

The secular age takes great pride in expressive individualism and exclusive humanism. Transcendence has been pushed to the side and all meaning, purpose, and significance are effectively limited to the material world. There is no God in modernity's wilderness and thus no image-bearer of God. There is only the insulated self whose task is to create a world of meaning within the mind. The creation of the cosmos has been replaced in the modern imagination by a spontaneously generated universe. Human flourishing is a present moment state of mind. Transcendent urges are projected onto food, sports, sex, adventure and other material pursuits. Secularism is a highly unstable dogma, perched on the edge of cultural suicide and a nihilistic will to power.

The psalmist understood the vast array of idolatrous perversions of God and his ways, but wholesale elimination of God and his works was beyond imaging. There was no secular state of mind when he penned Psalm 111. Only a fool would say, "There is no God," and then he would only have the nerve to say it in his heart! (Ps 14:1). But in the secular age it is easier not to believe in God than to believe in God. We have gone from everyone believing in God to "the courage to face the fact that the universe is without transcendent meaning, without eternal purpose, and without supernatural significance."¹ The perversity of the wisdom of the age has its own demonic brand of futility and darkness (Rom 1:21).

The call to sing a praise hymn to Yahweh in celebration of his great works may have always been counter-cultural, but now more than ever the people of God must worship with their whole heart and mind. They cannot afford to be practical atheists on the job and then come to church and mouth their hymns and praise songs. There is no room here for nostalgic nominalism or sentimental piety. Worshipers today really have to believe that God is sovereign over the most real world, that there is such a thing as capital "T" Truth! The psalmist is calling for flat-out praise and adoration. The scientist ought to be wearing his white lab coat when he sings the doxology and the soldier in his uniform when he sings "Stayed upon Jehovah." There should be no confusion of loyalties or split epistemologies. The people of God do not live in two worlds. The presiding judge dons her black robe as if it were a choir robe and lifts her voice in praise.

The timing of Psalm 111 is special. The editors place it right after Psalm 110's eschatological consummation of salvation history. Worshipers need to catch their breath and step back for a moment. Psalm 110's sweeping vision of the eternal Priest-King calls for a praise hymn that celebrates God's great works. Psalm 111 recalls the redemptive works of God, the exodus deliverance, the manna provision, and the conquest of the promised land in order to praise the Lord. This acrostic psalm has ten verses and twenty-two lines (excluding the first line that stands outside the acrostic arrangement), one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This tightly crafted praise hymn invites the people of God to follow the lead of the psalmist.

¹ Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, 77.

The Works of the Lord

Praise the Lord.

*I will extol the Lord with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.
Great are the works of the Lord;
they are pondered by all who delight in them.
Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
and his righteousness endures forever.
He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
the Lord is gracious and compassionate.
He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.
He has shown his people the power of his works,
giving them the lands of other nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
They are established for ever and ever,
enacted in faithfulness and uprightness.
He provided redemption for his people;
he ordained his covenant forever –
holy and awesome is his name.*

Psalm 111:1-9

The first line, “Praise the Lord” (Hallelujah) is a likely liturgical addition that sets Psalms 111, 112, and 113 apart as a praise set. We would like to know more about how the psalms were actually used in worship. Perhaps all three psalms were used as a liturgical unit at the yearly Passover in response to Psalm 110. Taken together the psalms celebrate God’s redemptive acts (Ps 111), God’s righteous people (Ps 112) and God’s gracious redemption of the poor and lowly (Ps 113). This three psalm unit is part of a larger sequence known as the Egyptian Hallel (Ps 111-118).²

The worship leader leads by example. His worship is deeply personal, honest from the inside-out, and boldly public. There is not a hint of religious showmanship behind his passionate first person declaration, “I will extol with all my heart.” His worship context is the shared company of faithful believers in the assembly. The physical facility for worship is not mentioned. Only the relational solidarity of authentic worship is emphasized. He is among the people of God who worship willingly and enthusiastically with their whole heart.

The exemplary character of worship inspires our responsibility to lead others to worship the Lord. Worship pastors and musicians are obvious examples, but parents and friends have an important role to play in encouraging and exemplifying worship as well. The psalmist takes the initiative, “I will extol the Lord,” and so should we. There is no indication in the psalm of putting

² Kidner, Psalms, 401.

on an affected or animated performance so as to impress people. We worship not to be seen or copied by others. We worship in the company of the committed to glorify God with sincerity and integrity. The psalmist's appeal is echoed by the author of Hebrews: “. . . *Let us* draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that *faith* brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. *Let us* hold unswervingly to the *hope* we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And *let us* consider how we may spur one another on toward *love* and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:22-25).

The main section of the psalm (Ps 11:2-9) is focused on the works, deeds, and wonders of the Lord. These works are described as “great,” “glorious,” “majestic,” “faithful,” and “just.” The psalmist begins with an all encompassing statement of praise that includes creation and redemption. It is easy to see how this verse inspires the scientist to ponder the macro and micro cosmos and delight in every aspect of God's work in creation. The descriptive adjectives such as great and glorious are only so much flattery if the objects of God's work are not taken seriously. The scientist analyzes, specifies, quantifies, and images God's creation, giving new meaning to our descriptive terms “majestic,” “awesome,” “wonderful.” The call to ponder the great works of the Lord in creation is the scientist's holy calling, a calling that only serves to deepen our worship and enrich our delight.

James Clerk Maxwell, the famous nineteenth century mathematical physicist who formulated the classical theory of electromagnetic radiation, suggested in 1874 that Psalm 111:2 be engraved in Latin and hung over the main entrance of the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, England. When the lab moved to new facilities in 1973, Andrew Briggs, a PhD student at the time, suggested that Psalm 111:2 be inscribed in English and once again posted at the entrance, bearing witness to the greatness of the Lord's work.³ The Lord's enduring righteousness integrates the work of creation and the work of redemption. The psalmist's approach encourages scientists to be theologians and theologians to be scientists. His unified field theory of knowledge encourages a free exchange between natural and special revelation. All truth is God's truth, whether found through scientific research or biblical interpretation. The providence of God is displayed in creation and in history. The same one who created the starry host saved the people of God with an everlasting salvation (Isa 45:12,17).

To pray Psalm 111 at the Passover festival inspires worshipers to remember the Exodus and the Lord's deliverance of his people out of bondage. To say that the Lord is compassionate and gracious draws the Israelite back to Exodus 34:6: “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” To remember the daily supply of manna, recalls the Lord's gracious provision and his everlasting covenant. To remember the conquest of Canaan and the giving of the Law testifies to the Lord's faithfulness and justice. The psalmist praises the Lord's glorious and wondrous works, but these works only go to prove that the Lord is righteous, gracious, compassionate, faithful, upright, holy, and awesome. The value of these works lie in the

³Sermon by Laurence W. Veinott (8/2013) http://cantonnewlife.org/sermons/psalm/psalm_111_2/psalm_111_2.html

Lord's everlasting covenant and in the redemption of his people. The psalmist establishes the everlasting continuity between the word and covenant of God and our salvation. Our faith in Christ is built on this Mount Sinai word and this Exodus covenant. You might say we are saved because of them and they are saved because of us.

To pray Psalm 111 at the Lord's Table inspires believers to remember that their deliverance from the bondage of sin and death comes from the atoning sacrifice of Christ. The epicenter of redemption has shifted from the Exodus to the cross. Psalm 111 causes the believer to remember the Lord's great work of redemption, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and the formation of the "one new humanity" in Christ (Eph 2:15) and the worldwide body of Christ. The author of Hebrews takes the praise recital of Psalm 111 and sees all of these redemptive works fulfilled in Christ in whom we have a "better hope" (Heb 7:19), a "better covenant" (7:22), "better promises" (8:6), a "better sacrifice" (9:23), "better possessions" (10:34), a "better country" (11:16), and a "better resurrection" (11:35). "In God's gracious purpose the perfection of the Old Testament faithful was only possible together with us. . . . They died without having received the ultimate promise until the advent of Christ, his sacrificial death, and the enacting of the new covenant."⁴

The Fear of the Lord

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise.*

Psalm 111:10

No one arrives at this "beginning" without being moved by the Lord's great works. There is an intuitive grasp and experiential awareness of the grace of God going before us and preparing us for the Lord's faithfulness and justice. Nature alone materialism is not the way to maturity and exclusive humanism offers no escape from despair. Knowledge limited to sensory experience, to the empirical world of the five senses, is not the most important form of knowledge. This is why we are told over and over again that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Divine revelation is foundational to both relational and scientific knowledge. Wisdom is the ability to see the world and ourselves from God's perspective and to obey his precepts. This is what it means to have "good understanding."

The psalmist's admonition to fear the Lord underscores the personal nature of wisdom. All knowledge is ultimately relational and reverential. This bound phrase, the fear-of-the-Lord involves a way of life "appropriate to our creation and salvation and blessing by God."⁵ Our fear of the Lord is not mixed with dread or terror, but with gratitude, trust, and delight (Ps 111: 2, 4, 9, 5).⁶ This is the wisdom that leads to extolling the Lord with all our heart.

⁴ O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 447.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 43.

⁶ Kidner, *Psalms*, 398.