshipers praising God for his majesty and holiness.

In Jewish tradition Psalm 29 has been associated with the Feast of the Tabernacles or “ingathering.” The people of Israel gathered to Jerusalem in the fall on the fifteenth day of the seventh month (September - October), five days after the Day of Atonement (Exod 23:16, 17; 34:22; Lev 23:33-43). They camped out in makeshift tents made from palm trees and willows and observed the feast for seven days with special offerings. “On the final day of this feast, according to the Septuagint, they would sing Psalm 29.”⁶ A psalm designed to reboot and refresh true worship was especially well-suited to this New Year’s festival experience.

The voice of the Lord

*The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is majestic.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon leap like a calf,
Sirion [Mount Hermon] like a young wild ox.
The voice of the Lord strikes
with flashes of lightning.
The voice of the Lord twists the oaks
and strips the forests bare.
And in his temple all cry, “Glory!”*

⁵ Fitato, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 212

⁶ Griedanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 198.

Psalm 29:3-9

Psalm 29 invites us to listen to the voice of the Lord and its thunderous impact from the creation of the world, when God said, “Let there be. . .!” to the promise of the new creation, “I am making everything new!” (Rev 21:5). The voice of the one who sits on the throne, declares, “Look, I am coming soon!” (Rev 22:7). This is the voice of revelation, the voice that is centered in Jesus Christ: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). We read Psalm 29 and imagine Jesus in a boat with his disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee, when suddenly a furious squall comes up and waves break over the boat. In a panic, the disciples wake Jesus up from a dead sleep, saying, “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” Mark tells us that Jesus got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! Be still!” And immediately the wind died down and it was completely calm. Jesus said to the disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” But they were terrified. They were more afraid of what Jesus just did than they were of the storm. They asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:35-41).

Yahweh sovereignly dominates the forces of nature with a word from his lips. “‘The waters’ stand for tumultuous forces that threaten to overwhelm the regular order of life, in the way that a flood can overwhelm people, land, and even cities.”⁷ They can also stand for tumultuous experiences in political and personal life.⁸ The message of the psalm is that there is absolutely nothing in the cosmos that can stand up to the voice of God. Yahweh asserts his will over all creation.

Implicit in this positive description of Yahweh’s self-assertion is a polemic against Canaanite pagan religion and the worship of Baal, the storm god. No matter how powerful the voice of the Lord is rival gods and ideologies compete for worship. Even though “what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Rom 1:19-20).

At times in Israel’s history the people were seduced by a fascination with Baal, “the great active god of the Canaanite pantheon, who [allegedly] controlled rain and fertility.”⁹ The prophet Elijah confronted Ahab king of Israel because he had abandoned the Lord’s commands and “followed the Baals” (1 Kings 18:18). This led to the famous showdown on Mount Carmel when the prophets of Baal were defeated. Today, the people of God do not struggle with pagan nature deities but we do struggle with the myth of nature alone, the basic ideology that postulates that there is nothing besides nature. The modern equivalent to ancient superstitions is atheistic naturalism and bio-determinism. We are either believing in some “Baal” god – pagan or secular – or we are believing in the Living God who is there and is not silent. We are either the holy possession of God in Christ, personally chosen by God, predestined for communion with God,

⁷ Goldingay, Psalms, 417.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ A. E. Cundall, Baal, ZPEB, vol.1:431-433

adopted into the community of God's people, recipients of God's grace, redeemed by his personal sacrifice on our behalf, and signed, sealed and delivered by the promised Holy Spirit, OR we the accidental product of an impersonal universe, subject to blind chance and random forces, existing in a sphere of energy devoid of promise, plan, purpose and fulfillment. G. K. Chesterton came down against materialism and faulted it as an explanation for life because of its "insane simplicity."

"Now, speaking quite externally and empirically, we may say that the strongest and most unmistakable mark of madness is this combination between a logical completeness and a spiritual contraction. The lunatic's theory explains a large number of things, but it does not explain them in a large way. . . .I admit that your explanation explains a great deal; but what a great deal it leaves out!" As an explanation of the world, materialism has a sort of insane simplicity. It has the quality of the madman's argument; we have at once the sense of it covering everything and the sense of it leaving everything out."¹⁰

I love a good thunderstorm. When we lived in Colorado the storms coming off the Rocky Mountains were fast moving and dramatic. Ominous black clouds stretched along the mountain range with powerful winds, flashes of lightning and peals of thunder were both terrifying and thrilling. My most memorable thunderstorm was one evening in northern Ghana. We sat outside after a long hot day of teaching pastors from villages on the edge of Sahara. A storm was brewing. The wind picked up. The atmosphere changed. Lightening and thunder could be seen and heard off in the distance. We sat there almost too tired to move and watched the storm roll in. The thunder was deafening. The ground literally shook, the dust swirled around us, but we didn't move. The rain pelted us hard, but then stopped as fast as it had begun. Thunder and lightning encircled us 360° and we were fascinated by the spectacle.

The psalmist identifies the voice of the Lord with a powerful storm, one that breaks in pieces the evergreen conifers of Lebanon and shakes the earth like a baby's rattle. Mount Hermon, the tallest mountain in northern Israel, is jumping up and down like a wild ox, and the eastern wilderness of Kadesh is rippling like a wave pool. As a shepherd and a warrior, David experienced the raw edge of nature and some powerful storms. When he compares the voice of the Lord to a thunderstorm he makes a comparison that few Christians would think of. Psalm 29 causes us to face the reality of God's word in a fresh way. Left to ourselves we domesticate the Bible. We ignore certain truths and round off the sharp edges of God's truth. We substitute our way for the Jesus' way. For David the voice of the Lord was like a powerful thunderstorm shattering the oaks and stripping the forest bare. May it be so for us. The seven-fold perfection of the voice of the Lord receives a one word response, "Glory!" What can we say? The voice of the Lord thunders and we join the heavenly host in giving glory to God.

John Muir, one of America's first environmentalist and an early advocate for the preservation of the American wilderness, describes climbing a one hundred foot Douglas Spruce in the middle of "one of the most beautiful and exhilarating storms" he ever experienced in the Sierra. He stopped

¹⁰G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image Books, 1959), 20, 23.

at the house of a friend, but when the storm began to sound, he “lost no time in pushing out into the woods to enjoy it.” Muir writes, “For on such occasions Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof.” From his lofty perch at the top of the Spruce he “flapped and swished in the passionate torrent,” taking in “the exhilaration of motion,” the “delicious fragrance that was streaming past,” and the “extremely beautiful view.”¹¹ John Muir wanted to get as close to the storm as he possibly could. May the voice of the Lord in all its thunder be our passion. Instead of running for cover, let’s embrace the power of the word of God.

The Lord’s Peace

*The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord is enthroned as King forever.
The Lord gives strength to his people;
the Lord blesses his people with peace.*

Psalm 29:10-11

The psalm begins with a four-fold ascription to Yahweh’s glory. The psalm ends with a four-fold description of Yahweh’s sovereignty. Only after the heavenly host gives all glory to Yahweh and the voice of Yahweh shatters the landscape are the people of God brought into the picture. The voice that called creation into existence belongs to Yahweh who “sits enthroned over the flood.” The psalmist is recalling Noah’s flood (Gen 6-8) and the Lord’s sovereign control over all nature.¹² The mighty storm that just blew through is but an instant of the Lord’s universal sovereignty.

Psalm 29 was meant to refresh our worship. We are called to listen and behold. Our laments and praises cease as we witness the heavenly host praising and observe the power of the voice of the Lord. But as the storm abates, the people of God are brought back into the picture. They are blessed by the Lord with strength and peace. Franz Delitzsch writes,

“How expressive is the closing word of this particular Psalm! It spans the Psalm like a rain-bow. The opening of the Psalm shows us the heavens opened and the throne of God in the midst of the angelic songs of praise, and the close of the Psalms show us, on earth, His people victorious and blessed with peace in the midst of Yahweh’s voice of anger, which shakes all things. *Gloria in excelsis* is its beginning, and *pax in terris* its conclusion.”¹³

When John Muir climbed down the tree after the storm he found the forest hushed and tranquil and the slopes of the hills like a devout audience. The setting sun filled the valley with amber light and seemed to say, “My peace I give unto you.”¹⁴

¹¹ John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, chapter 10, 1984.

¹² Ross, *Psalms*, 661.

¹³ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 373.

¹⁴ Muir, *op. cit.*